

Migration and Women

The Lives and Tragedies



Creative Stories

As part of the flagship project, *Reducing Vulnerability of Women Affected by Climate Change through Viable Livelihood Options*, UN Women Bangladesh has been exploring the impacts of migration on women caused by climate change-related phenomena.

Together with research partners, the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS), UN Women studied 10 districts in three different eco-zones in Bangladesh to understand the district-specific implications that women face due to male migratory trends. The stories that women shared with the research team show some of the issues those who remain behind in the migration process are confronted with; work-related stress, increased childcare and household burdens, high occurrence of poor health issues, and the very real threats of physical and sexual violence.

A life for a smile

Name: Tasura Begum
Village: Beparikandi
Union: Uttar Tarabunia

Upazilla: Bhederganj
District: Shariatpur

At the end of a hot July day, Tasura Begum straightened up from picking green chilies and wiped the sweat from her forehead. Her four-year-old boy Jasim was playing nearby in the lush green grass. Tasura could see the mighty Padma River flowing by, and wondered whose life it had ruined today.

Tasura thought back to three months before, to the fateful day that had brought her to where she was standing today. For several weeks, she and her husband had been fretting about the river getting closer to their home. Both of them knew what was coming, as they had experienced this twice before. The river was coming to devour all they had, and there was little they could do. The river had become violent and unpredictable over recent years and there was no stopping its merciless power. It seemed all so recent that they were standing at the water's edge, watching the river engulf their hopes and dreams.

With a teenage son and daughter, and a child still dependent on his mother, Tasura and her husband spent nights under the open sky,

hungry, hopeless and without the means to feed their children. Then her husband heard of an offer. A local agency was helping men go abroad to work as labourers. Seeing no way out, and facing starvation, Tasura's husband took the large loan and flew off within the month, leaving Tasura and the children to fend for themselves. Only a week later, her son Milon packed his bags and took a bus to Dhaka to try his own luck at earning money.

With the sun setting, Tasura picked up the large basket of chilies and took her son by the hand, heading in the direction of Selina Akhter's home. Selina had not only given Tasura a job by which she could make ends meet, but had also been a moral support in these tough times. With all the pending payments, Tasura regularly had fits of panic. The money her husband sent was about enough to pay the installments of the loan, and her son only could send small amounts every now and then.

Tasura felt a sharp pain in her back, a reminder that she had not taken her kidney medicine



today. A month of taking the medicine was taking its toll, both physically and financially. The medicine cost more than Tasura could afford, but she knew that she had to get up and keep fighting for her children's survival. Roksana, her teenage daughter, was just about to finish her primary education and dreamed of one day becoming a doctor so she could make her mother well. Currently Roxana's schooling was free, as the government provided free primary education for girls, but Tasura knew that Roksana's education would soon start to cost money. Tasura prayed that her husband would come back soon with enough money saved from his work in Saudi Arabia.

As she walked towards Selina's home, Tasura saw Mohiuddin coming towards her. Mohiuddin was a prominent man in the village, having his own shop in the local market. But Tasura also knew of his night-time visits to the local 'ganja' spots with his friends. This was none of her business, but recently, when Tasura was at the market, Mohiuddin had made a remark about Roksana becoming prettier by the day, and Tasura had

been alarmed at the look in his eyes as he said it. Mohiuddin was mumbling a song about young love to himself as he swayed passed her. Leaving Roksana at home alone while Tasura worked was becoming a matter of increasing anxiety for her.

Tasura was not sure how much longer she could bear this hopeless situation. She already had two installments of the loan pending, and not being able to pay on time was a huge risk. Her kidney medicine was almost finished. The hole in her tin roof needed mending, the rains were already here, and the house regularly flooded. She was also worried about how her son was getting on in Dhaka, and whether she see him again. Now she had her new concerns about protecting Roksana.

When she reached home, Tasura dropped exhausted to her knees in tears, as the chilies tumbled from the basket and scattered. Jasim stood confused, but then Tasura heard the sweetest voice call out, "Mother!" She looked up and saw Roksana running towards her with a beautiful smile. Tasura got up with the last strength in her body. She lived for that smile.

