



A programme
of Simavi and BNPS

Voices for Change



IMPLEMENTING PARTNER

Bandarban



*Environmental and Socio-Economic
Development Organization*

Khagrachari



Rangamati



Supervision

Mahbuba Haque Kumkum
Programme Manager, Simavi

Content Editing

Sasa Rácz, Programme Officer, Simavi
Lindsay Van Clief, Communication and Advocacy Officer, Simavi

Coordination

Md. Ishaque Faruquee, Lobby and Advocacy Officer, Simavi

Story collection, Writing, Photography, Graphic Design

Center for Communication Action Bangladesh

Published by

'Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures' Programme, Simavi

Copyright

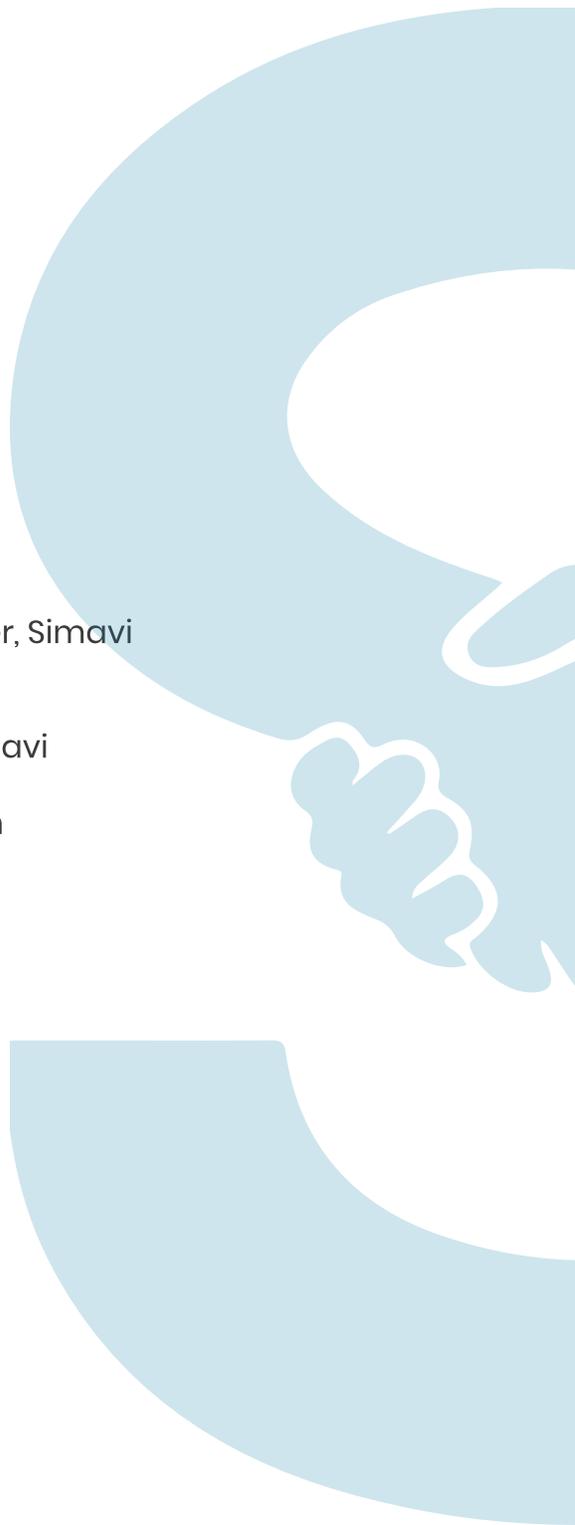
Simavi
Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh

Development Partner

Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh

Published

July 2023



Foreword

The Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures programme, funded by the European Union and Simavi, is designed to support and empower girls to transition into adult womanhood with dignity, and bodily and sexual autonomy, without violence, coercion, and discrimination.

In the course of this 5-year programme, girls of various ethnic groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been raising their voices to advocate for their needs in their communities and beyond.

842 girls' groups have identified a topic they perceive as a priority issue that needs to change, and which lies close to their heart.

