

BRIDGING THE GAP

FLYING COLOURS OF CHILDHOOD

FATEMA TUJ JOHRA

Irish artist Stacia Tauscher once said, "We worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today."

Every child is entitled to a meaningful childhood. One of the luckiest things that can happen to one in their lifetime is to have a happy childhood, but for many children, the reality of childhood is altogether different.

The movement for child rights and their empowerment started in the last part of 20th century. Save the Children has been working in Bangladesh since 1970, improving the lives of millions of children through campaigns focused on better education, child health, child protection, nutrition, etc. Recently, Save the Children in Bangladesh has conducted the "Bridging the Gap" programme under its global "Every Last Child" campaign – along with its partners JAAGO Foundation and SHOUT. As part of this campaign, I visited a *haor* area in Sylhet.

In my journey, I met little Runa Rani Pal. She is an 11 year old girl from a remote village of Habiganj. Her eyes tell the terrible story of life. She is facing more sufferings in her childhood years that no one should endure in an entire lifetime. We asked her to tell us her unfortunate story. She says:

"I study in class 6. I have started my higher secondary education in Paharpur Boshonto Kumar Public High School, which is in the Badalpur union. Usually, I leave home at 8 AM and walk for an hour to reach the boat. It takes 40 to 60 minutes to arrive at the gorge. I have to walk then for 30 minutes to reach my school. Often days, I miss catching the boat in time. Moreover, on rainy days we can't imagine going to school. During school time we have nothing to eat and have to starve for about 10 hours. After

school, I have two private tuitions which end at 6 PM. My journey to reach home takes 2 hours after sunset. As we do not have electricity in our village, I have to walk home in the midst of darkness. Every single day of my life, I dream to live a life like a normal human being. Our life is only surrounded by painful tears."

When I asked about her dreams she said, "I pray to God that He provides me with the opportunity to become a doctor."

Runa has never met a doctor nor did she ever go to a hospital. The only hospital nearest to her home is in another union. It's so costly just to reach the hospital that they cannot imagine going for treatment. They usually buy medicine from the local dispensary. This is the only way for treatment in those villages. In spite of that, her urge to become a doctor displays her confidence to overcome her situation.

Haor regions remain underwater for 4 to 7 months during the pre-monsoon and monsoon seasons. Runa's father is a farmer and works in the field during the harvesting period. As most of the cultivable land is used for one-crop agriculture, labourers do not have any work during the non-harvesting period. In that time her father performs music as a way to earn money for the family. And that is not enough for surviving. At times, Runa cannot pay her fees so she has to skip school for two to three months at a stretch.

In Bangladesh, children rarely have the possibility to express their opinions – to tell their stories. Let us be the voice for those who don't get the chance to speak for themselves. And the first step to our initiative should be to bringing colours to the lives of such disadvantaged children.

The writer studies Child Development and Social Relationship at Home Economics College, University of Dhaka.



Saving Meena's smiles

SHEIKH REZWANA TASNIM

Save the Children in Bangladesh, in association with JAAGO Foundation and SHOUT, gave me the opportunity to take part in "Bridging the Gap" programme. Under its global Every Last Child campaign, the programme brought people like us closer to disadvantaged children like Meena. Yes, this is the story of Meena Chowdhury, a 16 year old girl, who is struggling with poverty and inadequate facilities.

Bosikhali, a village in Habiganj, is one of the most inaccessible areas in Bangladesh. It is grappling with issues such as poor education, inefficient health services, inopportune communication system and so on. Meena and her family live in this village. Her family consists of her parents and two siblings. Her family and their cattle live in a single thatched house.

According to Meena, the dynamics which adversely affect the education of rural areas are poor economy, lack of access to institutions and concerns regarding quality education. The main problem is transportation. Approximately an area of 7 to 8 kilometers around Bosikhali stays flooded for half a year. At that time, boat is the only means of transportation. Meena cannot attend her classes every day because of this problem as they cannot afford the daily boat fare.

"I go to school, but I cannot afford to go every day, cannot afford tuitions to do better in studies. When I see others, I always wish if I could have all these facilities that an urban child has," she said.

I also spoke to Meena about her future plans. She said that she wants to study in a nursing institute.

"I want to take care of people in my village and offer free medical treatment to them," she mentioned. There are no medical facilities near the village. Sometimes patients breathe their last even before reaching the nearest hospital which is 2 to 3 hours far. But immediately after that she was also being doubtful of achieving her dreams. "Poor financial condition of our parents force us to sacrifice our dreams," Meena grieves.

I remember the first thing I noticed about Meena – it was her smile. She welcomed me graciously with a smile but as our conversation progressed, it turned into sorrow.

Meena is just one of the millions of deprived, neglected, disadvantaged children across Bangladesh. Like every child, Meena too deserves a chance to make her dreams come true. I truly want to be the bridge that these children need in order to have a new life for themselves, for their family, their community and the entire world.



The writer is a freelancer.