LIFE HISTORY OF SALMA (11)

Shiree Q2 Research on Extreme Poverty in Bangladesh

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<tr>
<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>International Development Enterprise (iDE), Bangladesh</td>
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<td>Household ID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee name</td>
<td>Salma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Livelihood before the intervention</td>
<td>Garbage collector (Rag picker)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Well-being Status before the intervention</td>
<td>Destitute (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status, children and other household members</td>
<td>Unmarried, lives with her parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union, upazilla and zilla</td>
<td>Nuton Bazar, Lanch ghat, 2 no Mosharaf Goli, Khulna (22 no word)</td>
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<td>Dates of Interview</td>
<td>Two visits, 1st and 2nd August 2012</td>
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<td>Keywords</td>
<td>Self managed family, destitute, dowry, deaf father, abuse, extreme vulnerability</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Salma (11) is a child labourer who was born in 2001 in a large destitute family. She lives, works and struggles for survival in an unhygienic and unsafe environment. She earns an income by working on the streets as a garbage collector (waste paper and plastic) and collects leftover vegetables and firewood from the market and other places (to eat and warm up the house).

Salma’s father, Jamal Howlader (42), is deaf and suffers from poor physical health and is currently suffering from hernia. He falls frequently sick with different types of illnesses such as fever and diarrhoea. Because of regular illnesses and his general malnutrition, he is often not
able to run an income generating activities. He is able to pull a rented rickshaw for which he earns 30/40 taka per day, for two to three days monthly. Because of his physical problems he cannot attract as many passengers as other rickshaw pullers and therefore cannot earn as much income as them.

Salma’s mother Jamila (30) is a garbage collector, like Salma. She leaves home early in the morning and comes back at night at around seven or eight. For the whole day she roams around on the street and in market places situated within a radius of one or two kilometres of her slum to collect garbage, vegetables, plastic and other things, some to recycle and sell and some others for household use.

Eight household members, eight rag pickers

Salma’s family is composed of ten members consisting of Jamila and Jamal, the parents, their four daughters; Shahana (19), Mahfuza (16), Salma (11) and Sonia (9), and three sons; Shumon (21), Shahid (13) and Masud (8), and Salma’s paternal grand-mother. Salma’s eldest brother, Shumon (21) and her second eldest sister Mahfuza (16) separated themselves from the household after their marriage. All of the rest of the family members are rag pickers and garbage collectors because they developed the skills to do it and have the required knowledge for it. Even her younger brother Masud, who is eight years old, works as a rag picker.

Search for food and security

Though the family lives together in a house, the parents have very little control over the children mainly because they are not able to provide shelter or sufficient food to their children. The children live by themselves and rely on their own daily income. In order to cover their basic needs (like food) and reduce the risk of hunger, the family members, including Salma’s mother, try their best to collect food from morning to night. Out of the eight family members, her grandmother is the only member who depends on other people’s income. Due to her old age, her grandmother is not able to participate in any income generating activities. The reason why the children still live with their parents is because being with their relatives helps them to maintain a certain level of safety and dignity (especially for the girls) that they would otherwise struggle to preserve if they were either living on their own or with strangers.
WELL-BEING BEFORE THE SHIREE INTERVENTION

In May 2012 the household became involved with the shiree programme, before the intervention their well-being was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Just before the intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-being category</td>
<td>Destitute (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diets</td>
<td>On average, Salma’s family used to get one and a half meals a day. Frequently, they struggled to get even half-fed. It was always extremely difficult for the family to arrange the minimum amount of food for the young children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranked Livelihoods now in terms of contribution to that years’ income</td>
<td>1. Garbage collector (Rag picker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For other principal adult member</td>
<td>1. Garbage collector (Rag picker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive assets now rank them in terms of value (e.g. land, livestock, rickshaws),</td>
<td>18’X 10’ leased land by city corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House and homestead: ownership, condition of tenure, condition of house.</td>
<td>Own slum house (leased by the government), tin roof and brick with 18’X 10’ living space in total.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

CHILDHOOD

Salma grew up on the margins of society, neglected and deprived, without education, affection, care and guidance from adult family members. She therefore became familiar with living in neglect and deprivation and could only survive through struggle and improvisation. Her life has been exhausting, difficult and unhappy.
She participated in income earning activities from the early age of eight years old. The first time she went out with her mother and collected wastage paper and some leftover vegetables from the market. Now she is an experienced rag picker who works almost nine to ten hours daily and by the end of each day, brings what she collected to their house and gives it to her mother. All of her brothers and sisters are doing the same except Shahid (13) who sells what he collects on his own and spends the money for his own purpose. However, on most days he does bring some leftover vegetables and some firewood to their house.

