## Life History of Sharna

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| **Union, Upazilla And Zilla** | **Current Address:** Karail slum, Mohakhali, Gulshan, Dhaka  
**Permanent Address of Sharna’s father’s house:** village: Digraj upazila: Mongla and zilla: Bagerhat, Division: Khulna  
**Permanent Address of Sharna’s father-in-law’s house:** upazila: Rayenda and zilla: Bagerhat, Division: Khulna |
| **Dates of Interview** | 6/11/2010, 08/12/2010, 27/12/2010 for baseline data |
| **Keywords** | Domestic Abuse, Separation, effectively female headed, slum dwelling, migration, chronic illness due to asthma, gambling, food support from neighbours and begging. |
INTRODUCTION

Sharna is a 30 year old woman with three children. Her husband, who lived with them until recently, is a gambler and his gambling not only ate through his income from rickshaw driving, but also he beats his wife every time her family doesn’t bend to his request for more money. They kept moving hoping removing him from the place of his gambling would change his habits, but it never did and his gambling seemed to go hand in hand with idleness and regularly beating her, sometimes seriously so. Finally, Sharna had enough and with the support of neighbours asked him to leave she said “I have to tolerate all the humiliation of my husband, but for my children to tolerate humiliation as well was intolerable for me!”

As already an ‘essentially female head’ as only income earner, Sharna’s position really didn’t deteriorate after separation; she was destitute within the marriage (but beaten) and destitute outside of the marriage. However, crucially, outside of the marriage she was not beaten and she became eligible for the sympathy of others which enabled her to beg for food, a necessary survival strategy when her youngest was only 15 days old. She said to her husband “Please leave us, because you are not maintaining the family. And it is not possible for me to do something (to maintain the family); even if I go to beg then people will tell me ‘no ‘that you have a husband.’”

She went on to beg, and then when the baby got older, she got a job as a housemaid and son as a helper. This life history highlights the need to take note of destitution and extreme poverty of women within marriage and not exclusively on “the vulnerability of female headed households” Many households are ‘effectively (and often invisibly) female headed’ particularly when their husbands drink, smoke ganja, gamble to excess or who are too weak or mentally ill/challenged to work. These women seem to be better off without such husbands. It also encourages us to rethink the meaning of destitution as ‘having no one, or no support it depends on the relationship with that someone.

WELL-BEING AT THE TIME JUST BEFORE THE SHIREE INTERVENTION

Just before the shiree intervention, the household was absolutely destitute and Sharna was managing her livelihood through begging and with support from neighbours.

In addition, her new born baby was facing asthma problems and she was unable to manage the treatment costs.

At the same time, 5 month’s house rent was due and the house owner. The house owner was not happy with the situations but she allowed Shapna to stay with the dues.
**Diet**

Often unable to manage two meals per day. Sometimes they had to starve or depend on neighbours for food, especially for the children.

**Urban living – Rent capability**

600 taka per month in addition to 100 taka for electricity and 100 taka for water supply. Comparatively it was a small room of 50 to 60 square feet only.

**Livelihoods**

The household was absolutely destitute (stage 1). Sharna was the only earning member for the family. She has a new born baby and chronic asthmatic problems. During the selection process they were dependant on begging.

**Assets**

They had neither productive assets nor any supportive family members. Moreover she had no communication with her parents/close relatives.

**Labour capacity per dependent**

1 of 4.

**Well-being**

Absolutely destitute.

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**LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE**

**CHILDHOOD**

In 1980, Sharna was born at Digraj village of Mongla Upazila of Bagerhat district under Khulna division. Due to her asthma problem, she was not able to continue her education after class three. Her father was an operator for a rice mill and her two brothers were doing a small business of selling old vehicles (locally termed “Nosiman”1) and so she had a relatively well-off childhood, on the border of non-poor.

**EARLY MARRIED LIFE OF SHARNA**

At the age of 16, she got married with Aynal Kabir, a resident of Rayenda Upazila of Bagerhat district. This marriage was organised by her guardians. Aynal Kabir was a rickshaw puller at Mongla town. After getting married they started family life in a rental house at Mongla.

**Her Husband’s gambling addiction and idleness as a curse on Sharna’s life**

Sharna remembered that up to one year of their marriage, she experienced the best time of her life. After one year of her marriage, she started to realise that Aynal had a bad habit of gambling. He usually spent most of the money they had through his gambling and this was the beginning of arguments with her husband.

Aynal started physical torturing and pressurising her to bring money from her father, which did on many occasions. With the expectation of breaking the bad habit of  

1 *Nosiman*: Nosiman is local term which means a locally made tree wheelers vehicle using an engine of shallow water pump
Aynal, they migrated to Chittagong in 1999 when Aynal’s two sisters lived. Although Aynal wasn’t involved in gambling in Chittagong he was also uninterested in work. Most of the time, he spent idle time at home.

**Serious abuse, injury to her head, and migration to Mongla**

As such quarrels started again at home and finally Aynal left Chittagong after making a serious injury to Sharna’s head. Sharna went back to her mother-in-law to get her support to sustain the family and through negotiations with Aynal; they started to live in Mongla again in 2000.

Sharna was passing her days with continuous torturing by her husband. It was in this context, her elder son and daughter were born in Mongla.

There were only two working opportunities for her at Mongla - working in the cement factory and collecting shrimp-larva from the river. But unfortunately, both the works were problematic for Sharna as she had an asthmatic problem.

**Migration to Dhaka**

Ultimately, to maintain the expenditure of their four member family, they migrated to Kamrangirchar of Dhaka using supports from one of the friends of Aynal in 2006. At Kamrangirchar she worked for a small handicraft factory and Aynal worked as a rented rickshaw puller.

