



Bangladesh 2020

# TRANSFORMING LIVES

Stories from the Ground

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**MESSAGE FROM UNFPA REPRESENTATIVE**

**Dr. Asa Torkelsson**

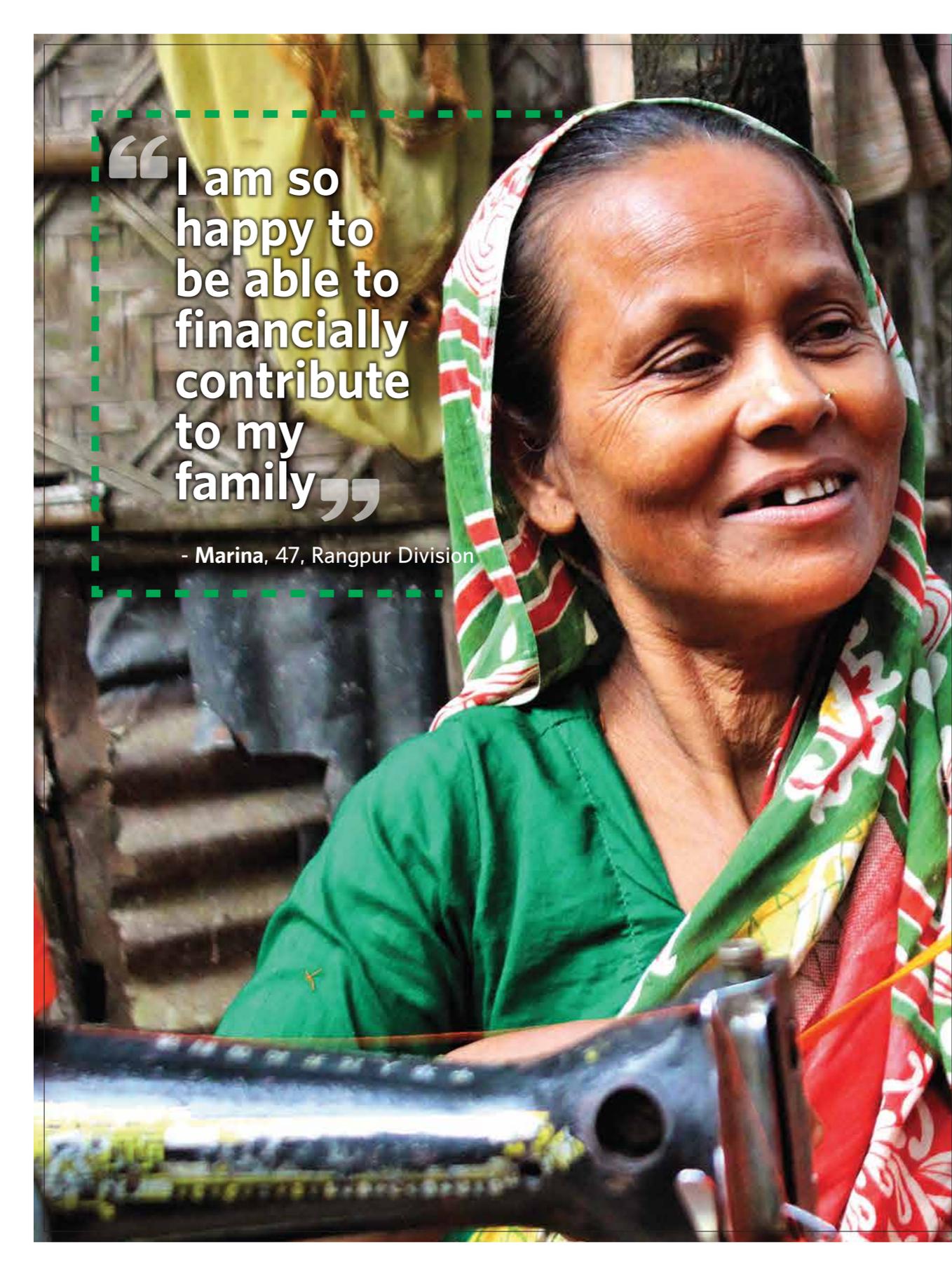
On behalf of the United Nations Population Fund, we are pleased to share with you a collection of inspiring stories of women and girls from across Bangladesh.

