BUILDING RESILIENCE OF BANGLADESHI ADOLESCENT GIRLS: PRIORITISING MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND SAFEGUARDING DIGNITY IN EMERGENCIES
Cyclone Mocha struck the coast near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border on 14 May 2023. Heavy rains and strong winds caused damage and destruction to shelters and public facilities, which are primarily constructed of bamboo and tarpaulin, across 33 Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar. This impacted over 40,000 Rohingya refugees and neighbouring Bangladeshi communities. In Teknaf upazila approximately 11,000 houses were damaged and over 50,500 individuals were affected. A Joint Needs Assessment identified food, shelter, and water as the most immediate priorities, with a particular focus on ensuring access to these services for the most vulnerable women, girls, and persons with disabilities. The assessment also revealed significant damage to public facilities related to education, nutrition, and protection.

On August 6, 2023, a flash flood struck Chattogram Division aggravated by heavy downpours in upstream areas. The flood affected over one million people. 39 out of the division’s 51 upazilas were wholly or partially inundated, causing substantial damage in Chattogram, Cox’s Bazar, Rangamati, and Bandarban districts. The region’s major rivers overflowed and damaged over 410 kilometres of roads, resulting in major infrastructure and transportation disruption. The immediate response effort focused on rescue and relief operations, and addressing the basic needs of those affected.
The Adolescents and Youth programme of UNFPA in Bangladesh in partnership with a national NGO, Concerned Women for Family Development (CWFD), has prioritised the sensitive and frequently overlooked needs of adolescent girls during disasters. The programme’s focused response to adolescent girls during natural disasters across the country has led to a significant increase in the number of girls reached. In 2023, the number of girls benefitting from UNFPA humanitarian support increased to 15,576 from 7,474 in the previous year’s response.

We have not been able to return to our home for three months, since the flash flood washed it away. My family has not been able to afford building a new home yet. Currently, we are renting a very small room up on the hill where we sought shelter during the flood. Right now, I don’t have any books and we are struggling to get through each day and night. During these devastating times, I had nothing to use during my menstruation. UNFPA’s MHM kit has been incredibly helpful, not only for my menstrual health but also I feel like I have something of my own and someone caring for me.

Sayed Sultana, Age: 17
Lama, Bandarban

Source: Implementing Partner Monitoring Tracking Report, 2023, UNFPA
Ensuring access to menstrual health supplies in humanitarian emergencies is vital for upholding the dignity and health of adolescent girls, who are often marginalised in disaster response and have limited decision-making power in Bangladesh. Leveraging the menstrual health management (MHM) kit developed jointly by UNHCR and UNFPA at the global level, UNFPA Bangladesh rolled out the kit to address the specific needs of Bangladeshi adolescent girls during emergencies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female underwear (s/m/l)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kit bag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kit bag</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cloth pegs and string</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detergent</td>
<td>1 (500 gram)</td>
<td>Bathing soap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap case (covered)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8 packets (64 pcs) OR 1 packet (5 pcs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap case (covered)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Disposable pads / Reusable pads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set of information education and communication (IEC) materials</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Infographic: Composition of menstrual health management kits*

These contextualised MHM kits offer tailored solutions to meet the needs and challenges of adolescent girls for a three month-timeframes. Each kit includes disposable or reusable menstrual pads, underwear, soap, soap case, cloth pegs and string, and information. The disposable pads come in three types including large, extra-large, and belt system pads for girls and women who are not accustomed to wearing underwear. The MHM kit bags are designed with jute materials, which is a renewable and biodegradable resource that is available locally. The adolescent girls are also engaged in orientation on disposal of the pads, and menstruation health management. Choices, preferences, and comfort were considered in the design of the items, which were developed with the active and engaged participation of adolescent Bangladeshi girls.
Bangladeshi adolescents and youth have actively participated in all phases of UNFPA’s humanitarian response, from preparedness to response to recovery. A group of 30 core volunteers and 300 district volunteers in three north-eastern flash flood-prone districts, 520 volunteers in two flash flood- and cyclone-prone districts in Chattogram division, and 220 volunteers in four monsoon flood-prone districts have been trained on disaster response, risk reduction, and their particular role in an emergency. They have all received training on adolescent sexual and reproductive health in emergencies, gender-based violence (GBV) core concepts and principles, sexually transmitted infections, child marriage, disaster risk mitigation, and disaster risk management. A total of 1,070 youths are ready to respond in case of a natural disaster in their districts.

