



Until we are all equal

Women gather to discuss family-planning options and how to prevent gender-based violence.



Transforming Futures, One LEAP at a Time in Bangladesh

The Lifting Healthy, Empowered and Protected Girls and Women in Cox's Bazar (LEAP) project is helping change lives of young girls and women in Bangladesh.

Education is giving young women and girls in Bangladesh the tools to **take control of their lives**. They are standing up against violence and rejecting gender-based discrimination.



After collaborating with the LEAP project, religious leaders have shifted their mindset about discussing menstruation and sexual violence and now actively share information on these topics in their communities.

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- New Beginnings: Nurnahar and Monika break from tradition to set their own path.
- Knowledge Is Power: Sushmita takes down bullies.



Sokhina joined a Champions of Change club and learned to talk about health issues like periods.

THE FIRST WORD

Breaking Silence and Stigmas

LEAP is helping provide young women with knowledge, encouragement and hope.

Among the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar, over half are women and girls who face significant barriers to health care and education. This puts them at risk for gender-based violence and early marriage, while deeply ingrained gender biases confine them to the roles of homemaker and caregiver.

One of those young women is Pooja. When she had her first period, in Grade 7, her teacher sent her home and told her not to return to school for a week. "I was scared when I suddenly saw blood," she recalls. "When I told my mother, she handed me a cloth and told me to stay hidden in my room."

For the next seven days, that room became her world. "I wasn't allowed to eat fish, meat or sour fruits," she adds. "I had to wash the cloth in secret and dry it in the corner of the room."



This pattern of isolation, silence and secrecy surrounding menstrual care continued for months, until Pooja developed an infection. "I suffered for a long time, but I didn't know if treatment was available," she says. "I couldn't tell anyone because of the shame."

However, thanks to your support of the LEAP project, Pooja's story took a hopeful turn. After finishing secondary school, she became a youth facilitator with Mukti Cox's Bazar >

Pooja is a youth facilitator who speaks with other adolescent girls about menstruation myths and how to safely manage their periods.

“
We are women
who face
different types
of violence
in the family,
but we never
can say any
words or raise
a voice against
any violence.
To empower
women, girls
must be
educated.”

—Sanjana, LEAP
project participant

**Thank you for
your continued
support.**

and joined LEAP's Champions of Change club. There, she gained important knowledge about menstrual health, and, for the first time, she had access to safe, hygienic care.

Although her mother initially resisted discussing Pooja's infection, Pooja eventually persuaded her to take her to the local family welfare clinic, where Pooja received treatment. To date, Pooja has shared her newfound knowledge about menstrual care and girls' rights with more than 400 other adolescent girls.

BREAKING GENERATIONAL HARDSHIPS

Like Pooja, Sanjana's life was shaped by a lack of knowledge about menstrual care and the added pressures of an early marriage. Married at 18 to relieve financial strain on her family, she had a limited understanding of reproductive health and used a single cloth during her periods. She subsequently joined a young married women's group through the LEAP project, where she learned about family planning, pre- and postnatal care and her right to health care.

Now a mother, Sanjana is determined to break the generational cycle of hardship. "Our mothers had six or seven children and struggled to care for them all," she says. "I don't want that for my family."

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

With your support, the LEAP project continues to work with young women like Pooja and Sanjana, both of whom have emerged as advocates for women's health in their communities. Together, they are determined to break stigmas surrounding sexual and reproductive health.

Project facts

WHO: Plan International and Global Affairs Canada, in collaboration with Partners in Health and Development, Somaj Kallyan O Unnayan Sangstha, Mukti Cox's Bazar, and Hope Foundation for Women and Children of Bangladesh.

WHAT: LEAP strives to improve the lives of girls and women living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh – host to the world's largest refugee settlement – by addressing the greatest risks they face, including verbal and sexual violence and early and forced marriage.

WHERE: Four subdistricts (Ukhiya, Teknaf, Ramu and Cox's Bazar Sadar) and three Rohingya camps of the Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh

WHEN: March 2022 to December 2024. This report covers the second year of the project.

HOW: The LEAP project will:

- 1.** Establish groups where teens, women, men and community leaders can learn about their rights and responsibilities to ensure equality and protect children against violence.
- 2.** Improve health services, including referral networks, to better serve girls and young women.
- 3.** Support local women's and youth organizations.

THE SCENE

The Cost of Early Marriage

Why girls and young women in Bangladesh are especially at risk.

Since 2017, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, has hosted more than 1.2 million Rohingya people forced out of Myanmar due to cultural and religious persecution. Girls and women from both the host and refugee communities are especially at risk.

Trafficking and violent crime make travel within the settlement dangerous. "To protect their daughters, some fathers limit their movements to keep them safe – but this also prevents them from accessing health care, school or other services," explained Amy LeBlanc, LEAP program manager at Plan International Canada.

