This life history highlights the series of what might be labelled ‘forced coping strategies’ following the death of her husband (and young daughter) starting with her being thrown into low paid domestic labour where she supported her kids by sharing her cooked meal with her kids, child labour, eventual withdrawal of all kids from education, early marriage of daughter. Her well-being improved when her small sons became old enough to work, but reverted again when her son separated and too his labour and support with him. She seems to be relying on support from her two sons who are poor themselves and her small ‘shop’ is starved of capital to run effectively. Real support came in terms of a widow’s allowance which enabled her to start up her business again and also in terms of her granddaughter who lives with her which gives her own daughter a valid reason to encourage her solvent husband to support her mother.
Ramisa is 58 years old. She lives only with granddaughter. She has been living in her para for 2 years. She wobbles to walk because of left leg’s abnormal thinness since her birth. She has two sons and one daughter. There are two members in her family. Her granddaughter has been staying with her for last three years and attends school.

None of her sons live with her. Her elder son resides twenty kilometres away in Sapahar Upazila and is working there as sawmill labourer. The younger son is doing the same job living at a nearer para (hamlet). About 10 years ago her only daughter who attended school up to class three was married off at the age of twelve. Her son-in-law is a share cropper.

About 8 years ago, she started a small business at her home. She sells mainly dry items like soap, food items for children, candy, biscuits and cigarettes. She struggles from lack of capital and a weak leg.

Her paternal cousin allowed her to erect a makeshift hut on his land. She sleeps in a corrugated steel sheet shaded room built beside the big mud house of her cousin who is well-off farmer. There is no latrine at her home, and at times she uses the one at her relatives.

The main challenge of her life is to continue this business with profit making and accumulation of working capital for further expansion. Currently she is not in a position to deposit regularly due to the vices of market relating to seasonality. Now she faces problems travelling to the market frequently because of her age and defective leg. In the last four years she has been struggling to maintain her shop since her sons cannot provide the required support and capital. Her granddaughter is supported with food and educational expenses from her own father, and so Ramisa seems to be responsible for just her.

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

Ways of earning means:

With an amount of BDT 500 provided by her sons, she initiated petty business 8 years back at her home. She sells mainly dry items like soap, food items for children, candy, biscuits and cigarette. Her daily sale comes to BDT 40 to 50. But the sale falls during Ashwin and Kartik month of Bengali calendar when the work scope of the villagers diminishes to a great extent.

Granddaughter’s income from her parents: The father of her granddaughter usually gives support either in cash or in kind so that his daughter can lead a life without difficulties. Right now she is being provided with BDT 70 each week to meet her educational expense and 2-4 Kilograms of rice with vegetables for consumption.

Diets:

Her family requires a quarter Kilogram of rice every day. Right now she takes two meals a day. Her granddaughter is being offered three meals by putting aside a
portion of dinner for next morning to be consumed as breakfast. Consumption of meat happens occasionally. She explained that she ate meat during the Eid-ul- Azha\textsuperscript{1} of 2009.

**Assets:**

- Two sarees, two petticoats and two blouse for casual use and one saree for occasional use
- Chador (Shawl), Sweater
- Two aluminium cauldron, one pitcher, Bati (Big knife)

**Human capital**

Her age is the prime drawback to her living. She is around sixty years old. She was also born with a weak leg which means she walks with difficulty. Her physical condition does not permit to handle her home based shop efficiently keeping. Overall, a great setback in her business is that profits from her business are so meagre that she cannot provide for her daily livings sufficiently.

**LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH (E.G. 0-20)</th>
<th>1950-1970</th>
<th>LEVEL – LOW3</th>
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Romisa was born around 1950 with a defective leg. She was born into and extremely poor family. Her mother maintained household chores while father as bread winner did share cropping, which did not went well due to the seasonal trends of cultivation and poor physical health (chronic asthma).

She got married at about 14 years old – she recalls being married off at a very early age. Her husband, who lost his parents in childhood and was brought up by others, was an agricultural labourer. Ramisa’s parents managed to receive her husband as Ghar Jamai since she was the only daughter of her parents and her orphan husband had a desire to win his in-laws' affection. For this, Romisa’s husband chose to reside in the home of his in laws after marriage and shared the meal with her parents' extended family consisting of her uncle and wife.