According to the girls, the most urgent issues in their communities are, among others: the practice of child marriage; taboos surrounding menstrual health and a lack of proper menstrual health management; gender based and domestic violence; gender inequality and challenges to girls' education; the lack of economic empowerment of girls; the quality and accessibility of sexual and reproductive health services; and environmental and climate related problems.

Girls chose a creative format to sensitize their families, friends, neighbors, community leaders, and government stakeholders. They prepared drama plays, painted posters, wallpapers and leaflets, made handicrafts, organized environment cleaning and planting days, art exhibitions from drawings, paintings and pictures, and created performances using dance, song and video art.

In this publication we are highlighting the story of 10 girls from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, raising their voices for issues that matter to them.

We hope that their courage, motivation and strength will inspire you to also make a change for girls!

Acknowledgements

None of this could have been possible without the efforts of all the organizations in this programme.

Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) and our ten local partners: Ananya Kalyan Songathan (AKS), Gram Unnayan Sangathan (GRAUS), Hill Flower, Khagrapur Mahila Kalyan Samity (KMKS), Progressive, Tahzingdong, Taungya, Trinamul Unnayan Sangstha (TUS), Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE) and Zabarang Kalyan Samity. A special thank you to all the girls involved in the Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures programme, and to their families and community leaders, who supported them throughout.

Thank you to Center for Communication Action Bangladesh for putting this booklet together.

To learn more about the programme please visit



INDEX

08	Shuvodra Paints a Bigger Picture
12	Keya Speaks Up Against Child Marriage
16	Duwari Says “Menstruation Is a Gift”
20	Robita Works to Normalise Menstruation
24	Hlahla Shing Takes a Stand on Gender Equality
28	Rupali Dreams of a Society Where Boys and Girls are Equal
32	Shanti Rani Champions Education Over Early Marriage
36	Priyanka Warns Girls to “Stay Away From Child Marriage”
40	Safety and Independence Go Hand in Hand
44	Simenu Tackles the Stigma Around Menstruation



Shuvodra Paints a Bigger Picture

Shuvodra Khisa, 17 years, Khagrachari

My name is Shuvodra Khisa and I am a member of the Moanghar Girls Club. I come from the Mahalchari Upazila in the Khagrachari District in Bangladesh. Through the Girls Club, I have been able to speak out on a topic I am very passionate about: the harassment faced by women and girls, especially in public spaces.

I have learned from my daughter's creative project that it is wrong to prefer boys over girls. We should ensure that both genders receive the same opportunities and privileges.

- Shudotto Khisa (Father)





The audience at the poster presentation event organized by the girls of Moanghar Girls Club, Khagrachari

I enjoy wearing dresses but unfortunately, I get taunted on the streets when I do. I would love to go to the bazaar wearing the dresses I like but I end up feeling terrible because the boys there always tease me.

I get very angry about it but I cannot say anything. I even told my parents about it and while they were also angry, no one took any action. This teasing is only a small part of the harassment women and girls face.

I once witnessed a man murder his wife in my neighbourhood. Even if the elders in my neighbourhood intervene, I worry that the situation may not improve. This is why I decided to take a stand.

I participated in the Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures programme in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. I enjoy drawing and painting, so I used my art skills to paint a series of posters on gender equality and ending violence against women.



The adolescent girls from Moanghar Girls Club, Khagrachari are working on their poster presentation

My goal was to raise awareness about gender-based violence. I showed the posters to the parents in every family in my area, hoping this would convince them to provide both their sons and their daughters with equal opportunities.

Secondly, I hoped this would empower the girls in these families by informing them of their rights so that they can protect themselves.

I truly believe that one day, we will all be equal.

Keya Speaks Up Against Child Marriage

Keya Tripura, 17 years, Khagrachari

Growing up in a big family that includes my parents, two sisters, two brothers, and countless cousins, I saw discussions about marriage start at an early age. Many young girls were being married off before they could finish school. I wanted to raise my voice against this.

I will make my daughter understand that if she gets married at an early age she might face physical problems, and 18 years is the perfect age for marriage. If someone marries below 18 years, that is called child marriage and that can cause physical problems.

- Gokul Tripura (Community Leader)





The audience watching the drama based on preventing early marriage by Kokbaksha Girls Club

I am Keya Tripura, a member of the Kokbaksha Girls Club in Dighinala, Mayafa Para. I enjoy dancing and helping my mother with cooking and gardening in my free time. I sat for my Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam recently and I am now waiting for the results. These things are all part of a regular childhood. The same cannot be said for the many girls who end up married at a young age — often without their consent.