Everything's fine

Name: Kulsum Khatun
Village: Char Dhulashar
Union: Dhulashar

Upazilla: Kalapara
District: Patuakhali

The phone beside Kulsum Khatun rang, stirring her 12-year-old daughter, Asha. It was already 10pm and rain was pounding the tin roof under which they lay. The call was from her husband in Dhaka.

"Hello! Were you sleeping?" her husband hoarsely asked.

"Yes. It's pretty late here" replied Kulsum.

"How are the children?"

Kulsum looked at her two sleeping children. Beside Asha, lay her five-year-old son, Rahim who had a high fever and was stirring and moaning in his sleep. Kulsum had not been able to give him any medicine, nor had she been able to visit the village doctor. Food was scarce, and this made her son even weaker.

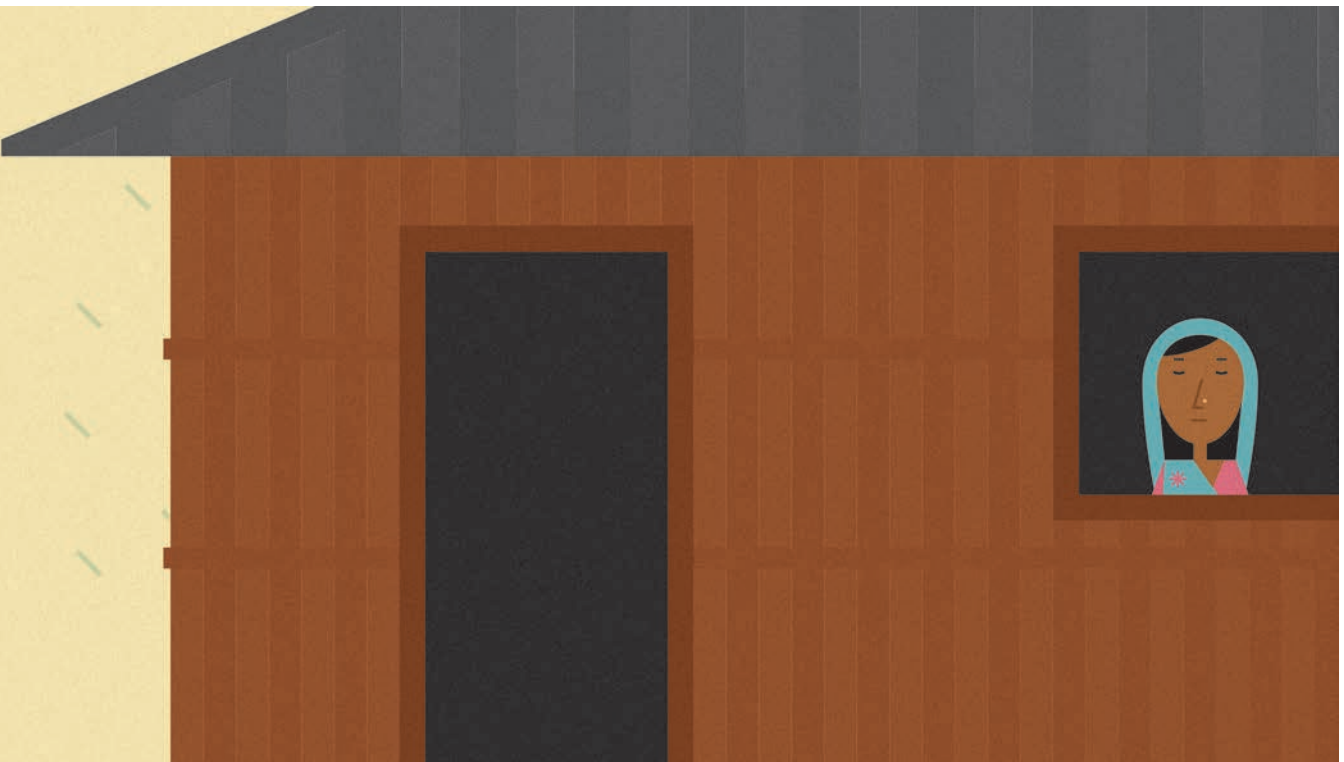
"He's not so good," she replied in a small voice, barely able to suppress tears.

