



Managing Periods During the COVID-19 Pandemic Amongst the Ethnic Communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

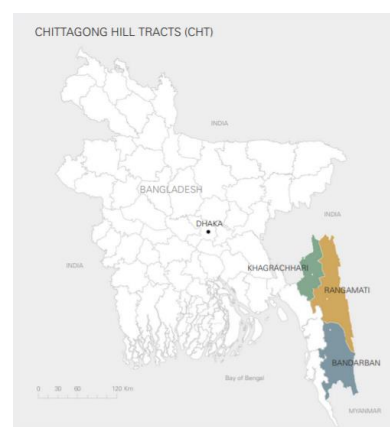
SUMMARY

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent needs of adolescent girls in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a pilot intervention on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and menstrual hygiene management (MHM) has been carried out by a collaboration of the Child Protection and WASH sections at the UNICEF Chattogram Field Office in Bangladesh. Partnering with the Sustainable Social Services in Chittagong Hill Tracts (SSSCHT) project, approximately 2,500 adolescent girls from 150 adolescent clubs received support. Additionally, 150 staff and 4,000 adolescent club members participated in capacity development initiatives on SRHR issues. Moreover, a key activity of this intervention included entrepreneurship training and supporting the development of marketable skills for adolescents. Safina Naznin, WASH Officer for the Chattogram Division of UNICEF Bangladesh, shares her experience in this WASH Diary regarding UNICEF's efforts in the CHT.

Background

Worldwide menstruation is a monthly occurring fact of life for 1.8 billion girls, women, transgender men and non-binary persons of reproductive age (UNICEF, 2019). In Bangladesh, menstruation and menstrual practices still face many social, cultural and religious restrictions, which represent significant barriers in the path to dignified menstrual hygiene management (MHM). In many parts of the country including the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), girls are often not prepared for and unaware of the physical details of their menstruation and options to manage it before its

Figure 1: Project Area



KEY STATISTICS

According to findings from a UNICEF internal qualitative survey in support to the SSSCHT project in 2020:

- *In the CHT, around 47 per cent of adolescent girls used old cloths during their menstruation and 69 per cent of them washed these cloths properly with soap and water.*
- *Around 56 per cent used sanitary napkins if they found them available.*
- *Around 35 per cent of girls reported that they felt embarrassed to buy sanitary napkins from a shop.*
- *During the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation became worse as they were bound to use unhygienic materials for their menstrual hygiene management.*

first occurrence. As a result, they face many difficulties and challenges at home, in school and in the workplace. Women and girls experiencing menstruation require water and sanitation facilities as well as menstrual hygiene supplies in a friendly environment to manage their periods safely, comfortably and with dignity. Managing menstruation in resource-poor settings is often challenging. During emergencies, like COVID-19, the deprivations women and girls face can be exacerbated, including a shortfall of menstrual material supplies (leading to the unhygienic or unsafe management of menstruation) and mobility and market access restrictions.

In the CHT, the situation has become more dire due to the scarcity of water and soap. Such challenges are compounded by gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, poverty, secrecy, a sense of embarrassment and a lack of basic services for menstruation. Adolescent girls often face stigma, harassment and social exclusion during their period. During the COVID-19 pandemic, family members, male and female, were regularly confined in their homes together due to

the lockdown, often leaving no private space for women and girls to take care of their menstruation which in turn led to feelings of stress and anxiety. Furthermore, the lack of privacy at home as well as the risks of using shared, unsafe and unclean toilets and bathing facilities likely acted as a barrier for women to change their menstrual materials as frequently as required and to wash and store them in a hygienic manner. If girls lack access to affordable, hygienic menstrual products, they often use old rags, cloths or other unhygienic materials instead, which can lead to reproductive tract infections (RTIs) and other health problems.

In CHT areas, women do not have regular access to safe sanitary products, know very little about the types and methods of using them, or are unable to afford such products. As a result, they mostly rely on traditional methods (including using old cloths which they wash and use again). Despite the fact that there have been major developments in the areas of water and sanitation in the CHT, the specific needs and requirements of adolescent girls and women have often been ignored.