Child marriage is a serious problem that poses many dangers to girls, not just in my

community but also in many places around the world. I have seen up close the perils of early marriage.

For example, an underaged girl and an older man in our area ran away and got married against their parent's wishes. They fought a lot as they did not have a good understanding and didn't know how to handle married life. The girl got pregnant and gave birth to a stillborn child. This led to more trouble between them and the girl went back to her parent's house, who refused to send

her back to her husband. Fortunately, this story has a better ending than most as they are now divorced and living independently.

I was inspired to write a play on this topic to raise awareness of child marriage in our area through the Girls Club.

The play focused on the story of an underage girl married to an adult man. In the story, she gets pregnant and passes away due to complications during childbirth. Sadly, this is very common, which is why I decided to highlight this.

The parents of young girls, especially, need to be aware of these dangers and protect their daughters. Parents need to build honest relationships with their children so that they will trust them and listen to them.

I am glad I was able to educate some people in my community through the play. I hope to share this knowledge with our friends and neighbours to prevent child marriage.

The adolescent girls from Kokbaksha Girls Club, Khagrachari during the end of their performance



Duwari Says “Menstruation Is a Gift”

Duwari Tripura, 16 years, Khagrachari

As a teenage girl, one of my main concerns is the stigma around menstruation. There are many superstitions around menstruation among my family members and in society in general. Many people believe it is ‘impure’, therefore talking about menstrual health is taboo. Girls are also prohibited from entering kitchens and temples or burning incense during their periods.

“
After receiving training from the girls club, my daughter taught me awareness should be raised about the negative impact of menstrual taboos, and collective effort should be made to educate those who believe in such superstitions.
”

- Priyobala Tripura (Mother)





The audience waiting for the poster presentation by the girls from Montripara Girls Club, Khagrachari

I am Duwari Tripura from the Montripara Girls Cub in Khagrachari, located in southeast Bangladesh. I recently completed my Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam and spend most of my time at home, cooking and helping my younger siblings with their studies.

After I got my first period, I lost the freedom I had as a child. Whenever I go out, people always ask questions about where I am going, with whom, and for what. If I get home late, my neighbours gossip about it.

The members of the Montripara Girls Club, Khagrachari showing their poster presentation on menstrual health management



This mentality upsets me and I want to challenge it. I want to live independently without shame. I am proud that I can get pregnant and give birth. I do not think I should be ashamed of menstruation. I believe it is a gift that allows me to experience motherhood.

As part of our creative project, my friends and I worked to reduce superstitions around menstruation and promote reproductive rights and gender equality. We prepared

materials that talk about reproduction and menstrual health to educate our community. I can see that things are slowly changing but some issues remain. During menstruation, girls are still hesitant to dry their clothes under the sun because of stigma, and the older generations still believe it is impure.

I will continue raising my voice about this subject until everyone accepts that menstruation is healthy and normal.

The adolescent girls from Montripara Girls Club, Khagrachari are preparing their poster presentation



Robita Works to Normalise Menstruation

Robita Tanchangya, 25 years, Bandarban

In a traditional community like mine, it is not unusual for the girls in a family to take on household chores. I have three elder brothers and I am the only girl child. Therefore, my daily routine involves doing household chores and preparing meals before focusing on my studies.







I do not mind taking care of my family, but the thing I find most unacceptable is the disgust around menstruation in my community. Many people in my neighbourhood do not treat menstruation as a normal part of life. Because of these beliefs, girls like myself are subjected to harassment.

My name is Robita and I am a master's student living in Bottoli Para, Roangchari, in the hilly southeastern district of Bandarban. I am a part of the Bottoli Para Girls Club.

Many people believe that girls should avoid going outside, climbing trees, and eating fruits during menstruation. When schoolgirls are on their period, they cannot participate in many activities, unlike the boys. This might even make them fall behind their male peers in their academic pursuits.

The adolescent girls from Bottoli Para Girls Club arranged a courtyard meeting on menstrual health management



We discussed many topics at our 'Girls Club', including menstrual health management, which is very important. Girls in our village face many problems due to insufficient knowledge of menstrual health.