Salma is now involved in different types of income generating activities including scavenger/garbage collector, coolie, firewood collector etc. She said that when she goes to collect firewood from wood processing mills, workers of the mills abuse her verbally and physically. To prevent this Salma came to an arrangement with the mills owner – she has to give half of her collection to the owner when she collects bark. None of the household’s eight children ever have attended school except from Masud (8) who is currently enrolled in kindergarten at an NGO School.

**WORKING CONDITIONS**

The condition of a working girl is much more vulnerable than the one of a working boy because working girls are vulnerable to sexual abuses from men like mastans or older working boys. Shahana, Mahfuza and Salma reported being frequently cheated and subjected to abuse and violence. Once on the street, they have to face a daily routine of exploitation and violence. Shahana said that people verbally abuse her when she works on the street and also a few men have asked her to go with them to have sex. She said that in her childhood, people violated her physically and hit her when she collected garbage on the street and from other places. Salma and her family members are however reluctant to answer questions regarding substance abuse and there is a general tendency to hide such information.

**Box 1: No safe shelter**

On the roads there is no safe shelter from rain and other extreme weather conditions which increases the vulnerability of working children. One day Salma was collecting waste paper from the streets’ garbage, when suddenly the rains came and she was forced to seek shelter in a shop with her garbage bag. The other customers and people who were seeking shelter in the shop abused her verbally and told her to leave. They told her to “go away or else we will beat you up”. Monia left the shop and returned to her house in the rain.
Sonia (9), Salma’s younger sister reported that people abuse her verbally and sometimes physically when she collects firewood from the wood processing mill or paper/plastic from any shop. Salma, Mahfuza and Shahana also said that most of the rickshaw pullers and shopkeepers abused the children verbally and sexually.

Box 2: How extreme poor working girls get involved in prostitution

One day while collecting papers from the streets, Mahfuza and three of her friends were approached by an old man. He told them that he would pay them good money and provide them with food if they helped him with his household work such as washing clothes and cleaning his room. They were lured by the offer for food and accompanied the man. However, when they entered his house, the man locked the door. The man got hold of the oldest girl, Surma, and took her into another room and locked the door. The remaining girls started shouting loudly and tried to open the door. This alerted the neighbours who were living upstairs, and they started calling the man. The man opened the front door and told the girls to leave. They did so, but the oldest one did not go with them. They waited for her nearby and after sometime she came out and bought four ice-creams for them. When Mahfuza saw that she had 100 taka she asked her where she had got it. Surma said the man had given it to her because she did some work for him, but she did not elaborate as to what kind of work it was.

Surma met with the man several times after that and sometimes she took another two friends with her, but Mahfuza never went with them. One day Surma took Mahfuza and two other friends to a hotel to do some cleaning works in a hotel. Whilst Mahfuza was there, two unknown men came to them and took two of her friends to another room. Later she discovered that the Hotel owners were running an illegal brothel business and that Surma was a regular worker there. Mahfuza said that now two to three of her friends regularly go to the hotel to engage in prostitution. Surma is now living in Dhaka and Mahfuza thinks she moved there to earn more money through prostitution. She also tried to take a couple of her friends to Dhaka with her, but none of them agreed because they feared for their safety.

1 All names are anonymous
**INCOME, WORKING HOURS AND FREQUENCY OF MEALS PER DAY**

**Income vulnerability and exposure to abuse**

Most of the family members work as rag pickers. The family members store their collected items in their house where wet materials are dried and organized according to their type (i.e. paper, plastic etc). Salma’s mother then sells the items to a nearby shop and Jamila reported that they earned around 1,200 to 1,500 taka per month from it. The rainy season, which includes the Bengali calendar months of Asher, Srabon and Vadro (15 June to 15 September), is called the lean period. During these months they are unable to go outside to collect garbage for most of the day and as a result, because they can only collect a small amount of garbage, the household’s overall income decreases to 400 or 500 taka per month.

During the rainy season Shahana and her mother increase their income by working in shrimp farms where they clean shrimp’s heads and earn 30 to 40 taka a day (about three taka per kilo). Sometimes Salma helps her mother doing her job for free.

Apart from the father and the youngest brother Masud, all the household members work eight to ten a day and 25 to 30 days per month.

**Insufficient food**

Their income enables them to afford one and half meals per day which is essentially insufficient in term of amount and quality. It was always extremely difficult for the family to arrange the minimum amount of food for the young children. During Ramadan, the children beg for food at rich people’s house for the leftovers from iftar (the food that Muslims take after a whole day fasting) and when they get given food, they take it home and have dinner with their other family members. However, Masud, said that he has to collect food from waste packets, cans, and from dustbins because he does not work as much as the others and goes to school. They also buy food from on the roadside at open hotels/restaurants if they can earn enough money during the working hours.

**Box 3: Hiding their occupation**

Salma’s mother reported that her oldest daughter Shahana is a rag picker, but Shahana said later that she left garbage collecting one year ago. Instead she goes to her non-relative auntie’s house everyday and spends the whole day there but has never told her parents. As her auntie is sick and not able to do her household tasks, Shahana cleans her house and gets...
two daily meals in return. Shahana said she only goes there because her mother does not
cook food for them. There is possibility that she was hiding some information.

