LIFE HISTORY OF KAMRUNNAHAR

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**INTRODUCTION**

This household consists of Kamrunnahar (aged 23) and her 6 year old son. Though she lives with her parents on a WAPDA slope of government khasland, she eats separately and maintains her own expenses. She has two brothers both of whom are van drivers and occasional day labourers. Kamrunnahar studied up to class three in the local Madrasah. Though she did not continue with her studies, she completed all 30 chapters of the ‘Holy Quran’. She was married at the age of 19 and after two and a

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1 Educational institution where more importance is given to holy scriptures and leanings of Islam.
half years of marriage, she was separated from her husband. She was physically abused at her husband’s place after her father was unable to pay her dowry. Though her husband married a second time, she is still not divorced from her husband and her husband does not contribute anything for maintenance. Her parents’ house was washed away twice during cyclones Sidr and Aila and was affected during the high tides of November 2010. It was also severely damaged during the floods of 1988 and 1998.

From July 2010, Kamrunnahar started her own business of selling wood/firewood with support she received from Uttaran-Shiree project. Before this, her daily income had been Tk 20 to 25 per day cleaning shrimp enclosures and catching fish fries from the river. Then she could only manage work 10 to 12 days a month.

Kamrunnahar lives by the riverside on government khasland and fears that her family might be evicted from that place if the local authority decides to expand the embankment road. Following tables summarises her well-being status just before shiree intervention:

### WELL-BEING JUST BEFORE THE SHIREE INTERVENTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Just before the intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Well-being category</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Diets</td>
<td>2 meals a day with one vegetable curry and occasional fish curry (usually once or twice a week if she had been able to catch fish from the river)</td>
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| Livelihoods now (in terms of contribution to that years’ income) | Kamrunnahar:  
1. Work in shrimp ghers  
2. Catching fish fries in the river  

Kamrunnahar’s Family Network  

Kamrunnahar’s father:  
1) Boat man (transporting people)  

Kamrunnahar’s mother:  
1) Catching fish fries from the river (paid 45 taka per 100 fish fries)  
2) working at other people’s shrimp farms  

Kamrunnahar’s older brother:  
1) Van driver  
2) Day labourer  

Kamrunnahar’s younger brother:  
1) Van Driver |
PRODUCTIVE ASSETS
now rank them in
terms of value
(e.g. land, livestock,
rickshaws)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kamrunnahar</th>
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<tr>
<td>No productive asset - she eats separately and maintains own expenses</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Kamrunnahar’s Family Network
father
One Boat
older brother
One van
younger brother
One van (instalments are still being paid)

House and homestead:
ownership, condition of tenure, condition of house.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kamrunnahar</th>
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<td>lives on a plot of khasland on the slope of WAPDA embankment. The family has three bamboo, wood and mud-made houses on the plot. Kamrunnahar stays with her son in one of the houses.</td>
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LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

Until 2010, Kamrunnahar worked as a day labourer at other people’s shrimp farms cleaning the ponds and catching post larvae from the river. As she ate separately from her parents, she had to look after her son as well as meeting all her expenses. She was able to eat rice twice per day, with once with vegetables. She could have fish once or twice a week if she could catch it.

Her two brothers had two vans – costing around 8,000 taka each – which they had bought taking loans from the local insurance agency. Her elder brother was able to pay the full amount of his van but the youngest still needed to pay a further 1,900 taka to the agency for the van. Her father owns a boat which he also bought with a loan. Recently he was able to pay off his debts of 3,000 taka for the boat.

During the last visit it was seen that her parents had spent 20,000 taka to raise the platform of their house so that it would not be flooded during the high tides as in 2010. They have also expanded the house where Kamrunnahar lives with her son.

As Kamrunnahar now has to spend most of her time looking after her wood and turmeric business, her mother has resumed catching fish from the rivers and working at other people’s ghers.
Kamrunnahar was born in a family which had moved from a remote and disaster prone area and had three young children to feed. She has two brothers; one is five years older and the other is four years younger than her. Her father was the eldest of three siblings and her mother was the second child of her maternal grandparents.

Grand-parents land taken

Both her parents had their land taken: her mother’s family had lost their homestead to the Shibsha River (one of the largest rivers of the southwest regions) and her father’s ancestral property was illegally occupied by others. Kamrunnahar’s paternal grandmother used to beg to earn her living.

Kamrunnahar’s parents were married as her paternal grandmother needed someone to care for her young children when she was begging. When Kamrunnahar was an infant, her family had shifted to their present location, from Koira Upazilla of Khulna.