To solve these issues, we held discussions with the village elders and the girls. We spoke about why menstruation happens, cleanliness, and reproductive rights. We also used this opportunity to disprove superstitions.

I learned that a lot of the elderly women in our village also have these beliefs. It made me want to work harder to ensure that menstruation becomes a normal topic instead of a taboo.

I want to get rid of all prejudice around menstruation. I want girls to be able to keep up with the boys and involve themselves in different activities throughout the month. I believe that we can be a stronger society by doing this.

Robita Tanchangya and fellow members of Bottoli Para Girls Club, Bandarban



Hlahla Shing Takes a Stand on Gender Equality

Hlahla Shing, 16 years, Bandarban

From a young age, I experienced many issues while going to school by myself. Boys on the street would catcall me whenever they saw me walking alone. It made me feel very unsafe.

The project is helping girls learn and we are also learning from them. I really enjoyed the project, and the painting does a great job of showing how important it is to respect girls and promote their right to education.

- Shewaching Marma (Mother)



I complained about it to my parents and my father started walking me to school. I felt much safer having him with me, but I do not think this is a good solution for women and girls. I am older now and aware of my rights and the difficulties women face.

My name is Hlahla Shing, and I am a 16-year-old student in class 10. I enjoy reading and talking to friends during my leisure time. I also like walking along the winding rural paths in my area.

I often think about the violence against women in our society. Many women are not allowed to work outside because of this. I wondered what would happen to me when I started working.

I believe everyone should have the right to work but for women, this is difficult. We are not given the same respect that men receive and are not free to do what we want.

My experience inspired me to talk about gender roles and the challenges women and girls face. I worked with other members of my club on various activities to promote gender equality.

We had a poster presentation about women's rights in the workplace and violence against women in our society. We spoke about how women are capable of doing everything men do and how we have value outside of the home.

Lalasing and her friends are showing their poster presentation in the houses of the locality





The girls are dancing during the event of poster presentation

After our presentation, I noticed some positive changes. My brother started assisting with household chores traditionally done by women and people listened to what I had to say.

I hope more people understand that women are fully capable individuals who deserve respect so that we can achieve true gender equality.



Rupali Dreams of a Society Where Boys and Girls are Equal

Rupali Chakma, 20 years, Rangamati

I have always been a driven person. I watch a lot of motivational videos to remind myself to keep working hard. I dream of becoming a bank manager one day. I am also interested in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) and hope to sit for the BCS exam in the future.

“

It is essential that adolescent girls have access to education, and knowledge acquisition should not be subject to gender discrimination.

- Chandramoni Chakma (Community Leader)

”

Our Lives
Our Health
Our Future

বৈষম্য রাখিব না
হতে বাধা হয়ে

নাটক
হলত

ানা

পুর পাড়া,

জানী বি
গায়:

ব্যবৃন্দ





The adolescent girls portraying different characters in their street play on changing gender roles

While I have all these hopes and dreams, I find it difficult to get through my day because of the harassment I face. Commuting to and from college is a major issue in my area. Whenever I take public transport, boys sit uncomfortably close to me. Once, while I was out shopping, an old man approached me. He asked me for my WhatsApp number but I refused to give it to him.

Rupali Chakma and her fellow actors



He did not give up and started following me. I managed to get home safely and immediately told my parents about this incident. I began to worry that incidents like this would stop girls from pursuing their education and fulfilling their dreams.

I am Rupali Chakma, an honours student studying management at the Rangamati Government College. I am also a member of the Bodhipur Ujoni Girls Club in Bodhipurpara, Sapchori in the scenic district of Rangamati. My goal is to ensure equal rights for women and girls in society.

I was inspired to write a play to inform people of the differences between how girls and boys are treated in society. In the play, my character had two children — a boy and a girl. She forbade her daughter from

attending school but her son was allowed to go. My character made her daughter do housework and was preparing to marry her off while she was still very young. This was prevented by another character who convinced the mother to change her decision by explaining why child marriage is dangerous.

We emphasised treating boys and girls equally to ensure girls get access to quality education and equal opportunities. I wanted the girls who watched the play to be inspired and move forward.

