

# WE ARE THE voice of 40%

## The dire effects of dowry



STAR ARCHIVE

FAARIA TASIN

**W**HAT is the cost of a life? While there have been ample studies done by social and economic groups to discover the mystery, in rural Bangladesh this can sometimes turn out to be very little. A report by The Daily Star in January 2004 depicts that when a greedy husband in Chapainawabganj failed to realize a dowry claim of Tk 20,000 (\$339) from his wife Marina's family, he hired a gang of three men for Tk 300 (\$5) to help him kill her, just

tage and ask for a significantly higher amount of dowry.

The tale of dowry does not end here; in fact this leads to further violence on women after the marriage has taken place. In most cases, the husband will brutally torture the wife if the full dowry has not been given to him or unleash his wrath for more dowries even after conditions have been met during the wedding. One of the main reasons why women cannot abscond from their ill-fate is poverty. Advocate Sultana Kamal, executive director of Ain O Shalish Kendro, said "Dowry is strongly

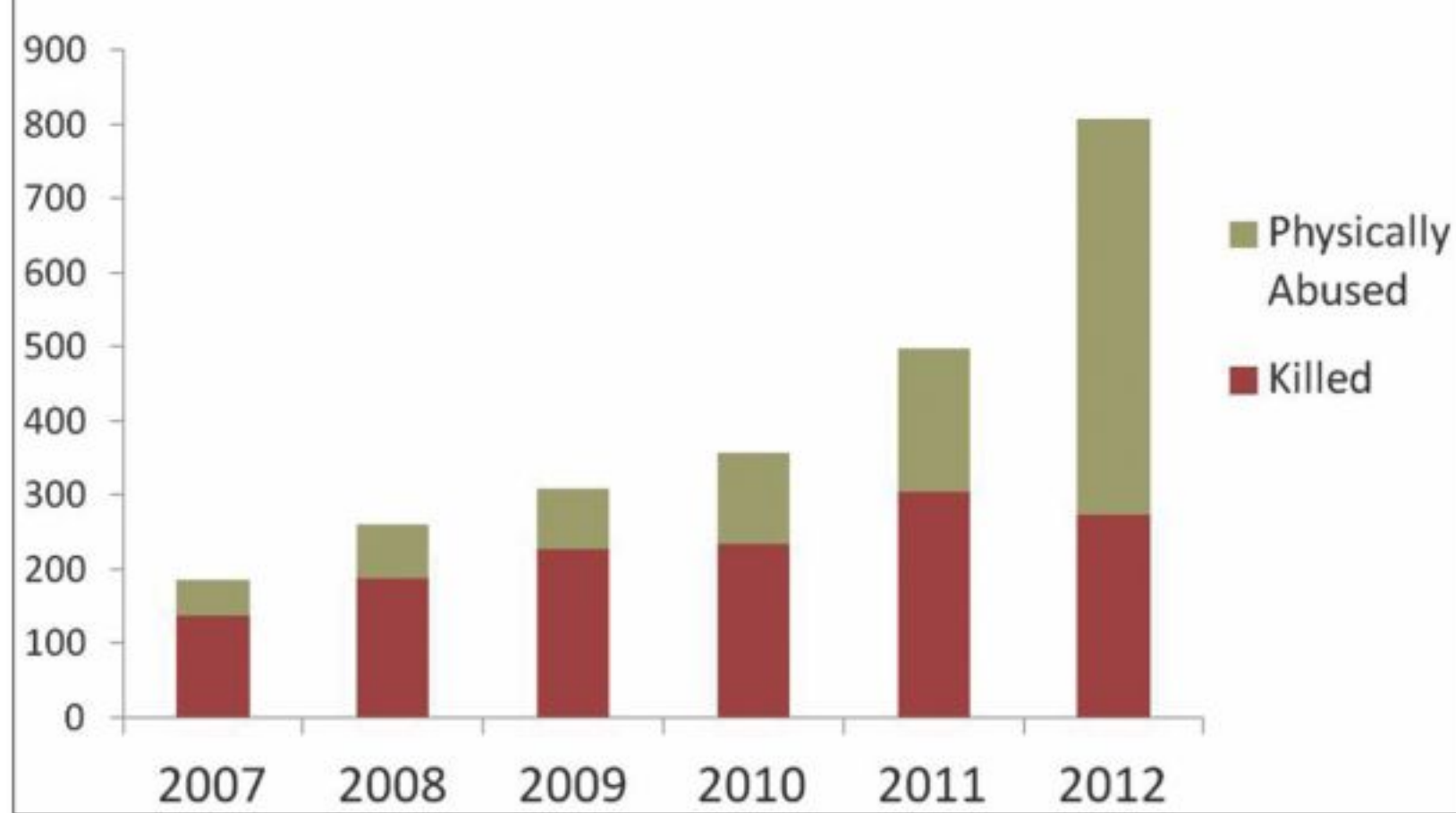
victims of blatant dowry-related abuse in 2012. This is four times the number in 2007- indicating the lack of social and institutional attention being given into this matter. Although there have been some laws enacted to recede such violence against women such as the Dowry Prohibition Act, the number of violence-victims continues unabated which clearly demonstrates that such laws do not have the capacity to bring this situation under control.

