

# STORIES THAT NEED TO BE HEARD

## “Bridging the Gap” aims to save every last child in Bangladesh

KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Save the Children in Bangladesh, in association with JAAGO Foundation and SHOUT, took an initiative to let school, college, and university students experience what life is like for the ones who live on the other end of the spectrum. Through its “Bridging the Gap” programme, as part

the streets, in their hometowns. This campaign is designed in such a way that they should start becoming thinkers and doers, and take actions to make lives better for every last child,” he said.

On August 8, 2017, a team of 28 volunteers visited the Rayerbazar slum area on the first leg of the campaign. They visited and talked with children and families living in one of the largest



of the global “Every Last Child” campaign, the whole nation will be informed by these students about the day-to-day hardships and drawbacks young children face in urban slums and remote areas of Bangladesh.

With help from JAAGO, 50 student volunteers were chosen by the organisers from a registration count of over 1000. These students possess the zeal to contribute to the ones who fall in the same age group but are not as fortunate when it comes to living conditions, education, nutrition, etc.

The selected volunteers participated in a workshop on August 6, 2017, where they learned in detail about the programme and its objectives. Furthermore, they took notes on effective photography and writing skills from the SHOUT team, as they would later have to report on their observations through pictures and articles for print and social media.

Tony Michael Gomes, Global Campaign Adviser for Save the Children, is leading this endeavour. He believes this campaign would be impactful in creating changes in our community. “Bridging the Gap should work like a philosophy for young people of Bangladesh. They meet so many ‘last children’ every day – on

urban slums in Dhaka. Below is an account by Md. Hasan Alam, one of the student volunteers who wrote about 12 year old Rasel, who nurtures big dreams in a small room.

### UNFULFILLED DREAMS IN RAYERBAZAR SLUM

*When Rasel, at age 12, should have been going to school and have friends to play with, he took up the responsibility to work alongside his father for their family.*

*The lack of proper education is one of the many challenges faced by the underprivileged children of our country. The school dropout rate is also very high as many of them would rather work to earn money to support their families. While talking to Rasel, I asked about his dreams. He said that he wants to be a teacher. I was pleasantly surprised to know the reason behind it – he wants to teach children free of cost, so no one is deprived of education.*

*He came to the Rayerbazar slum in Dhaka with his parents, leaving school at class 2. His father works as the caretaker of a house, and can hardly provide his family 3 meals a day. And so education is a luxury to them. Rasel started working to support his father by*

*making steel cages for birds. Part of a family of 10, his two elder brothers live separately and his elder sisters have been married off. He also takes care of his youngest brother. He gives 20 taka every day for his little brother’s tiffin and tries to manage other educational expenses.*

*Rasel and his family are also affected by health issues. They drink boiled water but still its source seems to be a threat for drinking and daily use. When they get sick they do not go to hospital because of the medical costs.*

*Moreover, Rasel’s job is causing damage to his eyes because sometimes he has to weld steel pieces and it is hazardous for a child like him.*

*Children like him are not encouraged to have lofty goals. They dream only to have bare necessities. These children have rights to education, health, nutrition, safety, recreation, clean water and sanitation just like us, but they are deprived. It is absent due to poverty, ignorance, lack of social consciousness and discrimination.*

*Unfortunately, millions of children in Bangladesh are deprived of their right to education and are subjected to exploitation and abuse. We are forgetting that children are the future custodians and torch bearers of the society. The future of the nation depends on how they grow up.*

Accompanying the volunteers in Rayerbazar was Korvi Rakshand, Executive Director and Chairman of JAAGO Foundation. He stated that the youth of Bangladesh have lots of opportunities to work for the UN Sustainable Development Goals in order to foster positive changes in the lives of marginalised people. He said, “The volunteers come from a totally different background. They have links with many important people, and using their pictures and stories from this urban slum, they can reach out to those individuals. It is only through participation that the youth can contribute to developing an all-encompassing society.”