Sometimes these daughters are forced to leave school when they begin menstruating due to cultural stigma and a lack of awareness. They're often seen as another person to feed, so their parents may decide to marry them, hoping



Sanjana was married at 18. Today she attends a young married women's group through the LEAP project to learn about family planning and her rights.

their husbands will provide for them. This places these young women at risk of experiencing sexual violence, early or unwanted pregnancy and bearing an unequal share of unpaid care responsibilities.

Married girls are four times more likely to drop out of school and are more likely to experience complications from pregnancy and childbirth as well as be exposed to gender-based violence. They also tend to have less influence on household decisions, including access to health care for themselves and their children.

Risks and reasons for early and forced marriage

► The situation

Bangladesh is among the top 10 countries in the world with the highest levels of early and forced marriage.

► The risks for married girls

- Marriage often ends their schooling and limits their knowledge of their sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- They are too young to handle household responsibilities, which can lead to gender-based violence.
- Early pregnancy and childbirth pose health risks.

► Why parents choose early marriage

- Reduced dowry costs
- Lower financial burden
- To avoid education expenses

BY THE NUMBERS

A few highlights of what your support is making possible

In its second year, the LEAP project reached close to 120,000 girls and young women with life-changing information and support.

6

1,297 awareness sessions on **violence against women and girls** were held, reaching a total of 25,516 community members.

41% increase in knowledge among adolescent girls and young women on their right to freedom from **gender-based violence**

6,300 girls and 1,760 young women's groups learned about their **decision-making power** and rights, including refusing unwanted sex.

20,181 adolescent girls and young married women received reusable cloth napkins and soap. [END-OF-PROJECT TARGET: 20,160]

119,516 adolescent girls and young women **received counselling** on sexual and reproductive health, violence and abuse prevention, family planning and menstrual health.



At a men's club session, participants learn about menstruation, gender equality and how to prevent gender-based violence.



Through the LEAP project, Rabeya gained valuable life skills and family planning knowledge, empowering her both physically and mentally and improving her quality of life.

WHY EDUCATION MATTERS

Early and forced marriage begins to decline only among young women with at least 10 years of schooling. The incidence falls below 50% among those with at least 12 years of schooling.

2,100 young married women learned about gender-based violence, pre- and postnatal health management and family planning. [END-OF-PROJECT TARGET: 2,100]

8,820 boys were trained and mentored in **overcoming gender biases** through the Champions of Change program. [END-OF-PROJECT TARGET: 10,080]

8,820 girls were trained on how to **recognize gender discrimination** and forms of verbal and sexual harassment. They also received guidance on how to **protect themselves** and **safeguard their rights**. [END-OF-PROJECT TARGET: 10,080]

“

The LEAP project has empowered girls to take control of their lives. One girl, who once avoided school during her period, now attends regularly after participating.”

—Nur Mohammad Ferdous Chowdhury, project manager, Plan International Bangladesh

STORIES OF CHANGE

Equality in Action

Mohammad is challenging deep-rooted gender biases to create a fairer, safer world for girls and boys.

Mohammad, 14, is a high school student in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. Life isn't easy for his family – his father's earnings as a farmer barely cover their basic needs.

Growing up, Mohammad has seen how gender discrimination is embedded in his community, where girls his age are pushed toward early marriage while boys like him are encouraged to study. "I see that people treat girls and boys differently by giving them different opportunities," he says.

For much of his life, Mohammad accepted this inequality as normal. At home, he saw it daily in simple acts: During meals, his sister would receive smaller or less nutritious portions, while he and his father were served the best food. "I used to think it was just the way things were – that boys should eat better food," he says.

But things began to change when Mohammad joined the LEAP project and participated in Champions of Change



Boys like Mohammed participate in Champions of Change sessions where they receive mentorship to help overcome gender biases.

sessions. These groups discussed healthy masculinity, ways to reject violence in relationships and how to stand up for gender equality.

Mohammad says he gained new insights that he then shared with his family. "I've been able to convince my parents that my sister and I are equal, so during meals, my mother should distribute food equally," he explains. "I am now working to stop gender discrimination in my family and discussing gender-related issues with my friends."

Mohammad is one of 8,820 boys who have participated in LEAP programs that aim to address gender biases and create safer environments for young women and adolescent girls in his community. Thanks to your support, boys like Mohammad are challenging long-standing traditions and building a more equal future for everyone.



"I will raise awareness to stop gender discrimination... so the next generation can be free from it," Mohammad says.

New Beginnings

Two young women's lives reflect the broader struggles faced by young girls in Bangladesh who want to shape their futures.

Nurnahar and Monika's lives both took a dramatic turn as they entered puberty, marking the onset of new challenges and societal expectations. Nurnahar, a bright and ambitious girl from a rural village, suddenly found her dreams eclipsed by the harsh realities of early marriage, a tradition deeply entrenched in her community. Meanwhile, Monika, living in the bustling streets of Dhaka, faced similar struggles as her family grappled with societal norms that valued marriage over education.