As the United Nations' sexual and reproductive health agency, UNFPA aims to achieve a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled, while also ensuring the safety and protection of women and girls. Our work is aligned with the 1994 Programme of Action resulting from the Cairo International Conference on Population Development (ICPD) as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Since 1974, we have worked closely with the Government of Bangladesh, and our other partners, including UN agencies, development partners, NGOs, CSOs and academic institutions, towards achieving the triple zeros of zero preventable maternal deaths, zero unmet need of family planning, and zero incidents of gender-based violence and harmful practices.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the year 2020 was undoubtedly one of the most difficult ones we have ever faced, globally. Despite the challenges, we adapted to the changing circumstances and continued to ensure we reached the people we serve, across Bangladesh.

This booklet celebrates the resilience and agility of the people of Bangladesh, as well as the tireless efforts of our staff, partners, and donors, in continuing to serve those most in need, despite the pandemic and compounding humanitarian crises. We hope that reading these stories will be an uplifting experience for you and give you the sense that even amidst extreme hardship, we stand in solidarity and uphold equality, towards a brighter future for all.

A woman with a patterned headscarf and a green shirt is smiling while operating a sewing machine. The background shows a rustic setting with wooden structures.

**“I am so happy to be able to financially contribute to my family”**

- Marina, 47, Rangpur Division

“When I developed a fistula after the delivery of my sixth child, I felt so alone and stressed. Because of the foul smell caused by the disease, nobody wanted to come and meet me. Even my own family members could not tolerate it! Fortunately my husband stayed with me as we had to take care of the children.

Then one day, I met a government health worker who told me that my condition could be cured through a surgery. After some time, I was finally able to have it and recover from this devastating illness.

After the surgery, I received a sewing machine and sewing training. Now I am making cloth masks to stop the spread of COVID-19 and earn around 2,500tk per month. I am so happy to be able to financially contribute to my family again.”

Fistula survivors continue to suffer from stigma and discrimination in Bangladesh. UNFPA strives to ensure their dignified reintegration into society by providing these women with livelihood opportunities and raising awareness for the struggles they face.

In 2020, UNFPA together with our partner, LAMB Institute, provided training for fistula survivors in Rangpur Division to sew and sell their own cloth masks. The initiative allowed the women to gain financial independence amidst the pandemic, while also contributing to combat COVID-19 and regaining respect from their communities.

**“Girls of my age are normally married off at a very early age. Luckily, my father is very supportive of my education”**

- Rumpa Aktar, Gaibandha District



“Eve-teasing continues to be a big problem in our society. When I go to college, I am often harassed by boys. But I want to be courageous and continue to go to school despite it. If someone teases me, I come home and tell my parents.

A lot of parents would react to these situations with fright and try to get their daughters married off as soon as possible. In my village, girls of my age are normally married off at a very early age. But luckily my father is very supportive of my education. He always says, ‘if my daughter wants to study, I have to let her study’. Despite our struggles, he feels that education should be the main priority.”

Over half of girls in Bangladesh continue to be forced into marriage before the age of 18. After being married, these girls often drop out of school and are confined to the domestic sphere for the rest of their lives. The practice seriously hampers the development of Bangladesh as these young girls are not able to unleash their potential and fully contribute to their communities.

In Bangladesh, the economic hardships caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have increased the vulnerability of girls to child marriage. Throughout 2020, the UNFPA-UNICEF joint Global Programme to End Child Marriage continued its work, despite the pandemic, raising awareness amongst communities on the harmful practice and in striving towards a Bangladesh where all girls are able to realize their dreams.