Her husband had only been gone a month, and already Kulsum had a mountain of worries.

She had been laying there, unable to sleep, worrying about her son, worrying about food, and worrying about her own health.

Although it was nothing new, the absence of Kulsum's husband was not easy. He had left after the cyclone had ravaged the village of Char Dhulashar in Patuakhali two years before. The embankment had broken and the cyclone had brought strong winds, and floods. Seven people had died, including a cousin of Kulsum's husband. The extent of the damage was severe and the village had never been the same. The soil had turned almost white through salt deposition from the storm wash and crops no longer grew. Kulsum's husband, who used to work in the fields when the fishing season was over, was out of a job in the dry season and decided to go to Dhaka to pull a rickshaw.

Life had never been easy for Kulsum and her family, but life had been manageable before the storm. They ate three times a day, and the whole family was together. Now, with her



husband gone for most of the year and not earning as much as before, life had taken a downward turn that seemed never-ending. Kulsum spent her days working in people's homes, mopping their floors and cleaning their lawns for a bit of extra cash. She had to take Rahim with her and he was now beginning to suffer.

When Kulsum was out working, Asha had to look after the home, cooking and washing clothes, which prevented her from going to school on most days.

But the biggest problem was food. Kulsum could barely afford to provide one decent meal a day, and it broke her heart to see the children's hungry faces every day. The money she earned was never enough, but she had survive for at least another four months, until her husband returned.

The other villagers were always sympathetic with Kulsum and other families in similar situations because of the cyclone. On nights when the

weather was bad, Kulsum and her kids usually slept in her neighbour Zuhayra's house. She was imposing, she knew, but she really had no choice. To survive, she would had to lean on others.

"Are you sending some money soon?" Kulsum asked her husband as politely as she could.

"Money? I can't afford to send money now. I'm barely eating over here. What are you doing? Aren't you working?" She could tell he was getting agitated.

"I am," said Kulsum quickly, not wanting to worry him. "Do look after yourself there, and make sure you eat enough."

"I will," said her husband, now calm again. "Anything else I need to know?"

There was a moment's silence, as the heavy rain battered the roof.

"No," Kulsum's sigh was long and heavy, "everything's fine."

The vessel of despair

Name: Hafeza Khatun
Village: Hariakhali
Union: Sabrang

Upazilla: Teknaf
District: Cox's Bazaar

A boat full of people was visible. Hafeza Khatun's heart beat quickly. Would her husband, and father of her three children, be on the boat? Today would surely be the day. The *sardar* had said so. Her husband had been found in a prison in Myanmar and was being brought back. Hafeza began to imagine going back to her old life again, after 21 months of struggling alone.