Father’s Home washed away by flood

When she was three, her home was washed away by the flood of 1988. They took shelter in nearby high land. This was a difficult time for the family as they had to eat once a day with whatever they could collect. They again had to construct their house with help from others and with government support.

One side of her face was paralysed when she was ten. She was sick for two years but eventually got better with homeopathy medication.

No government education because her parents couldn’t afford tuition

Her parents did not enrol her in government schools as they thought she would need private tuition which they were not able to afford at that point of time and she only studied up to class three. However she finished her studies of the Quran. In her own words: “I had a knack for Arabic and was not very good with Bangla.” After the 1988 flood, both her parents worked as daily labourers and most of the time they were paid in wheat. Her mother remembered that they had to eat lower quality food most of the time as their income was inadequate to support the five member family.
YOUTH

Loss of assets due to 1998 flood

Throughout her adolescence, she continued going to the Madrasha and she sometimes went with her parents to help them in their work - catching post larvae from the river and cleaning the gher - but most of the time she spent at home cooking and looking after the household. She also spent some time working in a fish depot beheading the shrimps and was paid 1 taka per KG of fish, but this was only possible after the high tides which happen in every 15 days.

Floods of 1998 and assets destroyed: goats, boat, home

When she was 13 years old, her family suffered huge losses during the floods of 1998. They had five goats and all were killed as the wall of their home collapsed. Her father had bought an old boat saving the wheat and the money he received from his work as day labourer and the boat was also destroyed due to the strong wind.

After the flood, they could manage two meals per day with difficulty. If they could afford rice for one meal then they had to manage with flat breads for the other. Per week, they could have vegetables for 3 to 4 days, only rice for the rest of the days and fish only once a week, if the father could catch it from the river.

EARLY MARRIED LIFE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD

Young adulthood and marriage

Kamrunnahar was married in 2003 at the age of 14. Her parents didn’t ask for her opinion while fixing the marriage, assuming that as she had studied the Holy Quran, she would be an obedient girl.

Kamrunnahar believes they were in a hurry to marry her off as she used to stay alone at home while her parents had gone for work and her mother was afraid that the neighbours would say bad things about her staying alone at home. Kamrunnahar comments that “most of the girls of my age are not even married yet and I have a son to look after”. Though her in-laws did not ask for any dowry at that time, her parents did have to give her gold earrings and necklace as a wedding gift.
Post marriage dowry demands: Domestic violence and husband’s second marriage

Her initial days at her in-laws place saw an improvement from her days at her parents place, and she was able to eat three relatively satisfying meals a day. She only had a mother-in-law and one brother-in-law. Her husband’s family had a plot of land in Jessore which her husband sold and bought a motorcycle which he drove on hire. But the motorcycle was stolen and he got more money from Jessore and so started shrimp cultivation.

She gave birth to her son one year after the marriage. Around this time, her husband’s family demanded 20,000 taka dowry from Kamrunnahar’s parents, but they were unable to pay. Her husband started having an affair with a girl staying in the neighborhood and wanted to get married again. He started physically and mentally abusing Kamrunnahar, giving her less food, no money and if she asked about it then her husband abused her further. She worried “if the husband starts having affairs with another woman, will he care about the family?”

When her son was one and a half years of age, she was forced to sign a written deed after threats by the brothers of the girl whom the husband wanted to marry that they would kill her son if she did not sign it. One and a half month after this incident, she came back to her parent’s home. From then on, she has lived in her parents’ home.

In 2006, she registered a case against her husband as her husband was set to marry the other girl. She commented: “As I have a son, I wanted to live with my husband, so, to protect my marriage; I decided to file a case against him”. But due to her financial problems, she was unable to pursue the case. When asked if she wanted to file for divorce and maintenance, she said that she still wanted to stay with her husband.

Family support for medical treatment

In 2006, Kamrunnahar had to undergo an appendicitis operation for which she required 6,000 taka. She borrowed the amount from her neighbours. After the operation she could not work for some time. As she was staying with her parents and eating with them, they repaid the loan on her behalf. However, soon after this incident, her sister-in-law began creating problems about her eating with her parents, and she decided to start eating separately with her son to maintain peace in the family.
Natural disasters: impacting the household assets

After the 1998 flood, Kamrunnahar's parents had started rearing goats and other poultry birds. When Kamrunnahar came back to their home in middle of 2005, her parents had 18 goats, 15 geese and 5 chickens. Her father had also bought a new boat on installments. She started working as a labourer on the shrimp ghers earning 20 to 23 taka per day.