**“I feel motivated to make the world a better place with women’s rights and gender equality at its foundation”**

- Nusrat, Case Worker for Women’s Protection and Empowerment, Cox’s Bazar

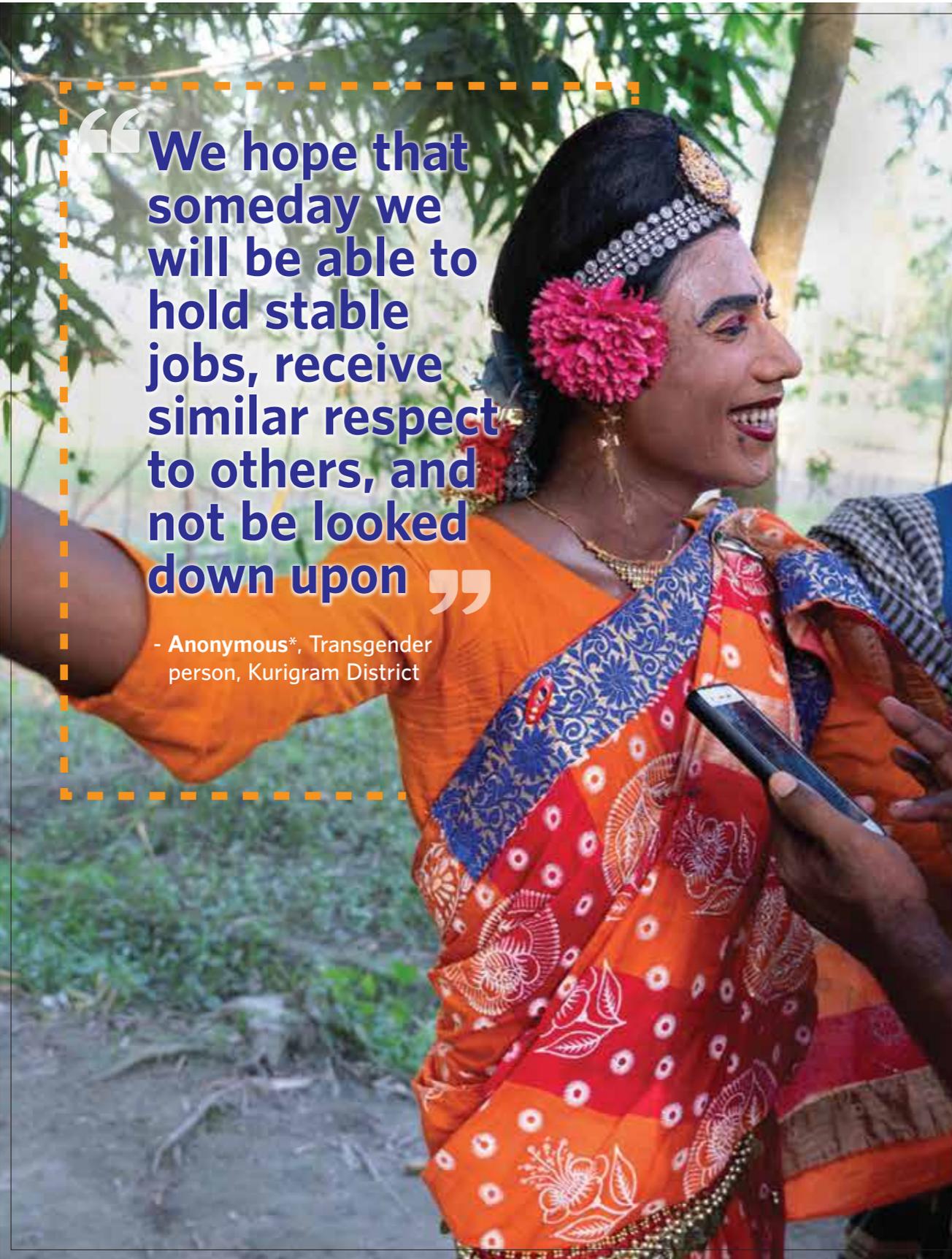
“The services we provide for survivors of gender-based violence here in the health facilities of the Rohingya camps will not stop for the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite limited movements, we continue to work, because our support to survivors is an essential service.

Personally, my work revolves around providing psychosocial support to the women that visit us. When COVID-19 began, I managed cases over the phone, but it was challenging. I realized that face-to-face interactions give women more confidence. When the community trusts the volunteers and case workers and truly feel that the health facility is a safe and confidential space to talk in, they visit us.

Despite the occasional challenges, I love my work. The inspiration comes from the survivors themselves who instill in me the courage and strength to move on. On my darkest of days, I see them having so little yet still finding the inner strength to look for solutions. Thanks to them, I feel motivated, energized and willing to continue my work to make the world a better place with women’s rights and gender equality at its foundation.”

