

LIFE HISTORY OF MADHABI HASDA

Shiree Q2 Research on Extreme Poverty in Bangladesh					
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Interviewee name	Madhabi Hasda	Sex	F	Age	45
Livelihood	Carer for physically ill son so depends on second son's agricultural labouring				
Well-being Status before Intervention	2				
Marital status	Married				
Union, upazilla and zilla	Kirtipara, Tanore, Rajshahi				
Dates of Interview	27 June				
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INTRODUCTION

The story of Madhabi highlights the exceptional dependence of the extreme poor on the quantity and quality of adult labour they can call on for the survival of the dependents. Life was good for Madhabi as long as there was plenty of young labour in the family when she was in a joint family, and even when she had a severely disabled blind and deaf first baby, he was taken care of by her mother in law. But when her parents in law died, she lost her carer and an earner in one year; this was followed swiftly by the separation of stronger working brother in law and his wife (2 workers). Life was hard because she found it hard to leave her son and this reached a crisis in 1994 he became mentally ill as well; she had to withdraw fully from the labour market. At the same time she had to pay legal fees in order to retain access to her Khas land from an affluent person who claimed ownership and threatened to evict her. It wasn't until her second son started working as child labourer at the age of 10 (at the cost of his education); supplementing her husband's work that life became less hard. But when her husband started suffering from partial hand paralysis she was became exclusively dependent on her 20 year old son to feed herself, her

husband and young children. She also sent her third son off as her second to do cattle and paddy work as a child labourer – one less mouth to feed. She now struggles with the physical and emotional issues involved in caring and coping with getting the 2 kilogram of rice she needs for her family each day.

ASSETS, LIVELIHOODS AND WELL-BEING AT THE TIME JUST BEFORE THE SHREE INTERVENTION OCTOBER 2010 LOW LEVEL 2

Madhabi Hasda is 45 years old. Her family consists of her husband and five children. She is a carer for her blind, deaf and mentally ill first son which restricts her ability to earn money as an agricultural or domestic labourer. Recently her husband has become virtually inactive due to semi paralyzed body condition and cannot afford to visit doctor for treatment. Consequently, both she and her husband rely heavily on her second son for survival. He is 20 years old and an agricultural labourer. He also carries maintenance for his 3 younger siblings: a 12 year old (class 5), 10 and 8 year old.

As a consequence of this heavy burden, their diets are very poor, merely rice with wild vegetables, and she is forced to eat scum of rice in lean periods. They live on Khas land. There are two rooms in her house made out of mud and corrugated iron sheets. She has no savings with any NGO's or at home. She has two fruit trees - one is guava and the other is wood apple (which has borne fruits for the first time). There is no latrine in her household.

The main challenge for her family is that only one member, her second son, among the family members earns to maintain a quite a big family with 4 dependants members. Her key difficulty is the physical disability of her elder son which keeps her at home all the time restricting her mobility to work as agricultural labour.

Ways of Income Earnings:

- She occasionally can do plastering domestic work in her neighbourhood and earns both in kind and cash – but it is rare and she works principally as an unpaid carer for her blind and deaf son
- Her second son works as a day labour. It was reported that her son had earned BDT120 in two days just before the interview date by doing rice processing work at local auto rice processing plant.
- Husband occasionally works as an agricultural labourer when he feels up to it.

Assets:

Productive equipment: two sickles, two spades and one chopper

Productive assets: one guava and one wood apple tree

Utensils include 2 big cauldrons and 1 small pot, 2 earthen pots, 1 pitcher, one iron pan, a few steel plates, One *boti* (big knife)

Sarees and petticoats for casual use

Diets:

At present there is food insecurity in her household. They eat twice a day (morning and night).

- During the lean season, in the morning they usually drink tea with puffed rice and in the evening rice with collected vegetables (roots, bindweed, arum, etc.). But, on the day of interview she only ate starch/scum of rice mixed with salt because there wasn't enough rice to go around (her family needs three and a half kilogram of rice each day).
- Sometimes the only way to obtain oil and salt through exchange for the Musti Chal that she put aside whenever cooks rice. The Musti chal is a handful of rice usually saved in a separate pot for use in times of scarcity.
- During the peak season she will prepare rice two times a day and she is only capable of affording meat during the Amon harvest festival in late autumn.

LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH (0-16) 1965-1981 LEVEL -2

Madhabi Hasda was born into an extremely poor family in 1965. She lost her mother during her childhood and was brought up by her elder sister. Her father was a sharecropper and owned 2 Bigha of land. He could seldom earn enough to ensure food security all year round. In order to supplement his income he used to work as agricultural laborer in addition to cultivating own land. In time of seasonal scarcity they collected food from natural sources. She had two sisters and two brothers, and one sister died. They had a Dekhi¹ at home.