Sometimes the perpetrators often pay off the officials to avoid arrest. Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman, a programme officer of Asian Legal Resource Centre said that "The perpetrators manipulate the system and ultimately the problem continues". It is also important to understand that the numbers related to physical abuses of women are an underestimation as abuses of many women go unreported. Fear of further attack by their husbands keeps many women from grasping the hand of law or even discussing about it with others.

A high number of dowry-related killings of women every year is indeed daunting; Odhikar reports that 305 women were killed in 2011, though the number stood at 273 in 2012, this only reflects a 12 percent decrease. However, victims who were physically abused increased by 3 times in 2012 compared to 2011. The notion of practicing dowry needs to be eradicated immediately. If not, it will continue to be used as an instrument for inflicting torture on women which will lead to more and more deaths every year. The third goal of United Nation's Millennium Development which promotes gender equality and empowering women will not be fully realized if the practice of dowry continues persistently. If dowry remains in the equation then gender equality will ceaselessly remain an illusion.

THE WRITER IS THE HEAD OF RESEARCH OF THE DAILY STAR AND CAN BE REACHED AT FAARIATS@GMAIL.COM

Victims of Dowry Related Violence



Source: Odhikar, Human Rights Reports 2011-12.

after 22 days of their marriage. Being a new bride provided no cushion to Marina from the grisly hands of dowry related violence.

The practice of dowry is based on the age-old notion that women are inferior to men; this is translated into the fact that since women are burdens, an economic incentive in the form of money or assets must accompany the girl during marriage to compensate for her weaknesses. Needless to say, if the girl possesses a dark complexion or has a physical disability, a bargain hunting groom will not hesitate to take full advan-

linked to women's poverty. Poverty makes women vulnerable". Poverty also restricts women from going back to their parents' houses as they may not be economically able to accommodate her; in addition, there is a strong stigma attached to it.

Studies have found that dowry is one of the main reasons for domestic violence. Refusal to provide dowry leads to serious physical abuse, deaths and sometimes even provokes women to commit suicide. Dowry related violence against women has been on the rise. According to Odhikar's Human Rights Reports 2011 and 2012, a total of 808 hapless women were

## Dial 10921

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

**B**ANGLADESH is one of the worst sufferers of violence against women. According to WHO, the rate of VAW in Bangladesh is one of the highest in the world. But only 2% of the VAW cases are being reported here. The proportion of victims accessed justice system is only 18% and 30% did not take any legal steps as violence was a family matter, according to BNHRC Report 2011. It might be that victims do not perceive such violence as crime but in most of the cases they are drawn back by sense of insecurity, social stigma, ignorance about the legal provisions and support. Therefore, an easy accessible confidential helpline could be a powerful tool to break the silence.

