LIFE HISTORY OF ROMENA BEGUM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shiree Q2 Research on Extreme Poverty in Bangladesh</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Institution</strong></td>
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<td><strong>CMS1 Reference</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Interviewee name</strong></td>
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| **Livelihood before the intervention** | 1. Cultivating own plot of land  
2. Goat rearing  
3. Looks after the children of a neighbour |
| **Well-being Status before the intervention** | Extreme Working Poor (2)                     |
| **Marital status, children and other household members** | Lives alone.  
Daughter lives nearby with her husband and four children. Parents and brothers live nearby. |
| **Union, upazilla and zilla** | Parulia union, Debhata upazilla, Satkhira Zilla |
| **Dates of Interview** | 8.11.2010, 9.11.2010, 19.2.2011 |
| **Keywords** | Separated, Patron client relationship, dependence on parents, road maintenance work |

**INTRODUCTION**

This household comprises of only one member, Romena Begum herself. Romena Begum is 48 years old and she has only one daughter (29) who lives with her husband nearby. Romena Begum maintains her own expenses and occasionally eats with her parents. Her parents live with her brothers and they stay in a nearby hut. She used to cook at other peoples' homes before but presently, she earns her living by catching fish, producing paddy on a plot of land jointly occupied by her and her father, keeping other peoples' goats and occasionally working at other peoples' houses. If she works at peoples' shrimp farms, she gets 60 taka per half days of work. But this
work is seasonal and she could find work only for 3 to 4 days a week. For the last one year she has been looking after the twins of her neighbours in exchange of having one meal with the family. She sold a goat in September 2010, which helped her sustain through the next few months. Her homestead comprises of a house, a plot of land where she cultivates paddy and a small ditch. The 16 decimal area of the homestead is a government khasland. She and her father are jointly occupying 33 decimal of land (1 bigha).

Her parents’ household is a beneficiary of Uttaran-shiree project and her father received van as IGA support in June 2010. Her brother drives this van. Her father also receives old age pension from government. Though her mother eats with her younger brother but her father depends on the old age pension and the produce from his small plot of land. Romena Begum is not dependent on any one.

The following table shows her source of income all through the year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boishak 14</th>
<th>Joishtha 14</th>
<th>Ashar 14</th>
<th>Shraban 14</th>
<th>Bhadra 14</th>
<th>Ashwin 14</th>
<th>Kartik 14</th>
<th>Aghravan 14</th>
<th>Poush 14</th>
<th>Magh 14</th>
<th>Falgun 14</th>
<th>Chaitra 14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looking after neighbours new born twins----eats with the neighbours</td>
<td>Goat Rearing</td>
<td>Harvesting of Mustard</td>
<td>Paddy cultivation</td>
<td>Harvesting of Paddy</td>
<td>Mustard cultivation</td>
<td>Working at peoples shrimp farm</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mustard exchanged for mustard oil</td>
<td>Small scale fish cultivation in the ditch</td>
<td>2 Mounds of Paddy used for self consumption (80 kg)</td>
<td>Earning 60 taka for half days of work in the shrimp farms (3 to 4 days a week)</td>
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**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>Well-being category</td>
<td>Extreme working poor (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diets</td>
<td>Two meals a day with rice and one vegetable. One meal is with the neighbours. If the neighbours provide and if she can catch, then she also has fish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livelihoods now) in terms of contribution to that years' income</td>
<td>1. Looking after neighbours twins 2. Goat Rearing 3. Working at shrimp farms 4. Paddy cultivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For other principal adult member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive assets now rank them in terms of value (e.g. land, livestock, rickshaws),</td>
<td>1. Plot of land and a small ditch (10 decimal) 2. Goats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House and homestead: ownership, condition of tenure, condition of house.</td>
<td>Romena Begum stays in her own house erected on 6 decimal of land. The house is built with mud, straw, wood and CI sheets.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How she manages her food

She usually takes two meals a day, only with rice and one vegetable. When she was interviewed, she was having one meal with the neighbours as she helped the neighbours with their new born twins because the wife of the neighbour was blind and she could not look after the newborns. Romena Begum was helping her with the babies. But she prepared the dinner at her home. She bought grocery items only once a week. She said that she would go to the market in the evening when prices would be cheaper and she would get whatever would be available. She usually requires 10 kgs of rice per month for which she pays 300 taka, 60 taka for 4 kgs of potato and some spices. She never bought vegetables as she herself grew them in her homestead. If she could catch shrimps then sometimes she would consume them.

