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INTRODUCTION

Rubina, 40 year old widowed a woman who has been living in Kamrangirchar for the last 25 years. She is a single mother and has five children. The eldest daughter is married and living with her husband in another ‘room’ within the slum. The remaining four children stay with the mother. She began life destitute – when her mother died, she was shifted from her own father’s house, to relatives who didn’t want her, to early child labour to early marriage – to a man with learning difficulties and illness. What they shared was that they were both orphaned and unwanted, which proves difficult for the destitute person reliant on outside support. After year one of marriage, he contracted tuberculosis could not work for the rest of her married life until he died in 2005. Rubina was thus forced to earn for the family and she did this by selling ashes house to house as a hawker, collecting waste papers from here and there (such as road sides, dustbins) for sale, and earth cutting for wages. She did this and gave birth to 8 children, but 3 died – 2 right after birth and one when he was 7 - suggesting she could provide neither the diet nor sufficient money for health interventions.

Given this poverty, she sent two of the daughters (oldest married one and the second youngest) off to be domestic maids in a very rich house (owners had a mini garment factory), but in Rubina’s view salaries were not much important. However the employing families tend to be helpful with gifts and favours such as helping out with clothes, dowry expenses, husband’s medical expenses and so forth. The second youngest daughter was sent off at 10 in 2010, and is paid in kind (food). None of her children went to school, and she never thought about it too much.

For Rubina, life temporarily improved in 2004, with the advice of a neighbour who helped her transition to working as a hawker for a local wholesaler/Mohajon getting part of the profits from her total sales. At that time she was able to earn 100-150 Taka per day. But within two years of her business of “Harek Mall”, the wholesaler left Kamrangirchar because local Mastans (terrorists) demanded large tips/ subscriptions and threatened him with violence. Rubina fell into crisis again and returned to her previous profession of selling ashes and waste papers managing her 4 young children (6, 10, 12 and 14 years old). According to Rubina, “Only one year of my life I had taken by my husband’s income. Since then (1986) I had started working and working ….. Still I am bearing the burden.”

WELL-BEING AT THE TIME JUST BEFORE THE SHIREE INTERVENTION

Just before the shiree intervention the family was totally destitute. With only the earnings of Rubina, she could not manage two meals a day so they often had 1. To release the burden, Rubina was forced to send her daughter Rumana (10 years old) to work as a housemaid.

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<th>Diet</th>
<th>One meal - often unable to manage two meals per day.</th>
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<td>Urban living – Rent capability</td>
<td>Taka 850 per month including taka 100 for electricity and taka 50 for drinking water.</td>
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Livelihoods

They were totally destitute (stage 1). Rubina was the only earning member within the five member’s family.

Assets

They had no productive assets except physical labour.

Only the strength of the family was a good relation with her daughter’s employer.

Labour capacity per dependent

1 managing 5 consumers

Well-being

Destitute

LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

CHILDHOOD

Effectively Orphaned - shifted from relatives who didn’t want her, to early child labour to early marriage.

Rubina was born in Jamalongj upazila in Sunamgonj district of Sylhet division during the liberation war of Bangladesh (1971). She was the only living child of her parents as other three died after birth. When she was only three, her mother died and she was shifted to her Auntie (sister of her mother) for care. Meanwhile her father married again and started to live in his new father-in-law’s house. Her auntie had to face physical torture from her husband for her decision to house her niece, and ultimately he forced her Rubina from their home when she was only 12. Rubina was simply a financial burden the uncle did not want to bear.

She returned to her father, but it was troublesome to live with her step mother and within a week she had to start working as a housemaid in the village managed by her Auntie. Within these circumstances, she didn’t get any opportunity for institutional education.

EARLY MARRIAGE LIFE OF RUBINA

At age 14, Rubina got married with a day labour named Didar Ali, a marriage managed by her cousin. Her husband was also an orphan and stayed with his sister’s family. He had no land or asset; moreover he had partial mental slowness. According to Rubina, “Both of us were orphaned and as per our guardian’s consideration, it was a perfect combination (as a couple)”.

3
Migration to Dhaka (Kamrangirchar)

Within one and half month of their marriage, they shifted to Kamrangirchar, because there was not enough work to survive at the village. Her Auntie, who had taken care of her at childhood, also shifted to Kamrangirchar earlier. Using her auntie’s support, Rubina rented a room at Kamrangirchar by taka 45 per month. It was the beginning of rainy season in 1985.

Her uncle was a market labourer (carried grocery items to buyer’s house from the shops) and he gave a basket to Rubina’s husband to do the same work. He started working as a market labour. But because of his mental difficulties, he was not able to earn required money to fulfil their minimum family needs.

Within one year of their arrival at Kamrangirchar, her husband become sick due to Tuberculosis and within a short time he became unable to earn. So Rubina was forced to go out to earn and started selling ashes at house to house as a hawker and collecting waste papers from here and there (such as road sides, dustbins) for sale. Sometimes, she also did earth cutting to earn1.

Large family, many deaths

Also over time Rubina gave- birth to 8 children. Among them her first and third daughter died when born and first son died at the age of seven.