Photo 1: Girls learning to design and sew a hygienic reusable pad



Source: UNICEF Bangladesh

Addressing MHM challenges in CHT communities with UNICEF Bangladesh - a story by WASH Officer, Safina Naznin

Safina Naznin, WASH Officer for the Chattogram Division of UNICEF Bangladesh, shares her experience about UNICEF and its partners' efforts to address the challenging situation described above in the CHT through an informal conversation with colleagues.

What is the state of menstrual hygiene in the CHT today?

"We are in the 21st century, but menstruation is still very much a taboo topic across the nation. In our largely patriarchal society, men along with women perpetuate the stigma and taboo around periods due to long-standing social norm. In Bangladesh particularly in the CHT areas, managing monthly menstruation safely, comfortably and with dignity is a struggle for adolescent girls and women.

While I travelled across the CHT areas, I rarely found an improved latrine with running water in the community or a separate space in the toilet to allow women and girls to safely change their sanitary napkins. The situation is quite common for the female population and female staff working in the CHT as the percentage of households using improved sanitation facilities is much lower than the national average (84.6 per cent), ranging around 54 per cent in CHT (MICS 2019)".

How has the situation been impacted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

"I have noticed that the situation became worse during the pandemic as menstruating girls and women faced limited privacy, inadequate access to toilets and water and risked lacking menstrual products due to the COVID-19-related lockdowns. When sanitary products are hard to obtain, individuals may be forced to resort to using

unhygienic alternatives that can increase their risk of reproductive and urinary tract infections. This lack of access to safe sanitary products during COVID-19 poses a real threat to the health and safety of people that menstruate. Families have experienced financial stress to access basic needs including menstrual hygiene products. Existing barriers to accessing proper menstrual hygiene products for women and adolescent girls in the CHT have been escalated during the COVID-19 lockdown".

How has UNICEF tried to assess the unique, gendered impact on women and girls?

"We have conducted a rapid qualitative assessment to know the situation. The assessment indicates that limited communication on the subject has the potential to hinder women's safe menstrual hygiene practices as well as deepen the existing menstruation stigma and taboos, especially within the context of COVID-19".

Based on your observations, what are the main challenges to MHM access in the CHT? How is UNICEF working to address these challenges?

"The three key challenges to MHM are accessibility, affordability and awareness. Considering this, capacity development initiatives have been carried out for 150 staff and 4,000 adolescents club members on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues including menstrual hygiene material support to 2,500 girls in Chittagong Hill Tracts areas. This included the distribution of reusable pads and training on how to use and care for them properly, to ensure that once the new entrepreneurs start producing reusable products, they do have an educated potential clientele base, who are interested in the products, thereby aiming to increase chances of success for the new businesses. The distributions were made possible through UNICEF's CHT Child Protection Section financial and programmatic support. Moreover, entrepreneurship training and the development of marketable skills for adolescents is a key activity

under this intervention. Adolescent girls in CHT face challenges that are increased by gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, poverty, secrecy, embarrassment and a lack of basic services around menstruation. Capacity-building initiatives help to reduce harmful social norms and stigma associated with SRHR and MHM. To reduce social stigma, adolescent boys are also trained to act as change agents”.

Can you describe the entrepreneurship intervention in more detail?

“An entrepreneurship training for the adolescent peer leaders/club members was designed to develop low-cost, reusable, sanitary napkins in which around 20 adolescent girls from three hill districts participated and received hands-on training. After the training they received sewing machines and startup funding to prepare the needed materials as well as start up their business. They act as entrepreneurs as well as change agents for MHM in their respective communities/*paras*. A para is defined as group of households living in a socially defined area who regularly interact with each other, have common values, common beliefs and who care about each other and feel they belong together. For CHTs, a para comprises a group of 30 to 40 households, which are mostly scattered due to the hilly terrain. Considering the high price and disposal problems of commercial one-time use sanitary napkins, the project encouraged participants to produce reusable and washable cloth pads. The pad is designed to be biodegradable. It offers a sustainable sanitary option, but must be hygienically washed, dried in sunlight and stored in a clean dry place. These cloth pads are reusable; so, they are cost-effective and eco-friendly”.

What are the future hopes for this initiative?