Her multiple livelihoods She has a small kitchen garden where she has planted vegetables. She is able to meet her needs from the vegetables grown in her garden. She also farms her tiny plot getting 2 mounds of rainfed paddy used for self-consumption (80 kg) and she exchanges produced mustard seed for mustard oil. She also has small scale fish production in her ditch.

When she works as a labourer in shrimp farms she earns 60 taka for half days work. But this work she only gets for 3 to 4 days a week, that also in a specific season (in winter and early spring). Romena Begum presently has 4 goats which she looks after.

When asked if she felt threatened to live on government khasland without any documents she said, “I am not scared. If they ask me to leave, I will leave. What can I do?”

LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Large family and not going to school

Romena Begum’s father was physically challenged. He used to be a wood cutter and every month he used to go to Sundarbans with group of people to cut wood. Romena Begum’s mother remembered that her father, for per visit, would be paid 30 taka.

Her mother used to work at other peoples’ homes as a domestic labourer. Her mother also used to work in food for work programme getting 2kgs of rice for per day’s work.

Romena Begum’s parents had six children, four daughters and two sons, Romena Begum being the eldest. Romena and her three sisters were not able to go to school, but the youngest sister and two brothers were able to go. Romena explained that she stopped going to school as she saw how the teachers used to punish the children. Though she never returned to school but she can sign her name. Due to the
low level of income, his physical disability and large family size, her father married her off at the age of 12.

**EARLY MARRIED LIFE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD**

**First marriage at a young age**

When Romena Begum was 12, she was married off. The sister in laws from her first marriage abused her and she was not given adequate food to eat. At one stage of her marriage, she suffered from chicken pox and her in-laws did not take care of her. She came back to her native place for better treatment and care. After she got well, she did not go back to her husband’s home. But she does not blame her parents for marrying her off at such an early age. She rather sees this as something that happened due to their abject poverty. Though she was abused all through her first marriage and she was scared of her husband but she believes that her life could have been better if she had not been separated from her first husband.

**Second Marriage, birth of the daughter and begging**

4 years after her first marriage, Romena Begum got married for the second time. Her second husband did not use to have a stable source of income but he had good physical strength and her parents thought that he would able to earn sufficiently to look after their daughter. When she conceived, her sister in law ousted her from the home. Though she stayed with her in laws after this incident, her husband never used to give her any money and never used to ask for her opinion about important issues. After two years of marriage, she gave birth to her only daughter in 1982. When her daughter was 2 years old, Romena came back to her parents’ home. Her second husband died in 1988 suffering from paralysis.

When she came back to her parent’s home with her infant daughter, she begged for one year to provide for herself and her daughter.

**Working as a cook**

After a year of begging, she started working as a cook in three different houses. She also cooked for 6 staff in a Godown (food storage facility). She used to earn 3000 per year. During this time she suffered from severe ulcer for which she needed to be hospitalised. Her employers took her to Khulna (industrial town in the south west part of Bangladesh) and gave 500 taka. Romena Begum paid the rest 500 taka for the treatment. Even her employer gave 3000 taka to her which she gave to the ward member and he allowed her to occupy the plot of land that she has been occupying till now. (It was known from the community people that during the eighties, the then government declared the place “guccha graam (collective village)” and people were given plots of land. It could be assumed that Romena Begum also received the plot under this scheme. But she paid the ward member to make her eligible to be included.) For the next 10 years, she worked at peoples’ houses and offices as a cook.
MID-ADULTHOOD

Daughter's education and marriage

Her daughter studied up to class 2. Romena Begum said that as she was not able to buy her daughter stationery items, her education stopped. Romena Begum’s daughter started working at a home, looking after their young children. In exchange, she used to eat with the family. The daughter worked there for 5 years. When Romena Begum decided to marry her off, her daughter’s employers gave her gold earrings and silver anklets. They also arranged for the wedding of her daughter. She had to spend 2000 taka for her daughter’s marriage. Romena Begum continued to work as cook after the marriage of her daughter. Both her daughter and her husband have been working as day labourers. Romena Begum sometimes helps her family and she also gets support from her son in law when she starts preparing the land for production of paddy and mustard. She had 500 taka saving with a NGO named ASA. But four years back she withdrew the money. As she knew people working in that NGO, she helped her son in law get a loan from ASA in 2010.

