

## LIFE HISTORY OF BITHI MONDOL

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<b>Interviewee name</b>	Bithi Mondol	Sex	Female	Age	29
<b>Livelihood before the intervention</b>	Domestic helper in a brothel (Cook and water transporting)				
<b>Well-being Status before the intervention</b>	Working Poor				
<b>Marital status, children and other household members</b>	Widow, 1 child, 1 sister, 1 elderly mother				
<b>Village, union, upazilla and Zilla</b>	Anonymised village, union, upazilla				
<b>Dates of Interview</b>	30/10/ 2010, 23/12/2010, 7/06/2011 and 18/07/11				
<b>Keywords</b>	Parents' illness, disaster vulnerability, abandonment, widow.				

### INTRODUCTION

Bithi Mondol is a particularly hard worker and the key breadwinner in her family. She supports her elderly mother of 53 years, younger sister (19) and son (12) who lives with her. Bipul Sarder (12), son of Bithi Mondol reads in class seven at Amtola high school.

Since her childhood she has been struggling, starting with losing her husband at the age of 17 leaving her as single mother. Moreover, natural disasters (flood, cyclone, tidal surge, river erosion) have also made her life more vulnerable. However, she has not stopped struggling against her vulnerability. She knows how to move forward and has some skills (in boat rowing and fishing with a net).

QUALITATIVE MONITORING OF SHREE INTERVENTIONS: CMS5 (S) LIFE HISTORY AND INTERVENTION TRACKING

WELL-BEING JUST BEFORE THE SHREE INTERVENTION (JANUARY 2010)

In February 2010 Bithi Mondol engaged with the SHREE project.

Indicator	Just before the intervention
Well-being category	Working poor
Diet	<p>On average two meals for round the year (sometimes smaller portions)</p> <p>During the full moon<sup>1</sup> period (<i>bhora goan</i>) the family catch small fish e.g. small prawn, small fish, and crab and can have 3 to 4 days in a week (full moon 15 days).</p> <p>The rest of the time they usually have only vegetables (of a lower price). She rarely used to give her son egg, and ate no meat a week, not even in a month.</p> <p>During the September-October lean season she faced food shortages and had to purchase food on credit from local shopkeepers.</p>
Livelihoods now) in terms of contribution to that years' income	<p><u>Bithi Mondol</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Water transporting from February to July in the brothel.</li> <li>2. Domestic work round the year (washing, cleaning, weeding in the agricultural land etc.)</li> <li>3. Collecting shrimp fry from local rivers during April to July.</li> </ol> <p><u>Her Younger sister</u> Assisted Bithi in terms of water transporting and catching fish fry.</p> <p><u>Her mother</u> Cooking at home for household members. Sometimes also collect fish (prawn, crab) from local river for daily consumption by using a net.</p>
For other principal adult member	
Productive assets now ranked in terms of value (e.g. land, livestock, rickshaws),	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Broken Boat</li> <li>2. Utensils (3 to 4 pitchers)</li> <li>3. Net</li> </ol>
House and homestead:	No owned homestead land (this homestead land is owned by a UP member).

<sup>1</sup> Full moon period are considered the best time to catch fish

## QUALITATIVE MONITORING OF SHREE INTERVENTIONS: CMS5 (S) LIFE HISTORY AND INTERVENTION TRACKING

ownership, condition of tenure, condition of house.	For the last 50 years, Bithi's grandfather used to live here and they used to pay about 17 kgs of paddy per year as annual rent. They stopped giving that amount of paddy for the last 30 years (the UP members are not charging that amount of paddy from them).  One house bamboo made wall and roof material is <i>goal pata</i> (Nypa palm leaf) and a kitchen shed.
Access to common property resources	During high tide some dry wood floats from the forest, and at that time she collects dry wood from the river using her boat so she does not need to buy fuel wood from the market. (If she wanted to buy fuel wood from the local market, she had to pay/spend at least 150 taka per month.)  Both Bithi and her younger sister also collect shrimp fry from the local river (April to July) every year.
Water and sanitation	The primary sources of drinking water for this household are pond, river, and rain water (during rainy season).

### LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

#### CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

**Childhood:** Bithi Mondol was born in 1982 in Dacope. She is a non-Muslim Dalit. Her father was a day labourer and her mother was a domestic helper. She has two younger sisters. Her second sister already got married and youngest (19 years old) lives with her.