NURNAHAR'S JOURNEY

Within the first year of marriage, Nurnahar had a child. Her husband was abusive, and by the time she was 20, she was divorced and living with her parents. "I had a hard time living at my father's house with my 4-year-old daughter," she says. "Everyone treated me as a burden to the family."

In an effort to alleviate the situation, her parents



Monika, 16, avoided an early marriage and stayed in school with support from LEAP.

arranged another marriage – this time to a 70-year-old man. She had another child with him, and he wanted more children. Nurnahar didn't. That's when she connected with the LEAP project's group for young married women. There she learned how to resolve conflicts and understand what contraceptive options were available to her. "I talked to my husband and discussed family planning and its methods," she said. "He agreed and chose a short-term method."

MONIKA'S TRANSFORMATION

At the same time, Monika faced her own struggles. When she started her period, new restrictions were placed on what she could do, including attending school while she was menstruating. However, her involvement with the LEAP project introduced her to the Champions of Change club, where she learned about sexual and reproductive health, how to address violence, and her rights – which included staying in school and not getting married. Empowered with this knowledge, Monika took control of her life, avoiding the constraints of early marriage and returning to the classroom to pursue her education.

“I talked to my husband and discussed family planning and its methods. He agreed and chose a short-term method.”

–Nurnahar, LEAP project participant

“

I felt sorry for myself back then. I gained the courage to make other girls aware, so they never have to experience what I did.”

—Sushmita, 18, a Champions of Change participant

A STORY OF CHANGE

Knowledge Is Power

In Bangladesh, a young girl turns knowledge into power, helping others stand up against harassment and violence.

In Bangladesh, many girls drop out of school due to verbal and sexual harassment, including teasing and bullying. They also have to deal with inappropriate comments made to them on their way to school.

Sushmita, now 18, was in Grade 6 when boys from her school began teasing her. It hurt, but she kept silent. “I didn’t dare share it with anyone, not even my family,” Sushmita says. “They might have stopped me from going to school.” To avoid further harassment, she began skipping school.

When Sushmita was in Grade 10, she was invited by Mukti Cox’s Bazar to join a Champions of Change session.

Sushmita says she now has the courage to stand up to bullies and help create a safer community for girls.

“I was surprised to see 19 other girls like me who had faced similar issues,” she recalls. During these sessions, Sushmita learned about the many forms of violence against women and girls and how to prevent it and respond to it. She also now understands the changes in her body related to puberty.

“I realized I wasn’t alone. Other girls were harassed like me, but none of us ever spoke up,” she says. “I felt sorry for myself back then.” Today, empowered by what she has >





Thank you!

With your continued support for the LEAP project, girls like Pooja, Sanjana, Nurnahar, Monika and Sushmita have found their voices and are standing up for their rights. They are safer on the streets as young boys like Mohammad learn to respect their choices. At home, parents are increasingly supporting their right to education.

Thank you again for your continued support.

learned, she is determined to help create a safer community for other girls around her.

“I gained the courage to make other girls aware, so they never have to experience what I did,” Sushmita says. She educates her peers on the various types of violence, including verbal harassment and body shaming, and cautions them about the risks of accepting gifts from boys or men, which could lead to dangerous situations.

With your support, the LEAP project team has led sessions that teach girls like Sushmita to recognize violence, protect themselves and stand up for their rights. Thanks to these Champions of Change sessions, awareness of gender-based violence has significantly improved: The percentage of adolescent girls and young women with knowledge about gender-based violence prevention and protection has increased from 38% to nearly 80%.

Thanks to your support, these young married women can now identify, prevent and respond to forms of violence against women and girls.



Click or scan the code to learn how you can support girls, until we are all equal.

WHAT'S NEW AT PLAN

Our Shared Dream

We see the world as it is and the world as it could be. No matter how complex the challenges, a better future is possible.

It takes **determination**.

It takes **optimism**.

It takes **vision**.

Our “moon shot” vision is equality for girls everywhere. Improving the lives of girls improves the lives of everyone in the family and the community. That understanding, which we know you share, is at the heart of our fundraising campaign, Until We Are All Equal. When you support this campaign, you’re trusting us to identify the greatest threats to

equality, especially for girls, and respond to them as they arise.

Just going to school every day is impossible for many girls, with one in six living in a conflict zone. That’s why, right now, about 120 million girls are missing out on an education. What’s more, many girls – 12 million every year – are forced into early marriage, placing them at a heightened risk of dying from complications of early pregnancy or childbirth.

There are 1 billion girls alive on our planet today, each filled with promise and potential and with their whole futures ahead of them. How do you transform the world? Start by investing in girls.



Until we are all equal

About Plan International Canada

Plan International Canada is a member of a global organization dedicated to advancing children’s rights and equality for girls.

Plan International has been building powerful partnerships with and for children for over 85 years and is now active in more than 80 countries. We stand with children, especially girls, wherever they are oppressed, exploited, left behind or not equally valued.

We’re determined optimists, and we will continue to persevere

until we are all equal.

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