“In the future, the adolescent girls who received entrepreneurship training will produce and supply reusable napkins in para centres. An important

aspect for the long term success of the young entrepreneurs, was that they received training on costing, material sourcing and product pricing in addition to the technical training on how to produce reusable menstrual pads as part of their entrepreneurship training. To strengthen the new market a one time distribution of reusable materials to adolescent girls (2500) was coupled with training on how to use and sustainably take care of the product (washing and drying) with the aim to turn them into informed future clients for the products. To promote inclusion of CHT in mainstream development, UNICEF and the Government of Bangladesh jointly formulated the para/village centre approach using a life cycle approach under the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tract Affairs. Its purpose was to improve access and utilization of basic social services for marginalized communities in the CHT through provision of integrated basic services of health, nutrition, education, WASH and child protection through the extensive network of para workers. UNICEF delivers basic services through 5,000 para centres at the three CHT districts. The para centre network plays an effective role influencing positive social behaviour and is widely accepted by the community¹. Women and girls disseminate their learnings with other adolescents along with the material support she received during the training at their catchment area. This will further provide them with alternative livelihood opportunities. In addition, the CHT Development Board, a government agency that can contribute their own financial resources for entrepreneurship development among adolescent club members and link up with local government and Hill District Councils for the market development of reusable sanitary napkins in remote *upazilas* (an administrative region in Bangladesh, functioning as a sub-unit of a district) and at the union level (a union is the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh)”.

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/shaping-future-cht>

Photo 2: Pue Marma making a reusable napkin



Source: UNICEF Bangladesh

Can you tell us more about an individual participant or participants views in this initiative?

“Pue Yai Nue Marma is a 19-year-old girl living in the Notun Para in Rowangchahri Upazila under Bandarban district. She lost her mother at the age of seven and grew up with the support of her elder sisters, who lives nearby. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she faced difficulties to manage her menstruation in a hygienic way. She also faced problems being able to afford commercially available disposable pads, which she could only afford to use on special days. Pue Marma explained her situation to me saying that ‘We do not have enough money for food. How can I ask my sister to buy sanitary napkins for me? So, I started using an old cloth again. I am worried about my health but what can I do?’

The UNICEF supported entrepreneurship training opened a new horizon for her and she shared her learnings with other adolescent girls at the same time distributing some reusable sanitary napkins. Participants of the training also take part in

awareness raising activities on menstrual hygiene management amongst peer groups as there are still some harmful social norms and practices in the hilly areas. Pue Marma said, ‘there were difficulties initially but now I am confident to manage my period safely. Thank you, UNICEF, for bringing it up. We will collectively do something better for the adolescent girls in CHT’”.

What was the biggest success in your eyes in this project?

“Stigma and taboo associated with menstruation is still a challenge in Bangladesh and menstrual hygiene remains a taboo topic in the CHT communities. People usually hesitate to speak openly about practices and beliefs that are private and are not willing to share about harmful practices. While reviewing literature, we found that little, inappropriate, or incomplete knowledge about

Photo 3: WASH Officer, Safina Naznin with children and adolescents in CHT



Source: UNICEF Bangladesh

menstruation is a great hindrance in the path of personal and menstrual hygiene management. Through our interventions we tried to break the silence on MHM issues and reduce the harmful social norms, which I found one of the biggest

achievements. In addition to this, building skill and capacity along with entrepreneurship development creates a window of women's economic empowerment, which is another success of this project".

What made UNICEF uniquely positioned to respond successfully to this challenge?

"UNICEF envisions a world where menstruation does not create stress, shame or any unnecessary obstacle for girls. Information about menstrual hygiene does not only safeguard girls' health but also helps them reach their full potential. Menstrual health and hygiene interventions can help overcome the challenges associated with menstruating for the adolescent girls and women in CHT. Through this initiative, not only did we support women and girls to fulfil their unmet demand for menstrual hygiene products; but also protect dignity, build confidence and strengthen sexual and reproductive health, particularly among adolescents".

What did you personally learn from the project?

"Drop out of the adolescent entrepreneurs is a major concern for sustainability of the project. Also, the unavailability of the raw materials in the remote areas sometimes discouraged them to produce the reusable sanitary products. Sensitizing parents and community people might be effective for ownership development and ensure sustainability. Moreover, menstruation is not just a girl's matter. It is everyone's matter. Boys also have a role to play. Taboos and myths are circulated among everyone. Educating boys and girls about menstruation can build confidence and encourage healthy habits. Furthermore, menstrual health and hygiene is a multi-sectoral issue that requires integrated action from WASH, education and health sectors, as well as specific expertise in adolescent development, child protection, disability, gender and more importantly involving the private sector".