**Lack of access to education:** Bithi went to primary school in her childhood, but she could not continue her studies. To her, *"I used to go to school with my friends, but my parents never take care of my study, they were not aware about the value of education."* So she had to stop schooling at an early stage and can only sign her name. However, her two younger sisters went to a government primary school. Her second sister studied up to class six and youngest one studied up to class three.

**Flood 1988<sup>2</sup>:** During the 1988 flood, water entered their house and destroyed their house and belongings. At that period her parents had no work. They had to take shelter in the church building (catholic mission) close to their house. Only World Vision and the Catholic Church came to

<sup>2</sup> The flood 1988, during August and September inundated 62 percent of land from 52 districts of the country and caused the loss of 2379 human lives.

help the flood affected people. World Vision and the Catholic Church (father Regan) provided corrugated tin, cow and some other relief material to her parents. As mentioned earlier, Bithi's father was not a hard worker and was idle, so after getting this support her father sold cow and corrugated tin in order to be able to manage their food expenditure.

**Child worker:** From 1992 (when Bithi was 10/11 years old) she used to help her mother by doing some household chores. As her mother used to work in a brothel doing domestic work and other villagers' houses, she had to take care of her younger sisters and do the household work. Sometimes she also used to help her mother working in other villagers' houses. At that time the landlord did not pay Bithi Mondol any cash but provided food to her. From her childhood she was engaged with labouring work. Since then she started collecting shrimp fry with her mother in the local river.

**Family Income source and diet:** Her father was a day labourer but was idle and not a hard worker. He did not continue any work properly e.g. he had contact for five months work as an agricultural labourer, but after 15 days he used to leave this work and could not earn an income. Therefore, her mother used to work as a domestic helper in villagers houses. Her mother also worked as a cook in a brothel and used to water transport to brothel girls. They had to depend on only her mother's income. At this time her mother used to get very little money which was not enough to run their family of 5 members.

Both of Bithi's sisters used to go to primary school and used to get 10 kgs of wheat under a food for education<sup>3</sup> programme. Most of the time starvation was a regular occurrence in their family. Often they relied on the wheat from this programme, and often they ate one meal a day and her mother used to mix some sugar with some flour to make a cake which was their main food.

### EARLY MARRIED LIFE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD

**Marital life (1996):** Bithi's future husband used to live in her village. He was good looking *but was known to have a mental illness*. According to Bithi Mondol,

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<sup>3</sup> The Government of Bangladesh launched the innovative Food for Education (FFE) program in 1993. The FFE program provides a free monthly ration of rice or wheat to poor families if their children attend primary school. The goals of this program are to increase primary school enrollment, promote attendance, reduce dropout rates, and enhance the quality of education.

*"At that time I was grown up, but I knew my parents had no capacity to arrange my marriage. Therefore when my future husband agreed to marry me I also agreed to marry him."*

Her mother saved 700.00 (seven hundred) taka. She used to save 5 taka per day in a village based women cooperative which she earned during construction of World Vision cyclone Centre in the village. During her marriage her mother withdrew her savings to buy bangles (*shakha*), sidur (vermillion) and *sari* for her and arranged her marriage. There were no relatives from her husband's side, because they were not informed about the marriage. Only very few persons from their village and *Thakur* (Hindu Priest) were present at her marriage.

**Relationship with her husband:** Bithi had good relationship with her husband. After getting married she did not need to go out for work and her husband could manage their food. Her husband studied up to class eight, so he was able to do business and do good calculations (so nobody could cheat him). Her husband used to do vegetable business and sometimes he used to buy eggs from villagers and sell in the local market. From these businesses he used to earn 150-200 taka per day and purchase fish and meat at that time. During this period they cooked together with her parents.

**Moving to her in-laws house (1996-1998):** One of her husband's relatives came to their house and told her husband to go back to his father's house. Two months later her husband took her to her in-laws house at Khutuakhai close to Botiaghata (far away from her natal home). When they went to her in-laws house, her father-in-law did not react warmly. Her husband had seven brothers including her husband and five sisters. They have some agricultural land and her father-in-law also used to do share cropping. According to Bithi, "Her in-laws are an educated family and one of her brother in-laws had also completed his graduation." By contrast she was uneducated and poor; it can be assumed he did not approve of the match. So life was difficult in her in-laws house. Bithi used to do all the household chores in her in-laws house. Her mother-in-law, brother and sister-in-law did not have any clashes with her, but most of the time her father-in-law used to scold her and was unkind to her. She stayed there for two years.