Throughout 2020, the UNFPA-supported health facilities in the Rohingya camps and in the surrounding host communities in Cox’s Bazar, provided life-saving information to survivors of gender-based violence, in addition to sexual and reproductive health services that ensured that women continued to deliver babies safely despite COVID-19.

Due to mobility restrictions during the pandemic, women and girls are at a heightened risk of health complications and violence. Ensuring that survivors have continued access to sexual and reproductive health services, together with gender-based violence response services, is critical to overcome the ‘shadow pandemic’ of increased violence against women and girls.



**“We hope that someday we will be able to hold stable jobs, receive similar respect to others, and not be looked down upon”**

- **Anonymous\***, Transgender person, Kurigram District

“When we walk around, people make fun of us by shouting “hijra, hijra” at us. Why would they do that? We transgender people are also creations of Allah.

We want to live like normal human beings. We want to walk around without people staring at us. We want to enjoy the same benefits and rights as everyone else. We hope that someday we will be able to hold stable jobs, receive similar respect to others, and not be looked down upon.”

Due to deeply rooted superstitions and misconceptions, transgender people continue to suffer from stigma and discrimination across Bangladesh. In spirit of the principle of leaving no one behind, UNFPA aims to address the needs of Bangladesh’s transgender community and break the social barriers that prevent them from being fully participating members of society.

In 2020, we participated in a landmark project funded by UN CERF and DFAT, where we helped communities in Gaibandha, Jamalpur and Kurigram districts prepare for anticipated floods by distributing essential supplies before the disaster hit. As part of the effort, for the first time in Bangladesh, UNFPA distributed dignity kits that were specifically designed to meet the needs of the transgender community amidst the natural disaster and COVID-19.

\*The photo does not depict the person quoted in the story.

**“I feel like a brave warrior who has not shied away from my responsibilities”**

- Sarmin Akter, Roving Midwife,  
Sunamganj District



“I know that this pandemic is very dangerous for all of us, but pregnant women are at exceptionally high risk due to limited access to services. As midwives, we are part of the battle against COVID-19 and together we will win it.

When COVID-19 began, I was appointed here in Sunamganj district to protect the health and safety of pregnant women and newborns. My job is to make sure deliveries continue to be safe and that maternal deaths do not increase in this region during this difficult situation.

To serve as a roving midwife, I have had to move far away from my family. But even after going through so much, I feel fulfilled. I feel like a brave warrior, who has not shied away from my responsibilities!”

Sarmin is one of over 300 midwives that are part of the roving midwifery team; an initiative introduced by the Directorate General of Health Service (DGHS) and UNFPA, as part of the Bangladesh national response to COVID-19. Through the initiative, supported by Sweden, FCDO, and the World Bank, midwives are deployed to districts that require maternal health care services the most, leaving no one behind.

Since May 2020, the roving midwives team have worked in over 30 rural and urban health facilities, ensuring that preventable maternal deaths and maternal health complications do not increase among vulnerable communities during the pandemic.

“I am so happy when I am here, because I get to chat with other girls of my age”