What was the most meaningful part of participating in this project?

"Working with the adolescents. At first, they were very hesitant to discuss these issues, but later on adolescent girls really engaged with us. While many interventions address issues adolescent girls face, for example child marriage, eve teasing, etc., interventions related to menstrual hygiene are uncomfortable to address as often many adolescent girls are shy. Throughout this project, however, we watched as girls gradually would open up to us and this made me very happy."

What was the most challenging part of this project?

"It was difficult watching mothers, who were willing to spend money to buy sanitary pads for their daughters, not consider buying sanitary pads for themselves. We know that some women use practices that may be very dangerous and can cause many harmful effects. While our intervention was focused on adolescent girls, we hope we can also engage families and have a positive impact on their menstrual hygiene".

References

Guidance on Menstrual Health and Hygiene, UNICEF 2019

<https://www.unicef.org/media/91341/file/UNICEF-Guidance-menstrual-health-hygiene-2019.pdf>

Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 2019; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and UNICEF Bangladesh

https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/3281/file/Bangladesh%202019%20MICS%20Report_English.pdf

"Many Tracts One Community", UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019,

<https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/reports/many-tracts-one-community>

Photo credits

Photo 1: © Safina/UNICEF/Bangladesh/2020

Photo 2: © SSSCHT-UNICEF/Bangladesh/2021

Photo 3: © SSSCHT-UNICEF/Bangladesh/2020

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Nicole Klaesener-Metzner (WASH Specialist) and Pushkar Sharma (Editor) at UNICEF's Regional Office for South Asia for editing this document.

Additionally, the authors wish to thank the following individuals for their support and commitment:

- Zaid Jurji, Chief WASH Section, UNICEF Bangladesh
- Madhuri Banerjee, Chief of Field Office, UNICEF Chattogram Division
- Flora Jesmeen Deepa, Child Protection Officer, UNICEF Chattogram Division
- Syed Adnan Ibna Hakim, WASH Officer, UNICEF Bangladesh

About the Series

UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) country teams work inclusively with governments, civil society partners and donors, to improve WASH services for children and adolescents, and the families and caregivers who support them. UNICEF works in over 100 countries worldwide to improve water and sanitation services, as well as basic hygiene practices. This publication is part of the UNICEF WASH Learning Series, designed to contribute to knowledge of good practice across UNICEF's WASH programming. In this series:

Discussion Papers explore the significance of new and emerging topics with limited evidence or understanding, and the options for action and further exploration.

Fact Sheets summarize the most important knowledge on a topic in few pages in the form of graphics, tables and bullet points, serving as a briefing for staff on a topical issue.

Field Notes share innovations in UNICEF's WASH programming, detailing its experiences implementing these innovations in the field.

Guidelines describe a specific methodology for WASH programming, research or evaluation, drawing on substantive evidence, and based on UNICEF's and partners' experiences in the field.

Reference Guides present systematic reviews on topics with a developed evidence base or they compile different case studies to indicate the range of experience associated with a specific topic.

Technical Papers present the result of more in-depth research and evaluations, advancing WASH knowledge and theory of change on a key topic.

WASH Diaries explore the personal dimensions of users of WASH services, and remind us why a good standard of water, sanitation and hygiene is important for all to enjoy. Through personal reflections, this series also offers an opportunity for tapping into the rich reservoir of tacit knowledge of UNICEF's WASH staff in bringing results for children.

WASH Results show with solid evidence how UNICEF is achieving the goals outlined in Country Programme Documents, Regional Organizational Management Plans, and the Global Strategic Plan or WASH Strategy, and contributes to our understanding of the WASH theory of change or theory of action.

COVID-19 WASH Responses compile lessons learned on UNICEF's COVID-19 response and how to ensure continuity of WASH services and supplies during and after the pandemic.

Readers are encouraged to quote from this publication but UNICEF requests due acknowledgement. You can learn more about UNICEF's work on WASH here: <https://www.unicef.org/wash/>

www.unicef.org/wash

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

The statements in this publication are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or the views of UNICEF.

United Nations Children's Fund
3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA

For more information, please contact: WASH@unicef.org