I hope to take this play to the areas where there are more instances of 'eve-teasing' and eliminate harassment.

I now dream of a beautiful society where boys and girls are equal.

The group of young actors are bowing before the audience at the end of the street play



Shanti Rani Champions Education Over Early Marriage

Shanti Rani Tripura, 15 years, Bandarban

Education is my passion. I believe that educating girls is important so that they grow up to become independent and can take care of themselves. Unfortunately, there is a major obstacle that stands in the way: the evil of child marriage. I decided to address this barrier so that girls can pursue their education without hindrance.

“
We have learned about the consequences of child marriage from the girls who participated in the training held in the girls' club. In the past, girls were not given as much importance in education as boys were. However, we now understand that both men and women have the right to education.

- Robert Tripura Karbari (Community Leader)

”



My name is Shanti Rani and I am currently a student in class 10. My house is located in the lush green Thanchi upazila in the Bandarban district in Bangladesh. I come from a family of five, which includes my mother, father, brother, and sister. My favourite pastime is sewing.

As a member of the Robert Somity Para Girls Club, we took part in sessions conducted by the Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures Programme. We learned about child marriage and how terrible it can be for young girls.



Child marriage can cause physical, mental, and emotional problems for the children involved. It often prevents them from continuing their education as well and puts them in a vulnerable position.

I identified that due to the lack of knowledge about this, many young girls get married before they become adults. I worked with my fellow club members to create a play to show our audience the risks of child marriage.

We aimed to raise awareness of the benefits of education through which girls like myself can recognise their worth. We wanted both the parents and their children to be able to make informed decisions, especially regarding early marriage.





The performers at the end of their short drama on the negative impact of child marriage

Educating girls is more important than child marriage because when educated, a girl can study and support herself no matter what happens in her future. We made it a point to inform parents that they should prioritise their child's education. I am proud of the project's outcome and hope this conversation continues in the future.

The audience watching the short drama on the negative impact of child marriage



Priyanka Warns Girls to “Stay Away From Child Marriage”

Priyanka Tangchangya, 15 years, Rangamati

I am a teenager, so I like to dress up in pretty dresses. But I am often criticised for the clothes I wear. The men in my neighbourhood talk about my outfits a lot. Whenever my neighbours complain to my family, my mother scolds me, which makes me sad. I want to change this mentality that stops girls from being comfortable in their bodies.

“
In my opinion, especially in terms of making teenagers aware, if parents treat their children like friends, then child marriage can be prevented. Teenagers usually get involved in underage marriages out of impulsiveness.
”

- Lakkhan Tangchangya (Community Leader)





Two young actors are role-playing in the drama about the negative impact of early marriage

My name is Priyanka Tangchangya. I come from a large family consisting of my father, mother, grandfather, two brothers, sister-in-law, and a nephew. My day starts with school, after which I go to tuition classes. I come home and study some more. During leisure, I like to dance and draw.

Young girls are lighting candles on the stage



Even though I am only 15 years old, I cannot wear my favourite clothes or do things I want to do without people gossiping about me. Boys do whatever they want but people don't talk about them. They always gossip about me because I am a girl. My unique personality and style are very important to me, so I do not like it when they say bad things about me.

I joined the Girls Club in Kaptai, Mohajon Para in the district of Khagrachhari. Here, we learned about the risks girls face in society, including getting married early. Learning about this was eye-opening because minor girls often get married to boys or older men and then regret it.

My sister ran away and got married while she was underage. She now regrets it because she could have studied more instead. I decided to spread this message in

my community through a theatrical performance so other girls would not make the same mistake.

My fellow club members and I put together a play with the slogan "Keep your emotions under control. Stay away from child marriage." The play spoke about how schoolgirls fall in love with boys and run away from home to get married. This could be very dangerous for young girls, especially if they do not have the support and protection of their families. They also experience health issues if they get pregnant while they are too young. I now know a lot about reproductive health, child marriage, and other related issues, and want to share this knowledge with others. I have also realised my value and want to be myself without any societal pressures holding me back.