- Mohsina, 15, Cox's Bazar

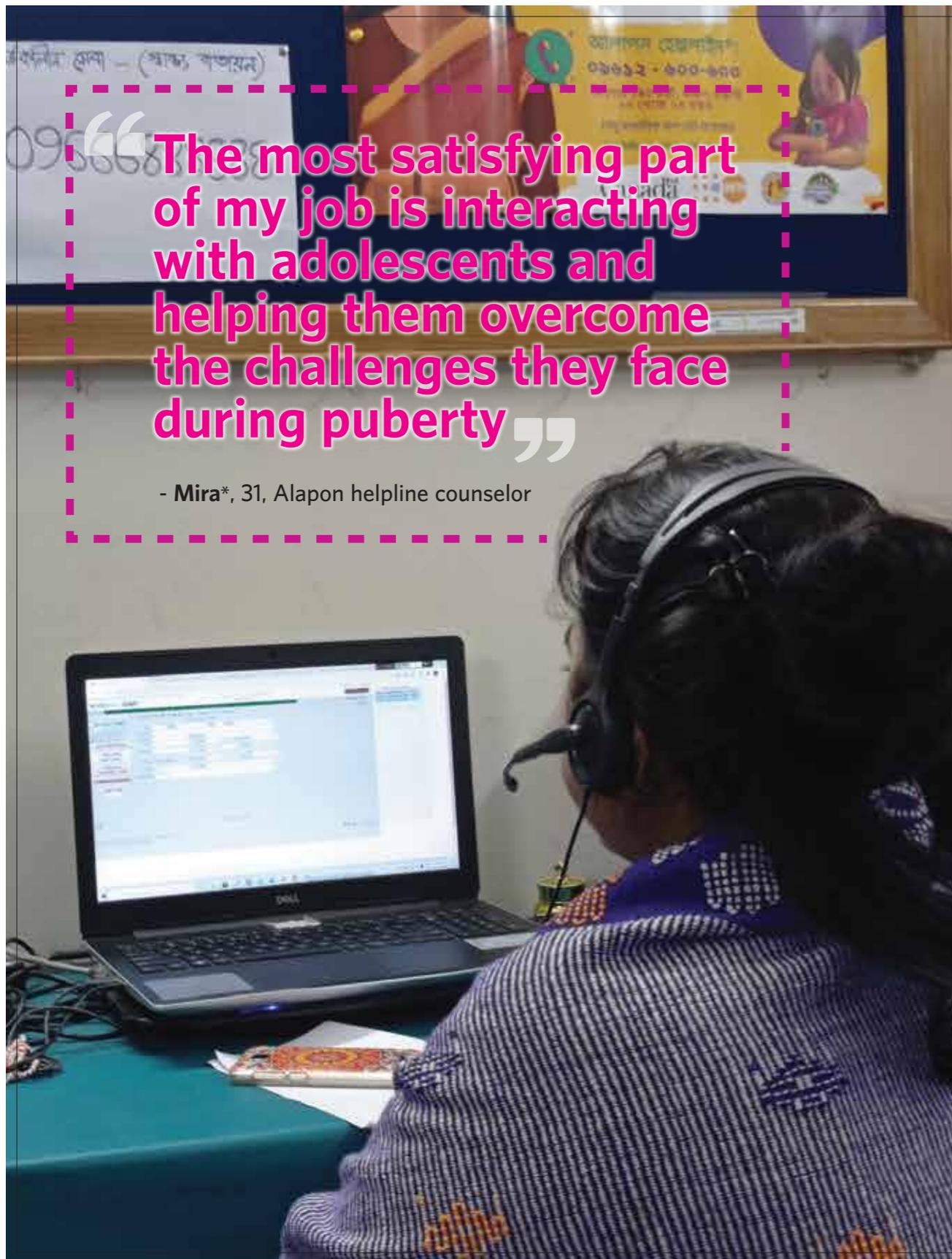


“I wish I could come to the Women Friendly Space every day. But it is not possible since someone needs to come and pick me up in my wheelchair. I am so happy when I am here, because I get to chat with other girls of my age. I could stay all day!”

Today, I was so excited to come and receive the hygiene kit. The kits will be a nice present for me and my two sisters. We will use the items for our daily self-care. I also love the bag. It is really practical, because the fabric is water resistant and I can put my water and clothes inside it!”

Mohsina is a 15-year old, differently abled girl living in the Rohingya camps of Cox's Bazar. In 2020, Mohsina was one of the 25,000 women and girls who received a COVID-19 kit, which UNFPA distributed to curb the spread of the virus in the camps. The kits contain soap, sanitizer, washing powder and other items for maintaining personal hygiene.

The kits were distributed through the 23 UNFPA-supported Women Friendly Spaces in Cox's Bazar, which continued to operate throughout the pandemic in 2020. The Women Friendly Spaces are safe havens for women and girls in humanitarian emergencies, as they provide life skills training, counselling, and support to women to respond to gender-based violence.



**“The most satisfying part of my job is interacting with adolescents and helping them overcome the challenges they face during puberty”**

- Mira\*, 31, Alapon helpline counselor

“My name is Mira\*. I have been working as a counselor for the Alapon helpline for one year now.

