

A WARRIOR IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE PANDEMIC



"Having two young children and an elderly mother-in-law at home, it was dangerously risky for me to go out during the pandemic. Still, I couldn't leave my work and my community behind," shares Haowa Khanam, a socio-economic and nutrition facilitator (SENF) of the Shonirvor CDC Cluster under the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

As soon as the pandemic hit, 35-year-old Haowa and her team were out in the field with banners and leaflets containing COVID-19 safety guidelines. She also worked on installing hand-washing stations and carried out training sessions to teach people of her community at Korail Slum the importance of proper hand-washing. However, even though she was going out to

work for the greater good of the community, not everyone was supportive of her actions.

"Initially, people in my community did not approve of me going outside my house during the pandemic and tried to stop me multiple times," shares Haowa. She had to explain to them how her PPE would protect her from the virus and that they need not worry. "I viewed the pandemic as a kind of war. During wars, you don't only think about yourself but about what's best for all the people around you. And that's exactly what I did," she continues. She and her team also faced resistance from the police, with one of their operations being completely shut down. "We didn't give up. We changed the way we worked and continued serving the community," says Haowa.

Haowa's career started at a

garments factory soon after she got married. Later on, she found work at BRAC, where she spent around eight years. "Then my child fell ill, and I had to leave Dhaka. It was a huge struggle financially for me without work," recounts Haowa. After two years, she was back in the capital, looking for work at an NGO again since she had found her calling – social work. She quickly found a job at UNDP in 2019 and has since been working tirelessly in her role.

"The fact that I can stand by my community during a global pandemic and share advice that can help improve their lives is something I'm greatly proud of," shares Haowa. She hopes to continue her work in the future and has dreams of seeing her two little girls grow up to be successful women.

**By Mayabee Arannya
Photo: Rashed Shumon**

A MOTHER TO THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY



"I was six months pregnant when the pandemic first hit Bangladesh, but I knew I had to go out and help my community," shares Sajia Akter, a 29-year-old mother of two. Since July 2019, Sajia has been working as a socio-economic and nutrition facilitator (SENF) for the Alor Pothey CDC Cluster under the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

"I used to be petrified of the risks of going out, especially as a pregnant woman. Being in PPE all day under the sun was no easy feat," recounts Sajia, whose team single-handedly distributed five soaps per household to 2,760 families in her community at Bauniabadh. One issue they faced during this operation was that people began to gather around the distribution point. "We couldn't risk COVID-19

transmission, so we instead went door-to-door to every single house. We ensured that not one family was left out," shares Sajia. They also delivered food baskets to 150 families. These essentials were life-changing for people during a time of increasing economic uncertainty, as many community members were being laid off.

With two young children at home, Sajia's day usually begins at 4:30AM as she juggles taking care of the kids and working full-time as a SENF. "We are all slaves of habit. At one point, I got used to this routine, especially since I love the work that I do," shares Sajia, with a big smile on her face. One aspect of her work she is most passionate about is helping pregnant women and young mothers. Currently, her team is responsible for counselling 97 young mothers. Sajia ensures food baskets containing eggs, oil

and other essentials are delivered to them every month.

"We regularly monitor whether the food is going directly to the mother and child as intended," she adds. Sajia also holds meetings with the women of the community to explain COVID-19 guidelines and nutrition information, especially for pregnant women and young mothers. "Since I am raising my children following the correct nutritional guidelines, I can be an example to other mothers in the community. If my words can help even one mother, I consider that a huge success," mentions Sajia.

"I am grateful to LIUPC for allowing me to do such meaningful work. I hope to continue working relentlessly for the betterment of my community," she adds.

**By Mayabee Arannya
Photo: Rashed Shumon**

A BEACON OF RESILIENCE



"I had always dreamt of working to help marginalised communities, and I made sure my dream came true," shares 23-year-old Beauti Rani Sikder, a woman who not only takes care of her family on her own but has also dedicated her life to taking care of her community. With her father having left when she was only five years old and her mother tragically passing away a year and a half ago, Beauti was left to fend for herself and her younger sister.

Adding to her list of hardships was the global pandemic that hit Bangladesh in March 2020. "I wouldn't leave the house. It felt like corona was standing outside like a ghost waiting to catch me," says Beauti, recounting the horrifying first few days of lockdown. But she quickly realised that the situation was bigger than her fears. As a Community Facilitator (CF) of Alor Khojey CDC Cluster under the

Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), she couldn't just stay put and let her community at Korail slum suffer.