She was married off rather at early age. In her marital life she did not venture to visit the market alone.

**Separation from extended family and downward mobility**

According to Ramisa, their hardships shot up after separation from her father’s extended family. She expressed that her husband was earning much more than his brothers. Despite that there were frequent quarrels with her sister in law on trivial issues in general and concerning familial expenses in particular. Just three years later she had been separated from her parents’ family. After two years of separation from

\textsuperscript{1} One major religious festival of Muslim communities observed once in a year. During this festival cattle are sacrificed and meats are distributed among the poor neighbor and relatives.
parents hearth Romisa conceived and gave birth to her first baby in 1970. However, she stayed 13 to 15 years sharing the same courtyard of her father’s homestead.

**EARLY ADULTHOOD: 1971-1990 LEVEL -2**

Downward mobility and political turmoil and famine

Well-being deteriorated slightly when her elder son was born as well as political turmoil prevailed in 1971 throughout the year. During this period they consume once in a day and for many days had to live on leafy vegetables. The main problem lingered was the unavailability of work followed by scarce income.

At the time of Sheikh Mujib’s tenure when famine appeared in 1974, their condition declined a step further. By 1977, she was blessed with two daughters and one more son. Growing family members impacted on their wellbeing.

With two sons and two daughters they had to eat either one full meal a day or half portions. This happened frequently during the lean season. Sometimes Ramisa and her husband were bound to starve a day to cope with severity.


Forced coping strategies following husband’s death: domestic labour, child labour, eventual withdrawal of kids from education, early marriage

The most critical turning point in her well-being was in 1985 with the demise of her husband, the only earning member of the family. Just 40 days later, her youngest daughter died of small pox as well. Her husband died of asthma, but want of food, medicine and treatment made his body quite fragile before death. After his death, she became very anxious about providing foods to her children. She had to shoulder her family without having any significant support from her brothers whose own financial condition was appalling. Often, they tried to support her by providing rice and other essential vegetable from local hat but it was insufficient, so she moved out to seek work.

Domestic work

In order to feed her children she started to do works in rich neighbours’ home that required working as domestic help as well as threshing and processing rice outside domestic chores. She managed to take work at the domestic area of rich farmers such as winnowing, drying and packaging of rice in the rice processing compound as well as delivering support to housewives in housekeeping activities which was her expected sector. She preferred domestic work as it usually created the scope for obtaining rice for her children’s consumption. It was very common that she would eat meal after feeding her children.

Withdrawal of boys to work in cattle grazing

With her fragile leg she struggled to continue these jobs until her elder son became enough grown up for work. Given her lack of income, she could not afford to send her kids to school. So instead of attending school, her sons had to take cattle of well
off farmers to the field for grazing and were provided only meals and bdt 2/4 taka on the Hat day. At the age of 11, her elder son started take care of the cattle of her paternal cousin who has been given her shelter allowing her to construct a hut while her younger son was took the same job at 7 years old.

Eventual withdrawal of youngest child too from school and early marriage

However, she managed to send her daughter to school up to class three. She was keen to keep her education running however as it turned out the elder son’s income was too little to provide sister’s educational expenditure. Besides, neighbours advised to marry off her girl considering better economic condition of the potential groom.

Resilience against destitution despite adversity – not begging

The only resource she could explore for their survival is mental strength and simultaneous efforts for change. In-spite of very critical financial condition she never begged. Even in great distress she was indomitable not to beg due to her inner strength for making changes in living conditions. At this level she maintained her livelihood at the level of the working poor lying to the lower end of the continuum that is very close to destitute.

MID-ADULTHOOD: 1991-2010

Some relief as her boys grow old enough to work – setting up grocery shop

She stopped working in others home in 1990 while her elder son started to earn sufficient and with the financial support of her sons she started petty grocery shop at home in 1998. Earnings made from the shop were used to spend in the family maintenance. Her condition started getting better and she could manage to sustain this until 2005.

Separation of elder then younger sons – ‘flight of labour’ – and rise in hardships

As soon as her elder son had separated, her economic hardships reverted to vulnerable state again. By 2007, her younger son got married and started to live separately in a nearby para. Her condition fell a step after two sons had moved away with their own family.