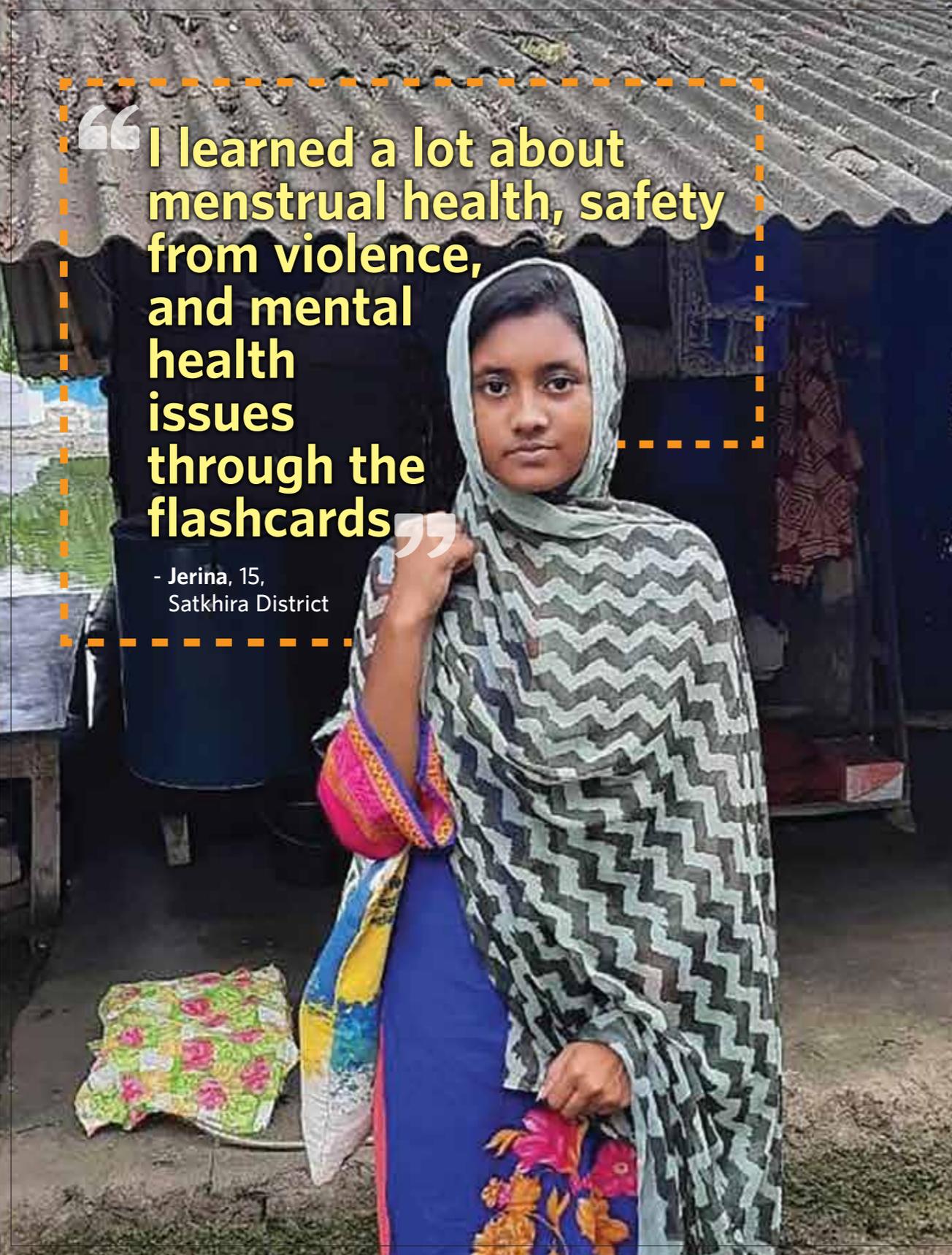
In my experience, the most common reason young people call the Alapon Helpline is to ask questions relating to their sexual and reproductive health. Wet dreams, menstruation and masturbation are some of the common topics. During COVID-19, many young people were also concerned about sanitation and hygiene, as well as the symptoms they were experiencing.

The most satisfying part of my job is interacting with adolescents and helping them overcome the challenges they face during puberty. This makes me feel so proud of myself!”