Involved in food for work programme

She left her work as a cook after she suffered from ulcer. She said that the heat around which she had to stay for long times created problems for her. She also said that she used to forget about the amount of spices and ingredients she needed to mix in her cooking. As she was having problems, she left her job as a cook. From 2006-07, she worked in a road maintenance work. The programme sustained her for one and a half years. She used to get 50 kg of rice every month. After the work was completed, she received 4000 taka.

Devastation during Aila

Her home was devastated during Aila (super cyclone) in 2009. She was not able to repair the home for one year and kept on staying there. After a year, she spent around 7000 taka to reconstruct the house. She said that she saved the money for repairing the house.

Agriculture work and Goat Rearing

She currently has four goats. The goats are not her own but belong to other people. She keeps them, feeds them and looks after them. Her profit is, if two are born, she can keep one and the owner can take the other. The mother goat stays with the keeper but the owner can take it back any time. In case of one baby goat, both the owner and the keeper can divide the selling amount. She thinks that she would be able to earn 1200 taka per goat. She also says that she has to pay 150 taka per goat for vaccination.

In the plot of land adjacent to her house, she tries to cultivate two crops a year, though she cannot go for two crops every year as un-salinised water is not available and rain is the only option for water. She usually consumes the paddy (around 2
mounds) which lasts for 6 months. If the year sees a good rainy season then she goes for mustard production, otherwise she does not. She can exchange 1 kg of mustard with 200 grams of oil.

She also said that she was able to release fish fries worth taka 500 in the small ditch adjacent to her house in 2010. She was able to get 2 kgs of fish. As the ditch was dried up she could not release fish fries in the previous years.

She has to pay 200 taka for worker to plough the land before rice cultivation. She also has to pay 60 taka per hour if she needs to irrigate the land. Usually it takes two hours to sufficiently irrigate her plot of land. These days, she could not work as day labourer like she used to do before as her health condition has deteriorated. That’s why she rears goats, in order to get the capital necessary for agricultural production.

In 2010 she had lost 7 goats due to disease. She said that the market price of these goats would have been 10000 taka. After that she started vaccinating the goats.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The life history of Romena Begum portrays a life that has seen ups and downs leading to gradual improvement when the respondent was able to be recruited as a cook in three different places along with her involvement in a rural road maintenance programme. But again, devastation during Aila and death of her livestock (goats) due to disease caused decline in her source of income. But we have also seen that Romena Begum has a strong support network and diversified sources of income which have reduced the risks of her moving down to destitution level.

The life history noted that Romena Begum cultivates the land attached to her homestead once a year which is based on availability of water. Every year she produces 2 mounds of rice which sustains her for six months. However, as she depends mostly on rain water for paddy cultivation, insufficient rain is seen as a major threat to her and can lead her to the level of extreme poverty. Her house was partly damaged during Aila. She has to use her previous savings and spent 7000 taka to reconstruct the house. She considers natural disasters to be a threat to her savings and sources of income. She has been involved in goat rearing for a long time. But these days she is facing problems as access to grazing land has become difficult. People don’t allow her to graze the goats on the dykes of their shrimp ghers (shrimp enclosures). Few months back she lost seven goats due to disease. When she was interviewed last, she told the researcher that she had vaccinated all her remaining goats so that similar thing did not occur again. However, she is hoping that she would at least get 1200 per goat.

But the instances of her life have told us that she maintained good relationship with her former employers who paid for her medical treatment. Her daughter’s employers also assisted in getting her daughter married off. This acted as a support system for her. Even her employers paid 3000 taka with which she paid the lease fee of the land twenty years back. Moreover, her parents and daughter live nearby with whom she can eat if she feels like it. Her good relationship with her son-in-law can open up
opportunities for her as she is planning to start a kitchen garden with his assistance. Though she lives alone, Romena Begum is much more organized in managing her resources. She cultivates her land, she uses the ditch for fish production and she has planted several fruit trees around her home. She has also vaccinated all her goats so that she doesn’t face any loss due to disease or infection. She believes that all these have raised her ability to cope with any form of sudden fall in her income level.
Left second husband’s home with a young baby. Parents’ support was not adequate to feed the baby. Romena Begum had to beg for one year.

Stable source of income of a cooking job in different house and godows was available through a period of ten years and again in 2006-2007. In 2006-07, she worked in the road maintenance program.

Devastation of her home in 2009 due to Aila and losing 7 goats due to disease had put extra pressure on her as she had lost important source of livelihood along with using up her savings.