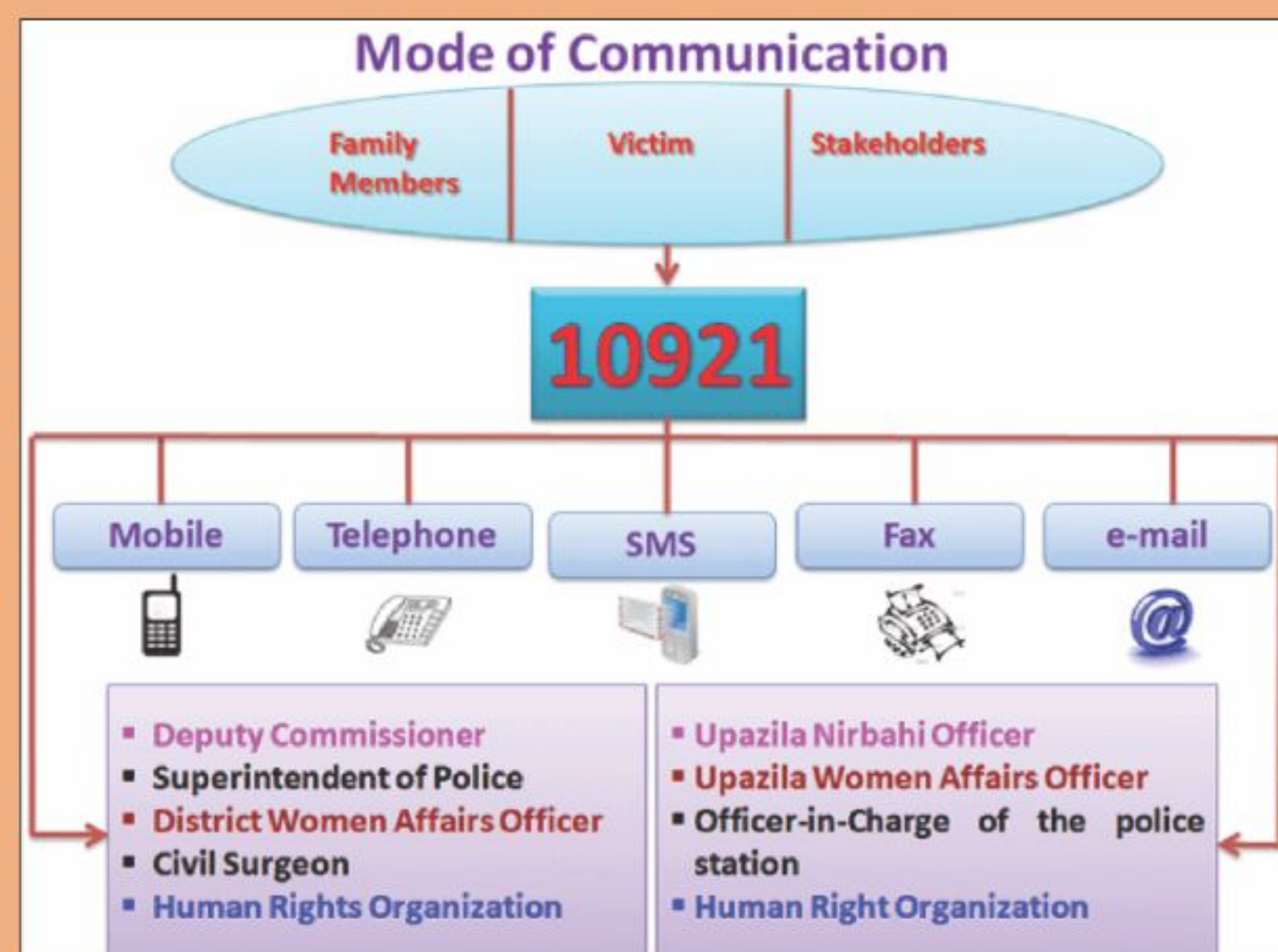
The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) has come forward with an idea of 24/7 helpline. It has established National Helpline Centre for Violence Against Women and Children on June 19, 2012 under the Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women.

The centre remains open to all victims or potential victims (women, children) of violence. The helpline provides immediate service to victims and links up to relevant agencies: doctors, counselors, lawyers, DNA experts, police officers etc. It is accessible from all parts of Bangladesh and through any mobile network. It ranges from informing various legal and other services provisions to help

rescue the victims in case of emergency through law enforcing agencies and other social activists.

The helpline number is 10921. According to Dr. Abul Hossain, Project Director of this multi-sector programme, everyday on average fifty cases are being reported.

The Helpline centre maintains a national database of all the government and non-government contact persons who can provide relevant support to the



victims and their families at the immediate hour.

They also do follow up of the news and reports of violence against women and children published in national newspaper and take action proactively.

This is a unique model in South Asia. This model has earned global appreciation. Saarc has entrusted Bangladesh to lead the replication of this successful model in other Saarc member countries.