The ‘Alapon’ helpline is a UNFPA-initiative, delivered in partnership with CWFD (Concerned Women for Family Development), and endorsed by the Ministry of Education, which provides young people access to counsellors to guide them as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the ‘Alapon’ Helpline continued to provide remote counseling services to young people between the ages of 10 and 24 across Bangladesh. The helpline was available 7 days a week, 12 hours a day and received thousands of calls from young people and parents that sought advice from professional counselors for their concerns about mental health, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and COVID-19.

\*The name of the person has been changed.



**“I learned a lot about menstrual health, safety from violence, and mental health issues through the flashcards”**

- Jerina, 15,  
Satkhira District

“During Cyclone Amphan, there was a lot of destruction in my community. River banks were eroded, trees were uprooted and houses were destroyed. My family’s home was hit and even though my father was able to rebuild it, life has been difficult for us ever since.

With all of this going on, we were not able to discuss concerns about our physical and mental health with our family members. That’s why these menstrual hygiene kits we received are so helpful to me and other girls in my community. They will keep us safe from sexually transmitted infections and help us take care of ourselves.

I also learned a lot about menstrual health, safety from violence, and mental health issues through the flashcards in the kits. I also know that I can protect myself from COVID-19 by wearing a mask and practicing social distancing. This information will help me for my entire life.”

In September 2020, UNFPA, together with our partners, Plan International and CWFD (Concerned Women for Family Development) distributed 5,200 Menstrual Health Management Kits to girls between the ages of 10-18 years in districts affected by Cyclone Amphan.

The kits contained essential goods such as soap, detergent powder, sanitary cloths, and underwear. These items enable adolescent girls to take care of their personal hygiene, despite the natural disaster. In addition to the items, the kits also contained masks and flashcards with information on sexual and reproductive health, safety precautions to follow during COVID-19 and the hotline number of the UNFPA-supported ‘Alapon’ helpline, which provides young people remote counseling during the pandemic.

“**The most fulfilling part of my job is to meet and weave relationships with young mothers**”

- Tania Akter, Midwife and Health Educator, Cox's Bazar



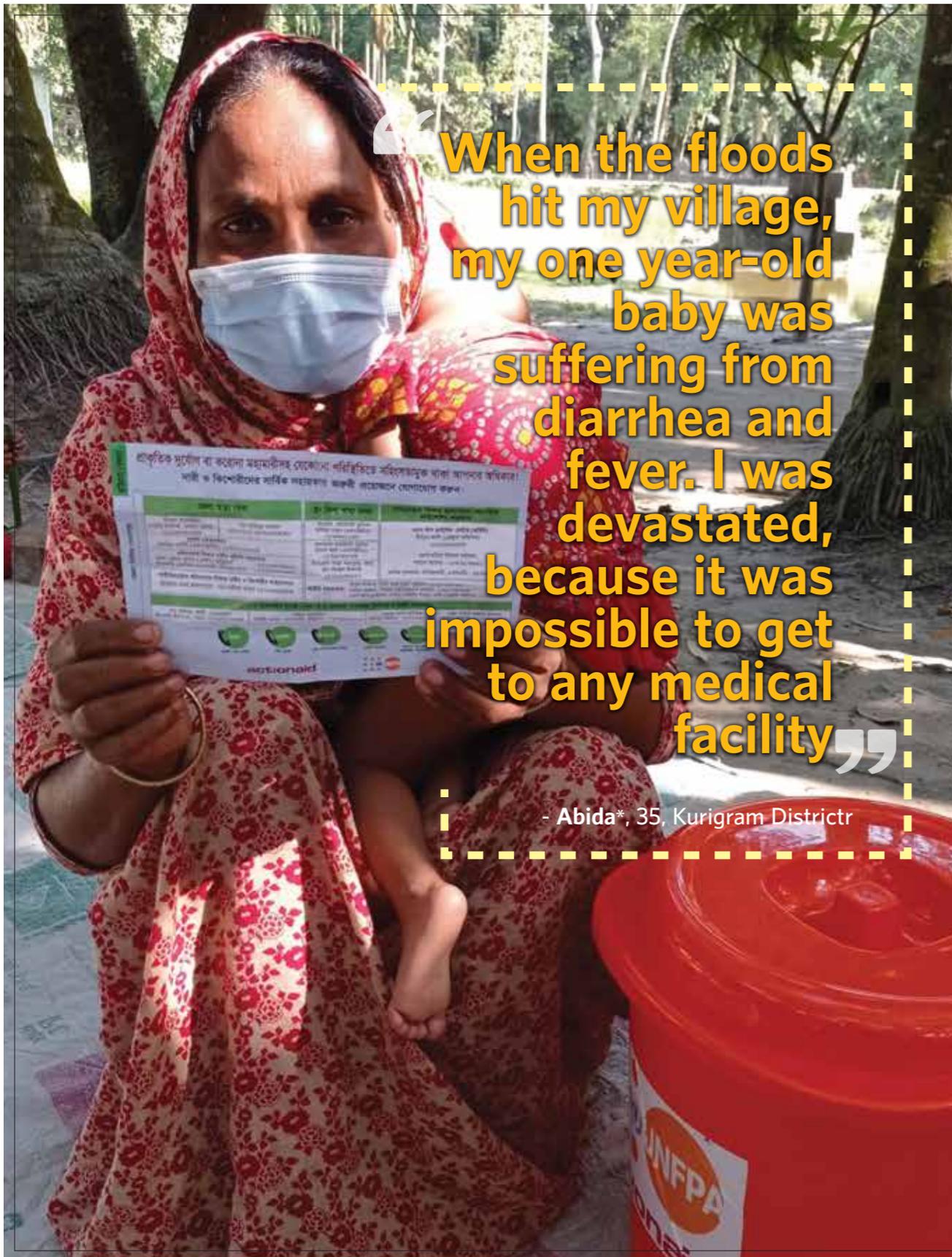
“The sessions we hold here at the Adolescents’ Corner are about educating young mothers on safe deliveries, family planning, birth spacing and antenatal and postnatal care. Through the networks of the young mothers, we also hope to cascade this knowledge to others in the Rohingya community.