LATER ADULTHOOD: GOVERNMENT ALLOWANCE AND GROCERY SHOP 2005-2009

LEVEL: LOW 2

Obtaining a widow allowance to continue business

She commenced her petty business in 1998. Since inception, she has been spending the income from her business to maintain family. But her business was found to fall short of working capital frequently due to investing the profit in consumption.

How did she gain access to widow allowance? She was enlisted by the then chairperson of UP who knew her sons well. The concerned chairman had a shop
beside the saw mill where Ramisa’s younger son works. The chairman used to sit there and her son came very familiar to him as he made frequent visits to chairman’s shop. Her son’s familiarity with the chairman helped to be enlisted for the allowance.

After having obtaining allowances she could resume her business as she could supplement her decreased working capital with the allowances. In-fact this support of government in the form of allowance has her capacity to restart her business when it was about to close. For the last four years she has been getting widow allowances. She is provided with BDT 300 in every three months.

She has got the skill for making puffed rice. At present, she goes to market 4-5 times in a month. At times she takes help of her nephew, elder son of her parental cousin, to bring goods from markets.

Granddaughter’s income from her parents support

When first we first asked her why her granddaughter resides with her, she told us that about six years ago her daughter with her son-in-law came to her home because of family feud. They stayed one year with Romisa’s family. When her daughter and her husband returned to home again, her granddaughter was not inclined to go back leaving her there as she chose to stay with Ramisa.

However, upon closer interviewing it she said the reason her granddaughter stayed with her is for better schooling. The father of her granddaughter usually gives support either in cash or in kind so that her girl can lead her life without difficulties. Right now she is being provided with BDT 70 each week to meet educational expense and 2-4 Kilograms of rice with vegetables for consumption.

Due to economic solvency of her son-in-law she can seek help from her daughter in time of acute crises. The existence of her granddaughter in her home has provided her daughter valid reason to offer some support to her mother

Health

She fetches drinking water from a government installed tube well in her locality. She is not habituated to visit doctors. Only at the time of severe fever, cold she goes to the adjacent Bazaar to visit a doctor. She takes medication from the pharmacy doctor known as LMAF.

She visited UHC two times. When her elder son’s condition was critical suffering from diarrhoea, she took him to Upazila Health Complex. Lastly, she went there during her daughter’s delivery.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This life history illustrates the sufferings and survival strategies of an aged widow. Her economic wellbeing was found to go downwards under three states. These are:

The first wave of vulnerabilities appeared during the political turmoil in 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh followed by the famine in 1974. Farming and economic activities in rural areas diminished remarkably shrinking employment availability. Consequently her husband suffered a lot to earn regularly.

The second wave hit she endured after the death of her husband. Her Husband passed away merely leaving behind 4 children - 2 son and 2 girls. None of the children were mature enough to help her shoulder responsibility for family maintenance. Eventually, Ramisa’s family’s income remained scanty to meet the minimum necessity for a long time. Her family income could not be restored until her elder son was earning as a semi-skilled labour in local saw mill.

She underwent a third wave of shocks when her two sons’ had moved out with the hope of bringing betterment in their wellbeing. Both of her sons are semi-skilled labour. They are working at Saw mill. But none of them earn enough to run a joint family consisting of their mother nor do they provide regularly a lump sum amount of money to their mother who is physically challenged and older.

Her age is the prime drawback to her living. She is around sixty years old. Her physical condition does not permit to handle her home based shop efficiently keeping. Overall, profits from her business are so meagre that she cannot provide for her daily livings sufficiently.
Birth of Ramisa in 1950

Birth of 1st son in 1970 & birth of 2nd son 1973

Death of husband 1985

Husband died

Ramisa started petty business in 1998 and elder son was working

Two sons got married and moved out for work leaving her and she gained access to govt. Widow Allowances on every 3 months since 2005. Recently her health affected her ability to manage her business effectively.

Insufficient employment of husband in liberation war of 1971 followed by famine in 1974

Quarrel with sister in law and separated from father's family in 1967

Ramisa took domestic works and her sons worked as a cowboy in neighbours home