With cyclone Sidr in 2007, their house was totally washed away and they stayed in the nearby cyclone shelter. Later they shifted to the nearby fish depot and stayed there for one and a half months. The household became totally dependent on relief as even her brother, who drove a hired van, could not drive the van as all the roads were broken by the cyclone. After Sidr, her father started earning again transporting people in his boat. The household ate once or twice a day with rice and one vegetable curry.

After Sidr, her elder brother procured a van from delta life insurance on installments who were distributing vans in installments in the Sidr-affected areas. The household constructed a house with government and non-government aid money and moved from the depot to their new home.

It was after techy cyclone that the livestock died from salinity
Though they had lost no livestock during the cyclone, in the period after Sidr all the livestock and poultry birds died. When asked what happened, Kamrunnahar's mother commented that she thought the land and the water got polluted due to salinity, causing the poultry birds to become diseased. They were unable to recover from this loss.

Aila struck

Finally in 2009, the super-cyclone Aila struck and their home was again washed away. Kamrunnahar's family went again to the local cyclone shelter and later on shifted to a nearby shop.

The family had no stable source of income for five months after Aila with her brothers unable to drive their vans due to heavy damage to the roads. Her father could earn 20 to 25 taka per day but this was also not regular. They received government relief (rice) with which they could afford to eat once or twice a day and as it became difficult to maintain the family, her younger brother took loan and bought a van. Four months after Aila they constructed the home that they are currently staying in with support from different government and non-government agencies. They have also been able to raise the plinth of their home and construct a small hut.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Kamrunnahar’s life history tells us that only once in her life she was able to move out from working extreme poor situation to moderate poor when she got married. She could have three satisfying meals, her husband had a plot of land which he later sold to buy a motorcycle and she did not have to work in other peoples’ shrimp farms or depots to earn money. Perhaps this was the reason she still wanted to go back to live with her husband, because even though she was physically and mentally abused by him and her signature was taken illegally by force, she never lodged a case for divorce and/or maintenance against her husband for the abuse, rather, she lodged a case concerning his marriage to another girl. Another reason could be that she wanted to ensure that her son gets a good education and grows up in a family which is relatively well-off. It seems that education is important for her as she is sending her son to the Madrasah and paying for his private tuition despite her hardship, and looks forward to educating him further. Though she could still ask for divorce and maintenance of her child, this is not something she is ready to consider.

Except for these two and half years of married life, she has lived in extreme working poor situation, moving quite frequently back to a level of destitution after natural disasters like the floods in 1988 and ‘98 and the Sidr and Aila cyclones. If we try to find the reason for her household’s vulnerability to natural disasters, then a major problem could be the location of their homestead; the sole house on the slopes of the WAPDA embankment with no protection from high tidal waves. Though they wanted to expand their land through filling in earth, it seems that this is being blocked by local elites. Besides Kamrunnahar’s house, there is a shrimp gher and the gher owner is not allowing them to expand their plot as it would mean a reduction in the size of his own shrimp farm which is also khasland. When asked if she has faced any threats of eviction from her khasland homestead, Kamrunnahar said she fears it but does not know what she would do if it actually happened. Her maternal uncle lives nearby but she thinks he would not be of any help as he himself is in a similar situation.

Their severe loss of her household’s assets in between Sidr and Aila highlights the impacts of the ecology on their livelihood as they now have no work in the area, no trees are grown in the soil and it has become more difficult to raise livestock or poultry birds in the area due to:

- Increased salinization of land and water making it difficult for the livestock to graze for food and water, and;
- Fodder not available in the locality, or the households not being able to buy fodder for the livestock.

It seems that Kamrunnahar’s household has the ability to move up to the extreme working poor situation along with a tendency to drop to the destitution level after natural disasters struck in part due to their location its surrounding ecology.
1988 flood had washed away their homes and belongings and the household was dependent on only one earning member. The home was again washed away with heavy asset lost. Kamrunnahar's father lost his boat which was the major source of livelihood for the family. Separation and returning to her native home had forced her to eat separately from her parents and being solely responsible for her son. Marriage helped her move into a better living condition as she could have three satisfying meals and her husband had a stable source of income driving a motorcycle on hire. Damages due to Sidr and Aila along with asset loss, loss of source of income and dependent on relief have made Kamrunnahar's household nearly destitute.