This dedicated group of youth volunteers has supported preparedness and response activities in their districts and has conducted sessions on these topics for 12,050 adolescents. By training a group of volunteers in disaster response and risk reduction, UNFPA has both empowered local youth and improved its own response, particularly in serving the needs of adolescent girls. Moreover, this approach has fostered a culture of community engagement and cultivated youth leadership.
The initiative to empower adolescent girls through Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials aimed at catalysing norm change has yielded significant results. Adolescent girls were equipped with life-saving information about their rights and where to access gender-based violence and child marriage referral services and support. Additionally, they received comprehensive guidance on menstruation health management, especially in a disaster context. In an effort to address deep-seated cultural beliefs and harmful practices, UNFPA has organised sessions, in-depth discussions, one-to-one discussions, household visits, campaigns, and others to provide fact-based information to all.

After receiving MHM kits, 9,050 adolescent girls participated in sessions focused on life-saving information about protection, rights, and services both within the Women and Girl Friendly Spaces and in the communities. In areas where UNFPA-supported safe spaces are unavailable, youth volunteers mobilised and utilised existing government facilities to conduct sessions. Adolescent girls also participated in post-distribution information sessions where they had the opportunity to share their experiences, ask questions, and provide feedback. This concerted effort aims to change social norms to cultivate a culture of inclusivity and dignity, where menstruation is prioritised rather than stigmatised, ultimately advancing gender equality and social justice.

Neela Akater, Age: 12
Herbang, Chakaria

My mother never allowed me to go to school during menstruation as she thought it was harmful to my health to go outside. When the UNFPA-supported volunteers came to our home, we got the opportunity to discuss menstruation and learned what I knew about menstruation was not correct, and my mother realised that there was nothing harmful to going outside during that time. Now I never miss school during my menstruation.
Building on UNFPA’s pilot on voucher assistance for reproductive health in urban slums and recognising menstrual health needs at the onset of emergencies, UNFPA will offer menstrual health management support to adolescent girls leveraging voucher assistance. This initiative aims to use the local market and its supply chains to distribute menstrual kits to adolescent girls, in the most time and cost-effective way. Instead of requiring girls to visit the distribution point, an adolescent girl can redeem the menstrual supplies at nearby selected shops using a card with a QR code when an early warning is issued or prior to the onset of a crisis. This innovative solution ensures that all transactions are recorded through a mobile app, thereby guaranteeing transparency and real-time monitoring of the distribution. This first of its kind-initiative will be rolled out in 2024 as part of UNFPA’s anticipatory action activities.

**Sohel Rana**
**Shop owner, Jamalpur**

Not only about the digital system, had we learned about adolescence and the changes during puberty which we never talked about. With this knowledge, I will be able to support adolescent girls who will visit my store to get menstrual pads and other items. I will ensure the availability of these supplies in my shop.
Special thanks to Concerned Women for Family Development (CWFD), the strategic partner of UNFPA’s Adolescents and Youth interventions in response to natural disasters for their continuous and substantial role in serving thousands of adolescent girls during disaster, as well as in implementing preparedness and recovery activities.

UNFPA contacts:

Rubina Yeasmin, Humanitarian Programme Officer
Adolescents and Youth Unit
Email: yeasmin@unfpa.org

Dr. Muhammad Munir Hussain, Programme Analyst
Adolescents and Youth Unit
Email: mhussain@unfpa.org

Dr. Iliza Azyei, Chief
Adolescents and Youth Unit
Email: azyei@unfpa.org

Samiha Fairuz Rahman, Community Mobilization and Content Development Officer
Adolescents and Youth Unit
Email: sarahman@unfpa.org