### ABANDONMENT AND DESITUTION: 1998

**Husband abandoned her for the first time (1998):** Bithi's husband was interested in business work but both his father and brother pressured him to do agricultural work. One day her father in-law scolded her husband and her husband went away to his first wife's place and did not come

back to his father's house. Before her marriage, she did not know about her husband's first wife. When she went to her in-laws house some villagers informed her about her husband's first wife and his one daughter with that wife. Her in-law's did not accept the first marriage.

Bithi waited for her husband and stayed in her in-laws house for two more months before leaving her husband. At this time Bithi Mondol was seven months pregnant.

**Changes in support relationships:** After leaving her husband, members of her in-laws family, particularly her father in-law, were unkind to her. Her father-in-law was trying to send her back to her natal home and was not interested in continuing support to Bithi and her future child.

His father in-law always scolded to her, because they had to bear her food costs. On the other hand, they did not know where her husband was and were not receiving any money from him, so it became very difficult for her to stay in her in-laws house. She therefore came back in her natal home in 1998.

**Coming back to natal home in 1998:** Finally, Bithi Mondol's father took her back into her natal home.

**Birth of her son in December 1998:** After coming back from her in-laws house she gave birth to a boy in 1998. At this time she had a severe financial crisis. Her parents had no money in their hands. According to Bithi Mondol,

*"These were hard days for me, during the delivery period I could not buy anything for my child even an injection to cut umbilical cord. My father managed 30 taka six to seven hours later to buy an injection."*

At that time they had no food in their house, so her mother fried some dry wheat and fed her this. .

**Engaged with work after giving birth to her son:** Despite her young child she had to engage with work outside the home. For the first few months she had to depend on her mother's income, but she used to do household work. She started catching shrimp fry when her son was only seven months, because she had no other options. From this period she was involved with different types of work e.g. water transporting, cooking, weeding and collecting shrimp fry.

**Husband's return in 1999:** When her son was one year old, her husband came back to Bithi Mondol. She was pleased to see her husband and planned to start their life again. She thought after seeing their son that her husband would settle in her place. She suggested to her husband that should stay here and not go back to her in-laws house, so that nobody will scold him.

**Husband left her for the second time and died in 1999:** Just 15 days later her husband left her for the second time. Bithi Mondol borrowed 100 taka from one of her relatives and gave it to her husband to initiate a business. Her husband went to market to get some vegetables but he did not return to her house, instead, he went back to his first wife's house. Bithi received news of her husband's death six months later. As such, she did not have the opportunity to see his dead body.

### BOX 1: DOMESTIC SERVICES AND RAISING A FAMILY

There were 8 to 10 rich families in Bithi's village who were used to engaging poor people for work in their homes and for agricultural work. Bithi Mondol obtained employment doing different types of work (cleaning, washing, weeding and milling rice etc.) in their houses. In terms of milling rice the patron employer used to provide food twice a day and one kg of rice at the end of the day. There were no other work opportunities in this village and she had no other capacity but to take part in physically hard work. Domestic work is now falling compared to the past because there are some new members (daughter-in-law, adult daughter) in those families, which are involved with household work themselves. Similarly there are automatic rice milling machine are available in the locality, so they do not need to employ labour to use the traditional dheki<sup>4</sup>.

**Father's illness (2001-2006):** Bithi's father suffered from paralysis for 5 years. At that time her mother had no capacity to bear her husband's treatment costs. Sometimes her mother used to buy medicine for 2-4 taka.

**Mother's illness (2003-2004):** Her mother suffered from tuberculosis. During her mother's illness Bithi Mondol could not afford her mother's treatment costs. Also, the facility of treatment and medicine for tuberculosis was not available at that time. When the Government of Bangladesh started treatment of tuberculosis free of charge, they took her mother to Chalna (Upazila Health Complex) to receive proper treatment. Due to illness, her mother stopped doing work for the brothel and other villagers' houses. After getting treatment she fully recovered.