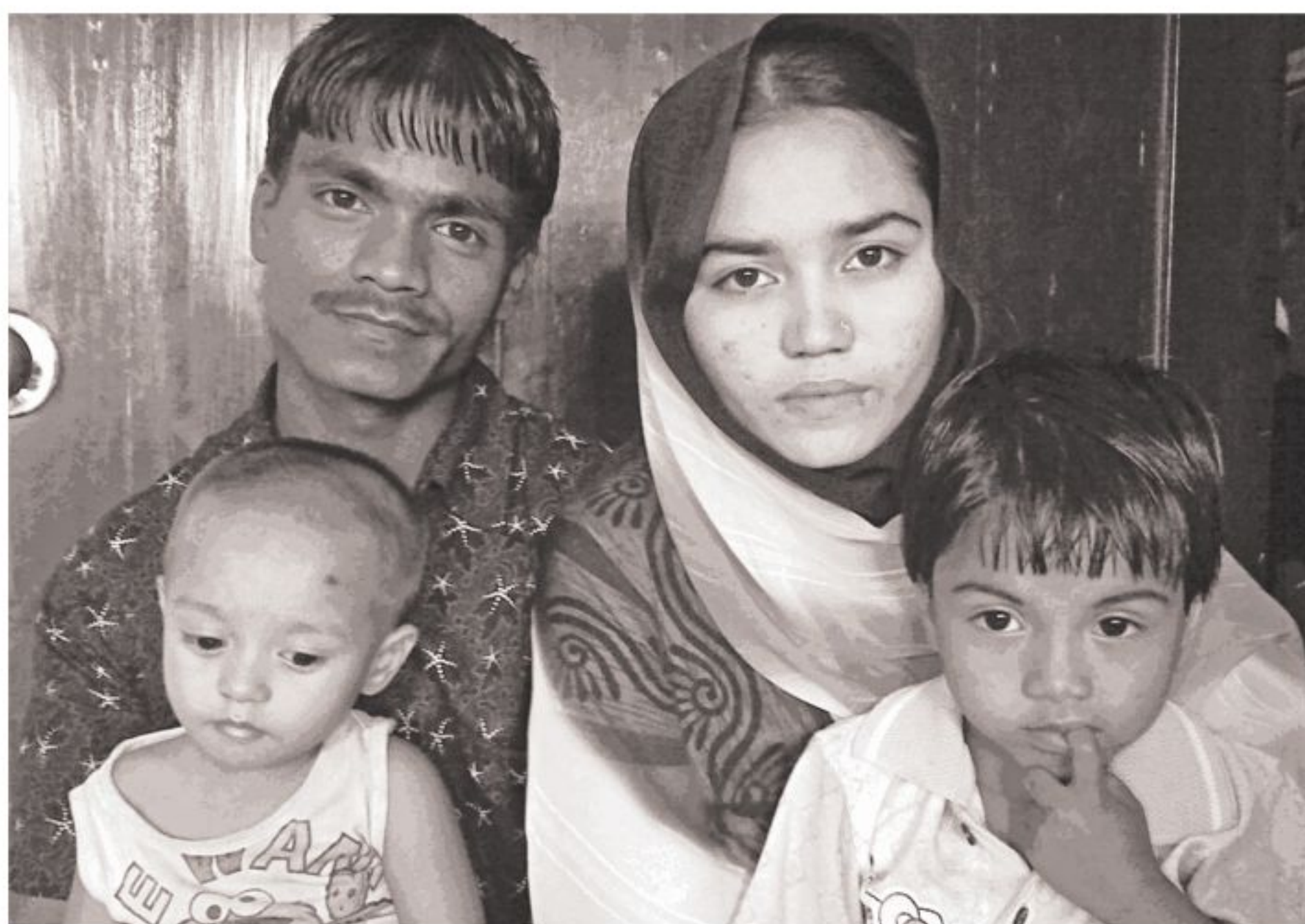
## Rabeya's dream

**R**ABEYA'S childhood was full of colorful dreams she can remember. Though her mother Sapia Begum died at her early age, her father Md. Wahab Bepari used to take best care of her. At her village Brahminia in Rajbari her life was secured and full of happiness.

At her age of 17 years she fell in love with a neighbour. With him she came to Kustia but he left her behind after days of physical relationship. Without any support her life started in a hostile society. In fear of being more harassed if she returned to the village her torturous time began as a floating sex worker. After some days she was arrested by the police and was sent to the shelter home run by the Ministry of Social Welfare, supported by the UNFPA under JP VAW project. There she received good food, clothes, toiletries, necessary health support and counseling. Those support and the healthy and safe environment helped her to forget her trauma. Rabeya also got the opportunity of being trained in sewing and bakery as the income generating vocation at the centre. Her primary school knowledge and desire for a life with dignity taught her and prepared her for the professional market. Instead of getting a job she likes to start her own business and that is why she has applied for the grant support. She said, "My fault destroyed my early dreams. I want to take no more wrong steps. I wish to be self-supported and lead a dignified life." She has started to weave new dreams now.



## An inspirational life story



25 years old, Momtaj is a charming woman. She lives in Sikder Para, a remote village of Cox's Bazar. She came from a poor family. At an early age, she was married to a neighbour named Wasim, without any mohorana (caution money). Rather her family had to pay Tk. 14,000 in cash as dowry.

Momtaj and Wasim had two children in their conjugal life. But Wasim often stayed idle at home. He did not have any fixed job. He gradually got involved in illegal activities and started doing burglary, even robbery.

Wasim stopped bearing any expenses of Momtaj and often beat her over trifling matters. One day after beating severely he threw her out of home. Momtaj took shelter in her father's family with her two children. Providing the expense for the food and healthcare of two children was simply too hard for Momtaj.

At this point, with the help of a field motivator she got enrolled in the Holudia Palong Victim Support Centre, Cox's Bazar. From the centre, legal notices were issued to her husband and in-laws for mutual solution. Wasim and his family members attended several meetings at the victim support centre. Officials of the centre, with the help of locally respected members, successfully resolved their problem and Wasim agreed to get Momtaj back and start a new life.

Wasim is now a truck driver. To help support the couple, Momtaj is making a living through sewing blankets and poultry farming. Momtaj and Wasim keep in touch with the victim support centre and send women victims there. They now enjoy an inspirational life story.