The most fulfilling part of my job is to meet and weave relationships with young mothers and see the community learn about safe deliveries, family planning, and the services we provide. 96% of deliveries in the camps are now done at health-facilities, thanks to the sensitization carried out during our sessions!

I find the programme very inspiring. My dream is to continue in the health system and hopefully one day become an owner of a nursing home!”

Adolescents under 18 years of age constitute 55% of the displaced Rohingya population in Bangladesh. Due to the prevalence of adolescent pregnancies and the lack of access to correct information about sexual and reproductive health, many pregnant girls in the Rohingya community find themselves at high risk of life-threatening maternal health complications.

UNFPA’s Young Mothers’ Support Group Programme, supported by the Government of Japan, hosts sessions in health facilities located in the camps, where teenage mothers receive crucial information to help them take care of themselves and their newborns, during and after pregnancy, as well as advice and counselling on family planning.



**“When the floods hit my village, my one year-old baby was suffering from diarrhea and fever. I was devastated, because it was impossible to get to any medical facility”**

- Abida\*, 35, Kurigram District

“When the floods hit my village this year, my one year-old baby was suffering from diarrhea and fever. I was devastated, because it was impossible to get to any medical facility.

Then I remembered the flashcards that had been distributed to us and called the nearest health complex. A doctor was able to suggest some remedies for my son on the phone, which I managed to give him with the help of local volunteers.”

Through the UNCFER Anticipatory Action Pilot Project, UNFPA distributed lifesaving supplies to women, girls and transgender people before the floods hit Gaibandha, Jamalpur and Kurigram Districts of Bangladesh. The initiative marked the first time for the UN to have provided supplies to those most vulnerable, in anticipation of a natural disaster.

As part of the landmark effort, UNFPA distributed 6,000 dignity kits to women in the vulnerable communities, with the support from the Government of Australia, and our local partners. The kits contained products that would enable women and girls to take care of their personal hygiene and protect themselves from gender-based violence in the challenging conditions of the temporary relocation settlements.

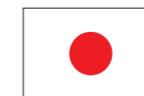
Included in the kits were flashcards that contained important contact numbers of nearby health facilities, which the women were encouraged to call in case of emergency. The information and telemedicine services proved to be crucial for Abida\* and her 1-year old son, who was severely ill when the floods hit.

\*The name of the person has been changed.

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Delivering a world where  
every pregnancy is wanted,  
every childbirth is safe and  
every young person's potential is fulfilled

**United Nations Population Fund Bangladesh**

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