Putting her fears aside, she went door-to-door with her team and distributed soap, COVID-19 awareness banners and leaflets, and food baskets. "Looking back, I can't believe how I managed to carry out distribution even during heavy rainfall," shares Beauti. Rain, however, wasn't the only barrier she and her team faced. "Sometimes, the police would frisk us or even threaten to take us away if we continued our work," she adds. Even though they were in full PPE gear and had UNDP identification, the national lockdown was still strictly maintained by law enforcement.

"Despite all these barriers, we worked day and night, during weekends and

even national holidays. It gave us peace of mind knowing that we were doing something great for our community," shares Beauti, who has been working as a CF for over a year now.

Beauti and her team also worked on installing hand washing stations, and they routinely monitored whether people were washing their hands properly and maintaining all COVID-19 safety guidelines. "To avoid having large families using a single hand washing station, we also introduced tippy taps, which are low cost and easy to install. They're like big water bottles that can easily be turned on and off," explains Beauti.

Looking to the future, Beauti hopes to continue her education and become successful and independent, as per her late mother's wishes.

**By Mayabee Arannya
Photo: Rashed Shumon**

RESOLVE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY



"I dream of building a world where no human being ever has to die of starvation," replies Runa Akter, with firm resolve when asked what she wants to do in the future. As Bangladesh is set to graduate to middle income status, the 23-year-old believes that at this point, there should not be a single person going hungry.

But when COVID-19 struck the country and lockdowns were put in place in March of 2020, food insecurity increased. People lost jobs and poverty spiked. But Runa remained resilient and amidst the uncertainty caused by the virus, she always stood beside the marginalised community. As a Community Facilitator (CF) for the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), she was involved right from the beginning of the lockdown in the work towards relieving the sufferings of her community in the Jatrabari area of

Dhaka city.

"When working during the lockdown, I did not really have any fear. This was work that I wanted to do. The real challenge was the empty roads, lack of transport, and getting past the police and the army. Every time we left the house, we would be barraged with various questions by law enforcers and we had to convince them to let us work," shares Runa. Furthermore, there was also resistance from her landlord as they feared she might infect the people in her building. But throughout all these obstacles, she had one goal in mind. She knew that the people in her community were facing hardship and they needed help. With this in mind, she carried out her services by following all the necessary COVID-19 preventative measures.

At the peak of the pandemic, Runa helped distribute soap and

food baskets to the marginalised families. Along with her team, she set up hand washing stations and monitored them as well. She also worked to raise awareness among slum residents.

Listening to her fearless stories in the face of the pandemic makes one awe at her resolve. In fact, Runa Akter has been working tirelessly to bring change in her community for over a decade now through involvement in several other UNDP projects.

"If I did not get the chance to work with the marginalised community, I never would have fully understood their struggles. The more I got to witness their hardships, the more my love and passion grew for the work I do. I am grateful that I have this platform."

**By Tasnim Odrika
Photo: Rashed Shumon**



DARING TO DREAM FOR A BETTER WORLD



"My parents were eager to get me married right after my SSC examination but I resisted. Now they are both very proud of the work I do for my community," shares Ayesha Siddika Shilpi, 20, a Socio-Economic and Nutrition Facilitator (SENF) for the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) project under United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

At first glance, her demeanour may seem meek. But as she starts describing the work she does, one can sense her passion and tenacity.

"In March 2020, as word of the pandemic spread, misinformation amidst the masses followed suit. This misinformation and lack of awareness remained at its peak among the slum dwellers. I knew that I could not just sit at home while all these people needed help," adds Ayesha. Although her work



is mainly related to raising nutritional awareness for pregnant women, during the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, she also helped raise awareness regarding the virus and the necessary preventative measures. Her work was centred on ward number 49 of the Dhalpur area of Dhaka city. But she went the extra mile to help poor communities residing in other areas as well whenever she could.

With the help of UNDP and Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), she started personally visiting the slums and raising awareness by distributing informational posters among the dwellers there and using microphones to curb misinformation. People living in slums did not have hand washing stations near their houses, which dramatically increased the chances of carrying the virus inside their homes. In order to deter the transmission of the virus, Ayesha helped build tippy

taps outside each house and also campaigned for proper hand washing methods to fight the virus.

"To say it was a challenge working as a frontline worker in an area like Dhalpur which had been a red zone with colossal numbers of COVID-19 cases, is truly an understatement. In the beginning, fear overpowered the poor communities that I work for and they were reluctant to listen to me. It took a lot of time and patience, but in the end, I was able to earn their trust," recalls Ayesha, with a hint of pride gleaming in her eyes.

Currently in her third year as an economics student, Ayesha has a vision for the future. All her dreams revolve around helping the marginalised in her community.

**By Tasnim Odrika
Photo: Rashed Shumon**