**Arranged her younger sister marriage in 2006:** Bithi Mondol arranged her second sister's marriage in 2006 *to a physically disabled person*. Her sister's husband suffered from polio in his childhood, and so had a problem in his two legs, and as such nobody agreed to get married to him. *But he studied up to higher secondary level and has a good income source. Therefore Bithi Mondol asked her second sister to get married to him.* Her sister's husband is a radio and cassette mechanic and also teaches students as a private tutor. Her brother-in-law is also a

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<sup>4</sup> **Dekhi** a wooden device for husking paddy to make **rice**, the staple food of Bangladesh

sharecropper. During her marriage she did not give any dowry. They live in West Bazua, 3 to 4 km away from her village. They can have three meals a day. To her, "They are happy and they have got a daughter." He also had good connection with his friends who are well off.

**Access to government safety net programme:** When her father was suffering from paralysis the Union Parishad provided the aged allowance of taka 100.00 per month for two years (2005-2006).

**Father's death in 2006:** After suffering from paralysis for five years, her father died in 2006.

### NATURAL DISASTERS AND VULNERABILITIES

**Cyclone Sidr in 2007:** In 2007 Bithi was affected by cyclone SIDR. Cyclone SIDR hit this area at night. So people did not have any preparation to protect their few assets. This cyclone destroyed her house and washed away all their utensils and spoiled their clothes. The roof of the house flew in a short distance and the house was left on an angle. She had to take shelter in the World Vision cyclone shelter which was built after the flood in 1988.

**Reliance on relief during the disaster:** Following the disaster, World Vision of Bangladesh distributed 15 kg of rice, 2 kg of lentils, 2 kgs of potato, 2 kgs of *chira* (dried rice), 1 kg of sugar, one blanket, one sari, one lungi, 5 packets saline and some water purification tablets. During that period Bithi got 10 kgs of rice and 500.00 taka from the Union Council. To her, "At that time we had to depend fully on relief material, because there were no work opportunities. For almost three months we benefitted from relief material."

**Engaged with Cash for Work Programme:** After SIDR she engaged with cash for work programme for a month and received 100 taka per day. To her, "This work helped me a lot to survive after cyclone SIDR."

**Cyclone Aila in 2009:** Cyclone AILA also struck this area in 2009. It destroyed her kitchen shed, damaged her boat and interrupted her lives and livelihoods. Cyclone AILA struck during the day time, and water entered in her house. Her son and youngest sister moved to the cyclone Centre. Bithi and her mother went to the cyclone shelter at night.

At that time they had to move to the cyclone Centre and stayed there for a week. There were no employment opportunities at this moment.

**Emergency relief:** During this period the Union Parishad provided 20 Kg. of rice, Rupantar (an NGO) provided a tent and bamboo for fencing, BSD (An NGO) provided 10 Kg of rice, ½ litre of edible oil and one kg of lentils.

**Engaged with work organized by CARITAS (an NGO):** As part of an AILA recovery strategy, CARITAS provided some housing support to severely AILA affected households. At that time Bithi worked for 15 days in this programme and received 150 taka per day.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

#### **Key causes of extreme poverty**

Having few adult earning members combined with Bithi's father's idleness forced her mother's to engage with different types of work to maintain their family. Due to their full dependence on her mother's income, Bithi was unable to continue her formal education and instead had to concentrate in largely low paid and tedious jobs.

Illiteracy was one of the key contributing factors to Bithi's poverty. Gradually her parents' illness also reduced the household's working capacity and family income.

The experiences of marital instability including her abandonment and her husband's death also made Bithi's life more vulnerable.

Repeated natural disaster (the flood in 1988, cyclone SIDR and AILA) also added to the vulnerability of this family. Disasters (floods, cyclone and river erosion) caused damage to their few assets and increased the reconstruction costs and made them shelter less/homeless. It is positive that she received emergency support from different organisations and was involved with government cash for work programme and NGO recovery programmes, which helped her to survive during these periods.

The household is still vulnerable. Bithi is the only main income earner in this family, but she has to manage food for four persons. She also has to bear her son's educational costs. If she suffers from any illness/disease and cannot continue her multidimensional work, there is no other adult member in this household to help to maintain this family.

**Life history map of Bithi Mondol (29)**