EARLY MARRIAGE AND JOINT INCOME BRINGS BETTER CONDITION 1982-1988 LEVEL- 3

She got married when she was 17 and received 3 mounds of rice (120 kg) and BDT27 as bridewealth from her husband's house. There is no dowry in her society since marriage related expenses are borne by groom's party. She shares that women/girls don't eat the head of fish and chicken in her society. There is no restriction on her movement.

During marriage her husband's family was in better condition compared to her father's family. Indeed most of the members of her husband's family worked as agricultural labourers - husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, and

¹ A wooden husking mechanism. It has a pedal which is pressed at one end with their feet to husk (or grind) cereal, especially rice.

sister-in-law. During lean season they used to move as a group to the east to a region called Natore.

After her marriage she joined them in agricultural labour and seasonal migration and began to earn for the family.

During this period she gave birth to her first son (end 1982) who was blind and deaf. But her mother-in-law looked after the child enabling Madhabi to continue working. She stresses that *the economic condition of her family remained secure as long as it was united – this meant some members had to work harder in order to meet the family's joint needs.*

During this period, they consumed rice three times for most the days except for seasonal variance owing to less production. Meat and fish were consumed every week.

DOWNWARD MOBILITY AND DISINTEGRATION OF FAMILY SUPPORT 1988-1994 LEVEL-2

The economic condition of her family started to fall gradually after her mother-in-law and father-in-law had passed away in 1988. This meant Madhabi no longer had a carer for her blind and deaf son, and this made it more difficult to take on agricultural work regularly and compelled her to start staying home more instead of working outside.

Just one year later, in 1989, her brother-in-law got married and separated from her family. Her sister-in-law went to live in India that year too. This break up of joint family together with the birth of additional two children in 1990 and 1993 caused a deterioration of Madhabi's financial condition. At that time only her husband was the only earning member to maintain a family of five members of whom three were dependent children.

Whilst in early adulthood she had maintained a position of working poor, after these events (and the costs associated with eviction in 1998, see below) her household became nearly destitute.

MENTAL ILLNESS OF SON AND MADHABI'S FULL WITHDRAWAL FROM WORKFORCE NEARING DESTITUTION LEVEL 1

Box 1: Discussion of son's disability and her withdrawal from workforce

Her eldest son is blind and deaf since birth. When her mother in law was alive she used to live at home during work since mother in law was able to take care of the physically challenged son. In the course of time her son developed mental disorders as well. The mental problem of the elder son turned critical in 1994.

With the financial help of her brother in law she could manage to take her elder son to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital. Also she received financial support from her paternal cousin who was able to get a link to the desired hospital with the assistance of a neighbour who provided her a referral slip. In addition, her elder brother who inherited 1 bigha land from her father helped with food stuffs, like paddy.

But, her son's condition did not improve. This has forced her to be in home most of the day and to refrain from working outside.

COSTS TO RETAIN KHAS LAND ACCESS: 1998- 2000 LEVEL 1

Life got even harder when just having been assaulted by mental illness and her withdrawal, an affluent neighbour decided to claim ownership of the Khas land they lived on, leading to legal expenses of 8000 and further emotional toil.

Box 2: Threat to Khasland Access and legal expenses

Her home is situated on the *Khas land* occupying 21 decimal lands. In 1998 an affluent neighbour from non-*adivasi* community claims the ownership of this land and tried to take control. But he failed facing resistance from Madhabi and her family. The affluent neighbour lodged a complaint with lower court claiming his ownership. In order to cope with the complaint, they had to bear necessary legal expenses of 8000 bdt. In order to manage the cost she sought for her elder brother's support and got bdt 5000 taka as help. The remaining 3000 taka was procured from her uncle and cousin. The claim of that neighbour on their land had stopped, although her husband was not sure whether there was any further legal action from the court.

Madhabi's hardships were severe until 2000, when her 10 year old able bodied son could begin work.

CHILD LABOUR AS 'A SOLUTION' TO HER HARDSHIP – 2000 – 2008 LEVEL 2

Her second son (now 20) joined the workforce in 2000 at age 10. Then her son was working at the home of a rich neighbour and her son's job was to take care of cattle. During this period, her boy consumed food at the employer's home.