Husband’s illness

After becoming sick of tuberculosis, Rubina’s husband became a burden for his family up to his death. He stopped doing all forms of income generating activity. Rubina had to spend a lot of money over a period of twenty years to treat her ill husband. This was a severe drain on her resources and in the most difficult times, she was forced to seek help from friends. The household where her two daughters worked as maids helped frequently and reliably when times were tough. This was because daughters received only food for their work and there is an expectation the employer, who was well off, helps in other ways.

Affected by flood in 1988 and 1998

Both in 1988 and 1998, Rubina was also affected by flood which was true for most of the inhabitants of Kamrangirchar. During the flood in 1998, they had to live by making a scaffold and finally they had to shift at the Beribadh (embankment for flood protection of Dhaka city) area where both of Rubina and her husband were

1 Earth cutting: Cutting of soil for construction of buildings and roads – very physically demanding work often paid per amount cut per day.
attacked by pneumonia. Her husband had to be hospitalized and the volunteers collected donations from the others for her and her husband’s treatment. He eventually died in 2005.

Box 1: Sending daughters to work as housemaid to manage dowry and gifts and support received (can outweigh small salary in Rubina’s view)

Their first daughter Moyna got married in 1994. Before marriage she had worked for a long time as a housemaid in a local rich family (owner of a garment factory). After some days of shifting at Kamrangirchar, Rubina introduced her daughter to the family as housemaid.

Much of the time, she received a lot of support from the family. Although the family has not paid her very well in normal times, any crisis moment, especially for husband’s treatment, she received some financial support from the family. Moreover, many of the assets of Rubina’s family - old CD player and television, meat safe/cupboard, an old trunk, clothes and three quilts were received from this rich family. All of these assets were given away by the rich family because they had become outdated. Rather than throw them away, the family donate them to Rubina’s family as part of the ‘deal’ whereby her daughters worked as domestic maids. The expense of Moyna’s marriage (eldest daughter of Rubina) was provided by the family.

Box 2: Sending her 10 years old to housemaid work

In 2010 Rubina had a lot of pressure on consumption, and so to release the burden, Rubina was forced to send her daughter Rumana (10 years old) to work as a housemaid. Rumana is also working for the family as a housemaid without fixing any direct salary. Rubina reckons that if her daughter can continue as housemaid with the family, she will get more support than the permanent low salary especially during her daughter’s marriage for dowry.

Involvement in buying and selling of “Horek Mall”

After working for a long time (around 18/19 years) as a seller of ashes and waste papers (she earned 80-100 Taka at the end of the 19 year stint), Rubina started selling “Horek Mall (low cost aluminium and plastic pots and utensils)”. She was introduced to this work by a neighbour in 2004. Over time, the local demand for “Horek Mall” has risen and it is more profitable with less effort than her earlier work. She worked as a hawker for a local wholesaler/Mohajon and at the end of the day she got a part of the profits from her total sales. She earned between 100 and 150 Taka per day. That was a better time for her in comparison with earlier days as seen by Rubina.

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2 Horek Mall: It is a local Bangla word which means different types of plastic, aluminum and melamine made utensils and pots.
Mastan threats and bullying so buying and selling of “Horek Mall” was stopped

However, within two years of her business of “Harek Mall”, the Mohajon/ wholesaler left Kamrangirchar due to a threat for demanding a large amount of tips/subscription by the local terrorists (Mastans).

Rubina fell into crisis again and returned to her old profession of selling ashes and waste papers which is less profitable and hard working. She was struggling to manage to earn the minimum requirement of the family. This is how DSK found her in August 2009 - a vulnerable widow who was managing 5 member family including 4 young children (6, 10, 12 and 14 years old) - and so she was enlisted as a beneficiary of DSK-Shiree project.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Rubina’s mother died when she was just 3, her father married again and she was taken care of by her Auntie though her uncle did not like that. She was married to another orphan who was man with learning difficulties and within short time of their marriage, her husband became unable to earn through Tuberculosis. So, Rubina had to struggle for the life time to maintain the family expenditure in addition to her husband’s treatment. Ultimately, the death of her husband was not a shock to her, he had been ill for all of her married life.

Before DSK-Shiree intervention, she identified the best time of her life as when she has worked as a hawker for a whole seller of “Horek Mall”. But unfortunately when the Mohajon left Kamrangirchar for the reason of demanding subscription or tips from the local terrorists (Mastans), Rubina lost the income she needed to maintain her family and she fell into destitution again. She encouraged her year old to work as a housemaid to ease the burden.
Life history map of Rubina Khatun (age 40)

1971_Rubina born at Sunamgonj

1974_Her mother was died & shifted to her Auntie to take care, Father had 2nd marriage

1983_She was got back to father but she was bound to involve as a housemaid for another family

1985_was married with an orphan dull headed day laborer

1985_came to Kamragirchar & her husband started as market laborer

1986_Husband was sick due to tuberculosis and Rubina started selling ashes and waste papers

2004_Started selling “Harek Mall” as a hawker under a wholesaler

2005_Husband died

2006_The wholesaler left Kamragirchar, business was closed

2006_STARTED selling ashes and waste papers again

2009 (August) Enlisted by DSK-Shiree project

2010(Feb) Received supports from DSK-Shiree and started buying and selling of “Harek Mall”