At one stage, Aynal’s friend died, and then Sharna and her family went back to Bagerhat again in 2008. In 2009, they came back to Dhaka at Karail slum using support from another friend of Aynal named Dulal. Dulal had been living in Karail for a long time.

However, unfortunately, the situation did not improve. Every moment Sharna faced financial crisis and physical torturing from Aynal. The main reason behind this crisis was her husband’s addiction to gambling.

**Aynal asked to leave in the context of beatings and his idleness**

In March 2010, Sharna proposed to her husband that,

“Please leave us, because you are not maintaining the family. And it is not possible for me to do something (to maintain the family); even if I go to beg then people will tell me ‘no’ that you have a husband.”

Frustrated neighbours also suggested that Aynal should leave the family. Sharna stated that her final decision to separate from Aynal was because:

“I have to tolerate all the humiliation of my husband but for my children to tolerate humiliation as well was intolerable to me”

Finally Aynal left Sharna and their children when their third son was only 15 days old. He is now nine months old. The family is facing their most vulnerable situation. They
have neither the productive assets nor any other supportive members in the family. The only adult family member Sharna isn’t able to work hard because of her Asthmatic problem and a newly born child.

Also they have no communication with their relatives as none of the relatives of Sharna and Aynal have their address at Karail slum. They may have no information about the real situation of Shama and her children. She had a mobile number of her brothers but this was lost by her nine year old daughter. On the other hand, Sharna is also not interested to communicate with her father or brothers as she would not like her and her three children to be a burden to her father or brother’s family.

**Begging became a temporary survival strategy**

Ultimately, the young (30 year old) Sharna was bound to start begging with her new born baby although she was never happy in this profession. Her elder son’s education was stopped when he obtained his first position in class three at Kamrangirchar. Her neighbours also shared that, Sharna has no interest in begging but sometimes she was bound to go for begging just to manage minimum requirement of food.

**No child care plus her asthmatic condition**

Sharna had the realisation that she had no working opportunities because of her new born baby and chronic asthmatic problem. On the other hand, the nice looking baby helped her to get more sympathy and support from the community people.

**Working as a housemaid and son’s child labour**

Sharna was selected as a DSK-shiree beneficiary when she was managing her family of four members through begging and getting support from her neighbours. Although DSK was interested to provide support to Sharna as early as possible, to maintain the official system and find potential income opportunities (considering Sharna’s family context), it was delayed.

In September 2010, she started working as a housemaid in a nearby construction labourers’ mess within the slum. She was getting by 800 taka per month and meals for herself.

**Child labour**

Also her 11 year old son has been working as a helper for a small restaurant within the slum. He is also getting 800 taka per month and three meals per day. But the income is not enough for the four member family because after giving 800 taka as house rent (including electricity and water supply) per month, she has to maintain the expenditure for the whole month with the rest of the money (800 taka).
When we last visited Sharna for baseline data on December the 8th, 2010, she shared that in the last three days, she had had no food in her house, because the labourers’ mess was not started, after the Eid vacation.

Her elder son was getting food from the restaurant; her husband’s friend and neighbour Dulal were providing foods for her daughter. But she was passing her days sometimes taking food from her neighbours and sometimes not eating.

She wasn’t able to manage any type of medicine for her 9 month son who was also suffering from asthmatic problems for the previous 15 days. She did not have a single taka in her hand.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The damaging gambling habit of her husband was one of the major causes of destitution for the family. With a family of four members, Sharna was totally destitute. She was totally puzzled, facing long term torturing and harassment from her husband, and was considering her uncertain future with her three young children. She asked her husband to go. For a number of months, she was forced to depend on her begging. After that, she had been able to earn only 800 taka on a temporary basis and her 11 year old son’s income of 800 taka a month was also temporary. For most of the time in the last 6 months, they were dependent on Sharna’s begging and support from neighbours. Even Sharna was not able to beg regularly or efficiently due to her chronic illness, comparatively young age, and new born baby.

Sharna has no communication with her parents or other close relatives to receive any significant support. Sharna is not interested in becoming a burden to her parents or relatives. However, her neighbours and house owners are very caring.

Sharna would like to survive with her three children within Dhaka city and she hopes that her eldest son will significantly contribute to the family in the future. She has a chronic asthma problem and her mobility range is very poor. As such, she is not confident enough to carry out income generating activities on her own, except as a housemaid. Her three children are still too young in age – the youngest son is only 9 months, her daughter is 7 years and her eldest son is 11 years.
1980_ Sharna was born at Mongla of Bagerhat district
1996_She was married to a Rickshaw puller
1996_Her husband ‘destroyed’ money through gambling and started torturing for the dowry
1998_They migrated to Chittagong to break the bad circles of gambling of her husband
1999_Her husband left her in Chittagong after seriously injuring her head.
2000_Return to Mongla after a negotiation from her mother-in-law
2006_They migrated to Kamrangirchar in Dhaka. Sharna worked for a small handicraft factory and her husband pulled rickshaw
2008_husband’s friend died and went back to Mongla
2009_migrated to Karail slum in Dhaka and torturing was increased from her husband
2009 (August) Enlisted by DSK-Shiree project
2010(March)_Husband left her and she started begging to survive
2010(Dec)_Labour’s mess was not started after Eid vacation and Sharna was bound to start begging again
2010(Sep)_Sharna started as a housemaid for tk 800 in a labour’s mess within the slum
2010(Oct) _11 years son started as a helper for tk 800 in a small restaurant within the slum
2010(Dec)_Labour’s mess was not started after Eid vacation and Sharna was bound to start begging again

Life history map of Sharna (30 years old)