After 2-3 years, when her son was 12/13, he son started to work as agricultural labour. In the first year of work he was paid half of the male adult wage because he was yet to perform such works efficiently. In the following years he received two-thirds of the male adult wage. However this partial wage still brought some improvement in her family's condition because at that time her husband still earned as well. Moreover, in 2006 she sent off her third son to the same maternal uncle when he was only 12 to do cattle and farm works. He doesn't get paid, however, by contrast to the second

son; this third son is continuing his education whilst at his uncles and will sit for secondary school certificate examination in next year.

ILLNESS OF HUSBAND AND COPING ENDEAVOURS 2008- 2010 LEVEL 2

At this point she had 2 male workers (father, two sons) helping to support a family of 6 at home (In 2008 her third son was only earning his own subsistence at an uncle's house). In 2008, however, Madhabi's husband's health started to deteriorate and he has been working intermittently due to ailments. Her husband is around 55 years old and now gets tired and pain in his hands while doing works. Consequently he is not in a position to join work on regular basis. As a result her family income declined.

She is thus reliant on her second son and her husband's occasional agricultural labouring work.

Box 3: Life managing sufficient consumption for a carer of a mentally and physically challenged dependent in extreme poor conditions

Her family needs 2 kilogram of rice each day which they have difficulty meeting. She still cannot go out for work as it is necessary to stay at home so that she can take care of her son who is blind and deaf and needs assistance for movement. For a carer who must work close to home at all times, she sees that only had two ways to manage this (i) through her relationships and (ii) through managing food consumption and very local work.

1. Managing through relationships

She tells us that her physically and mentally challenged son has been so dependant that he weeps always when he doesn't have his mother's care. This weeping is because he is so heavily dependent on her and needs her cooperation from taking him outside for defecation to eating food. She doesn't get any support from government offices. Even the *Majhi* or *Mondals*² did not come forward to provide support. She does not get support from her brothers-in-laws who are needy and lives from hand to mouth working as agricultural labour.

She took a small loan from her uncle to produce local liquor –but it was not of the quality necessary for profitable sale.

At the time acute of hardships she borrows rice from neighbours whose condition is slightly better than her. If she fails to pay back the borrowed food stuff she tries to make up by giving labour for household activities for example plasters their house with clay.

² Hierarchical titles of Adivasi leaders who have authority to resolve disputes of their communities

2. She also manages by managing by borrowing food, gathering food, and rearranging food consumption

So in order to meet her family consumption needs she sometimes collects food at places near to her home – skills she developed as a girl under famine conditions (see above). She gathers crabs, gangatic mudeel (a species of snake looks like eel fish), snail and fish from roadside swamps and ponds. Her family uses indigenous devices called Lal to catch fish. They used to fish for family consumption in Chaitra and Boishak but this scope has been limited now-a-days.

Sometimes she opted for obtaining oil, salt in exchange of Musti *Chal* what she put aside regularly when cooks rice. Also, she sells Musti Chal to meet the educational expenses of children – her youngest boy and only daughter who are reading at class eight and class one respectively.

3. She tried employment at home through Chuani production, but it failed because of lack of know how.

Also, because it is something she can do from home she tried local liquor production. She borrowed BDT50 from her uncle as capital necessary to produce homemade liquor locally called *Chuani*. But this effort failed to make any dent to her sufferings since the quality of produced liquor was not so good to make profitable sale.

She will plaster neighbour's houses in return for loans of food.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The life history of Madhabi Hasda shows that having a disabled son means the well-being state of whole family underwent a vulnerable situation as soon as they were separated from joint family living arrangements.

The well-being of her family became particularly precarious when she was barred from working out of home when her mother in law's death left no one in the family to take care of Madhabi's physically challenged son.

Then they had experienced further deterioration in incomes when her brother-in-law's separated from the family and sister-in-law moved to India, leaving the burden of feeding a family of 7 through one working male – her husband.

When her second son started child labour and graduated to full male labour conditions improved until her husband reached the age where labouring can become difficult (suspected arthritis in hands, other undiagnosed ailments).

Now five persons out of six family members are depended on two income earners – one regular in terms of working days in peak season whereas other is irregular. So it is difficult for her son and husband to keep their income running throughout the year. She has very few connections that might be supportive to absorb shocks. She did not

obtain any safety net supports nor could gain any considerable humanitarian help from GO and NGOs. During her troubles she sought help from one of her distant uncle. Apart from one of her distant uncle there was none to extend cooperation.

It is clear she needs a job which she can do at home, particularly as her husband ages. The size of her homestead land is enough spacious for doing kitchen gardening. Her household occupies 21 decimal lands. This can be exploited largely for growing vegetables. For gardening she need not require much time for moving out of her home. This would be advantageous for her to remain beside her physically challenged son.

Life history map of Madhabi Hasda (45)



