



DRC women group sewing sanitary pads, camp 8W. The production cost for each reusable pad is only 0.1 Euro. Photo: Sina Hasan/ DRC Bangladesh

Imagine a World of Women who Bleed without Fear

On this World Refugee Day, June 20th, here is a story on how a small idea led to great impact on the health and dignity of displaced women and girls in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

The 'Rohingya Refugee Camp' in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, is home to over two hundred thousand families who fled across the border from Myanmar to seek refuge in 2017. There are approximately a million displaced Rohingya people living in this area, and half of them are women and girls.

Needless to say, no family is protected until the health of women and girls is protected. Menstrual hygiene is integral to women's health and wellbeing. Poor menstrual hygiene, however, can pose serious health risks, like reproductive and urinary tract infections (UTI) which can result in future infertility and birth complications.

"Feminine hygiene is often overlooked in our camp. As a result, girls and women are left to manage their periods on their own, many people are compelled to reuse old rags. And it is not something we discuss with anyone," says 18-year-old Yasmin from Rohingya camp.

She is one of a growing number of women in the camp who are now able to sew and safely use their own sanitary pads, to the great benefit of their own health, wellbeing, and dignity.

"We have no money to buy sanitary pads, so we used to use old clothes, which caused a lot of itching and infections. Two years ago, an NGO gave us some disposable pads, we used them for a few months before they ran out."

Minara, 33. Rohingya Camp, Cox's Bazar

Idea sparked by tragic death

A year ago, Shamsun Nahar, another young woman in the Rohingya camp, died of rectal cancer at the age of 25. According to her neighbors, she also had other complications such as urinary infection, which she disclosed to them while she was alive. Her tragic death made a huge impact on the local community of Rohingya women, who started to raise concerns about feminine hygiene among themselves.

Not long after Shamsun's passing, a group of women from camp 8W came to the DRC protection team with an idea. They wanted to produce sanitary pads for themselves and other women in the camp, in order to practice cleanliness and prevent infections like UTI. The local DRC protection staff respected the idea and took the initiative to make it happen.

By the end of March 2022, 80 women from three different groups received both materials and training on how to sew and safely use reusable sanitary pads.

One of those women is Minara, 33. She is pleased that she now has a safer and easier option than she had before:

“We have no money to buy sanitary pads, so we used to use old clothes, which caused a lot of itching and infections. Two years ago, an NGO gave us some disposable pads, we used them for a few months before they ran out, and we don't receive those pads anymore. By the help of DRC, we have now learned how to make our own reusable sanitary pads.”



The homemade sanitary pads are made from cloth and can be washed and reused according to proper hygienic instructions. Photo: Sina Hasan/ DRC Bangladesh

“If we can't maintain hygienic practices, our entire lives will be endangered. It is especially important for adolescent girls like us.”

Nur Kalima, 16. Rohingya Camp, Cox's Bazar

Along with training in sewing their own pads, the 80 women received cloth, scissors, needles, underwear, and other materials to make and use the reusable sanitary pads. DRC staff also instruct them in safe use and hygienic maintenance, says DRC staff and trainer Joynab Akter:

“We follow hygiene instructions from doctors. The women are instructed to change pads within 4 to 6 hours, and we teach them how to wash the pads and dry them properly. We are really happy to see their awareness rising to the benefit of their health.”

16-year-old Nur Kalima, stresses the importance of hygienic awareness:

“If we can't maintain hygienic practices, our entire lives will be endangered. It is especially important for adolescent girls like us.”

Techniques and awareness widely spread

Although only 80 women received the original training, many more displaced women and girls benefit from it, since more than a thousand pads have been produced, and awareness is shared widely. The women also share the pad making techniques, so that other women can make the pads themselves and teach others.

“My neighbor thanked me after using one of our pads, and they are also highly appreciated by adolescent girls. It is of no use to be shy – we must share the hygiene awareness among girls and women in the camp, otherwise more will suffer,” says Minara from camp 8W.

Even though the hygienic support for all women in the camp is inadequate, these 80 group members provided more than a thousand of sanitary pads to women and girls in their community. When women and girls are protected, the benefits extend to their families, communities, and eventually to the entire camp.

On this World Refugee Day, let's imagine that all displaced women and girls get access to safe and hygienic measures during menstruation.

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Minara, 33. Rohingya Camp, Cox's Bazar



Sanitary pad production by DRC women and girls' group in Cox's Bazar 'Rohingya Refugee Camp':

Donor: IOM

- Three groups of **80 women** of the Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar received training from DRC, along with cloth, scissors, needles, underwear, and other materials to make and use the reusable sanitary pads.
- The women groups in camp 8W and 8E have 80 members.
- They **sew the pads and then wash and dry them in the sun before using the pads.**
- DRC protection staffs also **instruct the women in safe use and hygienic maintenance.**
- The members make pads for themselves but **also distribute to other women in the camp.**
- They share the pad making techniques as well, so that other women are able to make the pads themselves and teach others.
- Approximately **850 reusable pads were produced** during the training phase, which **supported almost 141 women and girls**, 6 pads for each person.
- According to the market price in Bangladesh, **one woman needs 6-9 Euro per month to buy non-reusable sanitary pads** (if period lasts around three to five days, and it requires 18-30 pads per month), which is totally unbearable for refugees and displaced families as they do not have any income and totally rely on humanitarian aid.
- The **reusable pads produced by DRC groups cost 0.1 Euro each**, so 0.6 Euro can secure hygienic menstruation of one person for two to three months if she follows the hygiene instructions properly.
- The average **costing ratio** of buying one time pad vs Pads made by DRC groups is **22.5:0.2 in Euro.**
- The groups depend on DRC assistance for new clothes to make pads but, it is a **major concern for them to find a way to manage new clothes once the project activities end in June.**