

# BRIDGING THE GAP

## Defending her dreams at age 13

ANIKA TASNIM NISHAT

There are different kinds of inequalities affecting the lives of children around the world. In fact, 1 in 10 children lives in a conflict zone, over 400 million live under poverty line, and 150 million have some form of disability. Save the Children's global campaign titled 'Every Last Child' aims to ensure survival and education for about 15 million children in 84 countries. Towards that goal, Save the Children in Bangladesh, in association with JAAGO Foundation and SHOUT, have undertaken a programme called 'Bridging the Gap'.

As part of this initiative, I, along with other students, have the opportunity to see firsthand how disadvantaged children in Bangladesh live, and hear them talk about their hopes and dreams. Kobita Akhter is one of them.

Kobita Akhter is a 13 year old girl, who lives in Jafrabad slum in Dhaka with her family. Previously, her family lived in a village called Araliya in Kishoreganj district. In the slum, she stays with her family in a single room. Her full family has been living here for about 8 years. Kobita's family consists of her parents and 4 siblings – Sumon (16), Muhin (10), Subarna (8), and Shafika (7). She is the second child of her parents. Her family is dependent on her mother and elder brother as her father, Shahid Miah (45), can't work because of his health condition.

Her mother, Rahima Khatun (35), works from morning till night as a domestic help, and her elder brother works as a sweeper. Kobita's elder brother, who is only 3 years older than her, had to choose work over going to school. She has very clear ideas about the condition of her family and the struggles which she feels she can't escape. In spite of these miseries, Kobita hasn't given up on her dreams. She is optimistic that someday their situation would get better.

Though Kobita's surroundings are not encouraging or accommodating, and she doesn't enjoy the privileges we do, her strong desire to study made her parents allow her to go to school. Going back to the time when they moved to Dhaka, Kobita's parents didn't have enough money for her and her siblings' education. At one point, they had to confess their inability and ask her not to go to school but she didn't let her hope fade away.

"When I understood that I can't have expectations from my parents, I started to save money for school by myself. I worked as a domestic help to manage my school fees, as there's no other alternative for someone like me," Kobita said. She talked about her two dreams. First, she said, she wants to become a teacher so that she could provide education to children who can't afford school, as she doesn't want anyone to face the difficulties that she faces. Second, she wants to give her family a better living environ-

ment and a dignified position in society.

For her age, Kobita sounds like a much older person. This young girl has to overcome so many obstacles that she has become an old soul. I wish all of her dreams come true from the core of my heart.



From left: Kobita Akhter, 13, and Suborna, 8.

## From Habiganj to Rayerbazar Slum

ATIKA KHAN

Excluded, ignored, underprivileged – whatever we say, it only leads to one meaning: being left behind. Even in the most hopeful time for our nation, when all children should have access to education and healthcare, there are many who have neither.

What are we doing for those who are excluded?  
 Save the Children in Bangladesh – along with its

partners JAAGO Foundation and SHOUT – launched a programme titled 'Bridging the Gap', under its global campaign 'Every Last Child'. The campaign aims for student volunteers to visit underprivileged children in slums and remote areas in order to tell their stories by being a voice for the disadvantaged.

As part of the campaign, I had the chance to connect with children living in a slum to better understand their lives. This is the story of 13 year old

Mohammad, from Jafrabad slum in Rayerbazar, Dhaka.

Mohammad wants to go back to his village in Habiganj. After the recent flooding of the *haor* areas of Sylhet division, his family moved to Dhaka in search of a better life. For almost 4 months, the family has been staying in the Jafrabad slum, the entire family in only one room. It was shocking to see how a family of 7-8 members could manage to live in a small room.

Despite his interest in reading and writing, Mohammad never had the chance to receive formal education. Perhaps, it wasn't feasible for his parents to send him to school when they had such a big family to feed. However, he attends the community school nearby to get a taste of basic education. But what about his formal education? Does this teenager not deserve it?

Mohammad wants to go back to his roots again. "I want to live where my parents and my siblings are, but going back to my village will be better for me," he said when asked if he liked it here in Dhaka.

This is the story of one Mohammad. Like him, many children in Bangladesh do not have access to education, for several reasons. And their stories don't make it to newspapers. It's time that we, the fortunate ones, become their voice and bridge the gap.



Mohammad (second from right) with his friends Sagar, Akash, and Bayezid, are residents of the Jafrabad slum in Rayerbazar, Dhaka.

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