Young actors at the end of the drama about the negative impact of early marriage



Safety and Independence Go Hand in Hand

Rinu Chakma Nila, 22 years, Rangamati

My name is Rinu Chakma Nila. I am a second-year Higher Secondary School student and a member of the West Baghaichori Girls Club in the Baghaichari Upazila. My family includes my father, mother, brother, and sister. I love playing indoor games, singing, and spending time outdoors. I dream of becoming a nurse but due to financial problems, I am unsure if I will be able to.

It is important for boys and girls to have equal rights. Through the training and sessions held in the girls' club, my daughter became aware of her rights and the importance of gender equality.

- Koruna Chakma (Mother)





The members of the West Baghaichori Adolescent Girls' club almost finished their poster presentation

In my community, girls grow up, get married, and have to listen to their husbands. They say this is for our safety but I disagree. I want to be independent and take care of my parents instead.

Through the club, I was able to gain knowledge on a variety of topics, including menstrual hygiene, women's rights, and the importance of higher education. I found this empowering, and wish to share this knowledge with other girls so that they can feel empowered too.

The opportunity arose through a creative project I did as a part of the Our Lives, Our Health, Our Futures programme. I helped create a poster presentation to raise awareness about the importance of higher education for girls and ensuring their safety and independence.

People react negatively when girls go out alone. Girls cannot go out at night because it is deemed unsafe. We hear about many cases where women and girls get sexually assaulted. The risk of gender-based violence holds us back from true independence. I want that to change.



Through this poster presentation, we called attention to many related topics, such as how women are treated as ancestral property, and also our rights. This includes access to education.

I want everyone to understand the value of education. Girls should be encouraged to

pursue higher education the way boys are so that they can move forward with confidence. But girls cannot pursue education if their safety is not ensured.

Safety and independence go hand in hand and I hope that people were able to realise this through our poster presentation.

The girls from West Baghaichori Adolescent Girls' Club are showing their poster presentation to the audience



Simenu Tackles the Stigma Around Menstruation

Simenu Chowdhury, 15 years, Rangamati

As a girl, I face several challenges. My school is very far away, but I do not mind because I know some people have to walk much farther than I do. The one thing I struggle with is that when I get my period and have to go to school late because of that, the teachers scold me.

“

Through the advocacy and creative work of our girls we have learned that through effective communication and the use of mediums such as street drama and creative projects, it is possible to dispel superstitious beliefs and facilitate change in the society.

- Ukhiya Jay Karbari (Community Leader)

”



While a few teachers understand my situation, most do not. I suffer from back pain and stomach aches and have to get up early in the morning to get ready. Changing sanitary napkins is also a problem.

I start feeling uncomfortable every three hours and need to change, but the condition of the washroom at my school is not good. I cannot wait till later because I have to go to tuition right after school.

I only come home late in the evening and have to handle the pain all day . In addition to this, my walk home is very unsafe.

While I walk back alone, boys stare at me, which is very scary. I know that good boys never stare, so I believe they have bad intentions. I wish that more people would be understanding towards me and others like me.



Simenu Chowdhury is helping others understand the myths related to menstruation



In the drama, Simenu Chowdhury is showing the girls how to use menstrual pads

I am Simenu, a class 9 student from the Rangamati Hill District in Bangladesh. I spend most of my day attending tuition classes to prepare for my exams, returning home only at 7:30 PM. In school, I take part in debates, presentations, and speeches. I enjoy listening to music and various forms of dancing, including the traditional Marma dance style. I have participated in dance programs for Victory Day and Independence Day.

I am a member of the Kachukhali Girls Club and my parents are very supportive of my involvement.

Through the 'Girls Club', I learned about my body and the changes it went through. They taught us about hormones, sex, chromosomes, the period cycle, and pregnancy. This was very educational but we do not freely talk about these topics in society. I want to spread this knowledge in my community so that others can also benefit from it.

I helped write a play on these topics focusing on an honest view of our society. I know that our community is not that bad. Most of the parents are educated but people from other areas believe in superstitions about menstruation. I want to tell them that menstruation is not impure.

Every community should have an educated person who can raise awareness about this. This is very important to me because of my personal experiences. Through my play, I was able to share the private worries I had and also reduce the stigma around menstruation.

I hope that more people understand that menstruation is normal and that we must be understanding toward those experiencing it.

The girls from Kachukhali girls club after the performance





Funded by
the European Union