On August 22, 2017, the volunteers and organisers set sail for a small, remote village deep within a haor in Habiganj. The journey to Ajmeriganj upazila took hours and multiple modes of transportation, and the participants were met with equally moving stories at the destination – one of them composed below by **Wakila Hussain Mouri**.

### INDOMITABLE DREAMS IN REMOTE HABIGANJ

*It’s not always easy to notice what’s on the other side of the coin – to acknowledge and realise the obstacles and sufferings of the people at the back of the line.*

*As part of Save the Children in Bangladesh’s “Bridging the Gap” programme we visited a remote village in Badalpur union, under Habiganj district, where I met Tama Choudhury, an 18 year old girl with indomitable dreams.*

*Tama recently passed her HSC exams. As I stepped into her house, I saw piles of books stacked against the walls made of thin bamboo strips; the mud floor was wet and the only small bed was covered with a red floral bed sheet.*

*Tama is the eldest of five siblings. Her father has a serious heart condition that puts her mother in an everyday battle to run the family. She passed her SSC from a school that took a 30 minute walk followed by a 2 hour boat ride and another 30 minute walk just to get to. The boat was not always available, and the fare unaffordable at times. Sometimes during bad weather, the boat would capsize and she had to swim back home. Her books and copies would get wet and damaged; her mother would dry them around the stove. Such an incident happened just weeks before her SSC exam too. However, she passed with flying colours.*

*Her college was in Paharpur, a 2 hour 30 minute boat ride from her home. Tama spoke of the days she had to study using the mobile phone’s torch light, as bad weather meant there was no electricity generated through solar panels. There were nights when she went to sleep having no food and on many days she had to walk in a way so that the holes in her uniform were less visible.*

*She also spoke of the day she screamed in joy when her HSC results came out. And I would give the entire credit to her and her only. Her determination and sincerity despite all the obstacles she faces everyday had brought that result, making me wonder what a girl like Tama could do if she had better opportunities. We were sitting by the little window in her house when Tama mentioned that her favourite subject is political science. I asked, “Suppose you are a policymaker of this country and you can change one thing about your community. What would it be?”*

*In her eyes I saw lights flickering that spoke of dreams she never got to spell out to anyone, because no one ever said that she was allowed to dream. Yet, she aspired, set goals to achieve, and nurtured her dreams just like she nurtured her siblings.*

*Tama said, “If I could bring one change, I would ensure electricity in every home so that no one had to buy kerosene. It costs 70 taka per litre to light lamps for studying. I would buy one boat for every family so that they don’t have to search for transportation when a loved one is in a medical emergency. I will make sure*



PHOTOS: CRCHID CHAKMA

*every child is educated because that’s the only escape from this place.”*

*“And what do you want for yourself, Tama?” I asked.*

*“I want to paint my walls purple,” she smiled shyly. “And I want to do my bachelors in English literature, be a university teacher, and travel the world someday.”*

*“Do you think you can achieve that dream?”*

*“I know it’s difficult and people may think I’m insane. But I think I can do this.”*

*As I stepped out of that small house, Tama asked me to remember her. I couldn’t tell her in words that it would be impossible for me to forget her.*



Readers can access stories from the Rayerbazar slum in the August 17, 2017 issue of SHOUT; more stories from Sylhet will be published on September 7, 2017.

Karim Waheed, Editor of SHOUT, considers the campaign and the youth publication to be a perfect match. He mentioned that it was a logical decision when Save the Children approached SHOUT to be a medium to reach the whole nation – so that everyone could see, hear, and read the stories. “SHOUT is all about young Bangladeshis, their successes and struggles. We wanted to give these student volunteers a platform

to tell stories of the disadvantaged children and the difficulties they face, from their own perspectives,” he said.

Fifty young minds were given the opportunity to be voices for the unheard through “Bridging the Gap” programme by Save the Children in Bangladesh. We hope that when these voices reach the upper echelons, particularly the policymakers, necessary actions will be taken so that we can all help create an inclusive society and a better future for the next generation.

Kazi Akib Bin Asad is a Sub-editor at Shout.