Box 4: Hunger is a curse

One day Salma fell sick and did not go to collect garbage. However there was no food in the
house and Salma was very hungry. She tried drinking water frequently to control her hunger
but this did not work and so she left her house in the afternoon to find some food. She came
to the vegetable market and worked there all most one hour as a coolie and earned 12 taka,
which she spent on rice and vegetables from a cheap hotel. Salma does not like to work as a
rag picker but she has no alternative way to get food. Though she is trying to leave this job,
whenever she is hungry she goes back to it. It is the lack of alternative and skills that pushes
her back to the streets.

MARRIED LIFE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD OF SALMA’S SISTERS

Salma’s family tried to get a bridegroom for Shahana when she was 17 years old, but they
failed because they could not afford the required dowry or the expenditures associated with
marriage celebrations and festivities. They talked with three families when attempting to
arrange the marriage. The first family had no dowry demand initially, but they chose the
second daughter, Mahfuza (15) instead of Shahana. Since they had no dowry demand, the
parents arranged the marriage of Mahfuza instead.

After two months of her marriage, the groom’s family started pressuring Mahfuza to bring
5,000 taka from her parents as a dowry and frequently abused her physically. Mahfuza left
her husband’s house and went to live in Khulna, resorting to working as garbage collector to
earn money. A few months later she fell in love with their neighbour Babu who used to be a
rickshaw puller. Babu was married but he divorced his wife to marry Mahfuza. Since they got
married Mahfuza has been a housewife.

Salma’s family is still trying to find a groom for her eldest daughter Shahana but her
prospective in law’s families want at least 5,000 taka’s worth in dowry, cloths and gold
ornaments for the bride and the groom as well as requiring Salma’s family to arrange a
wedding reception for at least ten to 15 people.
Sickness and treatment

A combination of factors including poor diet and lack of nutrition coupled with unsafe working conditions increase children’s exposure to serious health risks. Salma’s entire family is malnourished and anaemic and as a result, most of them suffer from various diseases and frequent illnesses, mostly diarrhoea, respiratory problems, skin infections, and fever. The household members lack sufficient income to afford nutritious and sufficient food and medical treatment when diseases appear, and also lack health awareness and fear of doctors and hospitals, they are exposed to many illnesses that they ignore.

CONCLUSION

Salma is an eleven years old girl who has experienced multiple forms of mental, physical and sexual violence and abuse. Her father, because of poor health, cannot get involved in any full-time income generating activity that would generate sufficient income to cover the basic needs of their ten children. As a young, uneducated girl whose livelihood relies on rag picking on the streets, she is exposed to a number of vulnerabilities related to the climatic conditions, income variations, lack of social networks and is at under constant risk of losing her capacity to labour and earn. Despite of the fact that she wants to quit her job, the fear of hunger and falling into prostitution pushes her back to rag picking. With her numerous brothers and sisters sharing her livelihood occupation, they have experienced living in unhygienic conditions with no proper shelter and faced acute hunger from their early childhood.

Malnourished and uneducated household members had no access to health care, safe water or sanitation facilities. Although she has an income generating activity her well-being status is one of destitution with no form of productive assets and very high vulnerability levels. Salma and her brothers and sisters are scavenging in the rubbish piles of Khulna city, working hard to collect waste paper and search for food. Salma and her sisters have to face a daily routine of exploitation by older children as well as adults and mastans and violence in order not to go hungry.
## SEASONAL LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITY MAP

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<tr>
<td>Bangla</td>
<td>Magh</td>
<td>Falgun</td>
<td>Chaitra</td>
<td>Boishak</td>
<td>Joishtha</td>
<td>Ashar</td>
<td>Srabon</td>
<td>Bhddho</td>
<td>Asshin</td>
<td>Kartik</td>
<td>Agrahaya</td>
<td>Poush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garbage collection</td>
<td>Season time</td>
<td>Lean period</td>
<td>Season time</td>
<td>Lean period</td>
<td>Pick season</td>
<td>Lean period</td>
<td></td>
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### Table 1: Salma's well-being movement by year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Well-being movement</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Poverty level 1</td>
<td>Salma was born in a destitute family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Well-being level 1</td>
<td>Salma is able to manage food for herself as a garbage collector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Well-being level 1</td>
<td>Salma is struggling to get even half-feed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Salma was born in a destitute family with a deaf father.

Salma’s family could not afford to send her to school and needed her to contribute to the household income instead.

Salma got involved in an income generating activity as a rag picker.

Salma is under and malnourished.

Salma relies on her mother and sisters to generate her income.

Vulnerable to sexual abuses from men like mastaaans or older working boys, frequently cheated and subjected to abuses, violence and exploitation.