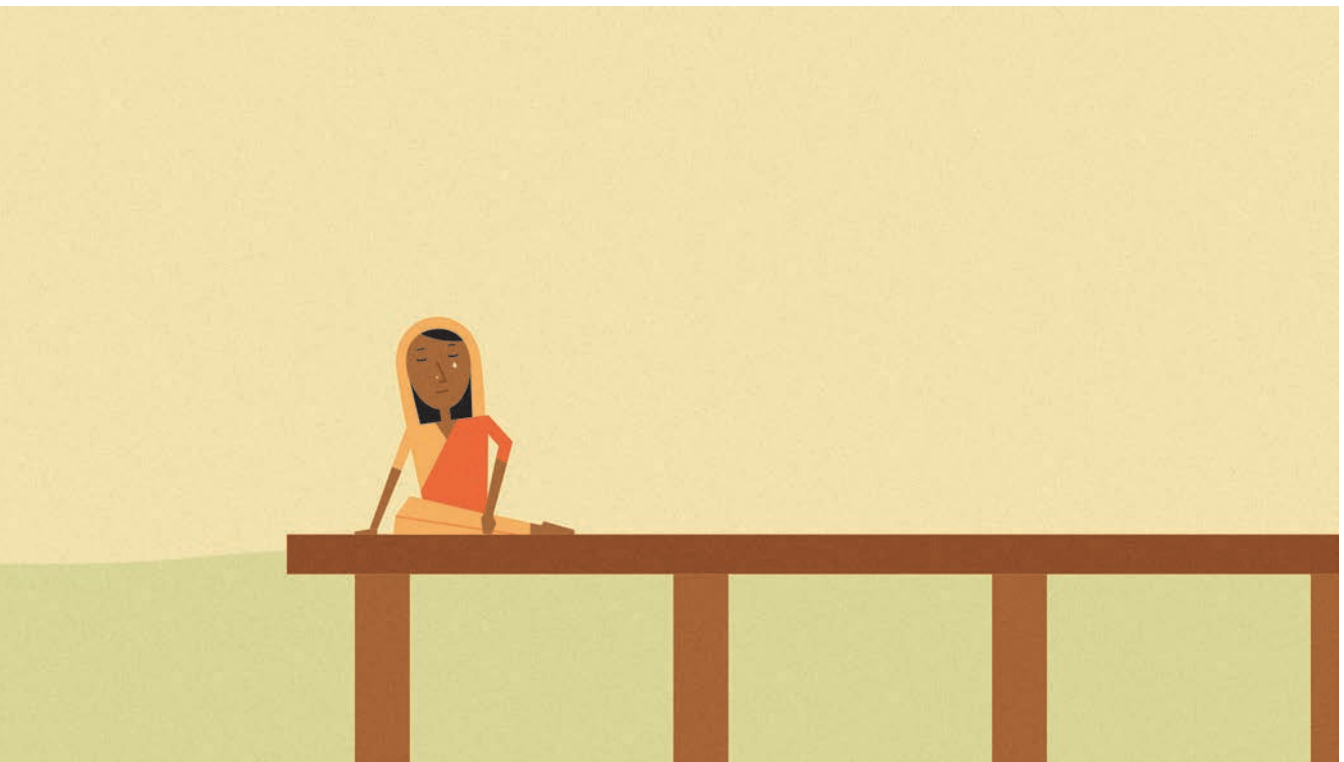
As the boat reached the jetty, Hafeza stood with countless other hopeful women, scouring the faces of the worn-out, weather-beaten men who had been rescued from Myanmar. One by one, the men were reunited with wives and joyous children, excited to have their fathers back. Then there was just the sound of the waves breaking on the shore. The boat empty and desolate, witness to the tragedy unfolding in Hafeza's heart.

Two years ago, Hafeza was leading the life she had hoped for. Her husband was doing well in his work and they had three beautiful children. He had just become a Garden Manager in a local betel leaf garden belonging to an influential man in Hariakhali village in the Sabrang Union of Teknaf Upazilla. This meant more money and

also more influence in the area. For her family, it meant they could eat meat and eggs, and have milk every day. Hafeza herself was thinking of buying some new sarees, for when she would visit important people in the village, and of course a new goat, and perhaps even a new cow for the small farm in her yard.

Then one morning, her husband had come running back from work in a state of distress. The embankment wall that kept the ocean at bay from their homes and fields had broken and water was flooding in. Soon after, her husband was out of a job. Days of struggle set in, and they had had to sell most of their cattle to survive.

Saline water regularly flooded the village and swathes of land were lost. Crops could no longer be grown, and people living along the shoreline lost their homes and belongings to the waves and tides. The rains made it worse. During the monsoon, it rained all day, every day, increasing the waterlogging in the area. Everyone lost their jobs, and people became desperate. Visitors came from the capital, sometimes foreigners, claiming to be helping, and saying it was something called 'climate change' that was



responsible. Hafeza did not believe them. It was God's wrath for the easy lives they had led before.

When her husband heard of the boat that would take men to Malaysia to find work, it was hard to hold him back. She had heard of men risking their lives, being lost at sea or getting arrested in Myanmar. But her husband pointed out that men had made it to Malaysia, and their families were doing well now. Hafeza eventually agreed, purely out of desperation.

When he left with 20 other men, she had wondered when she would see him again. The children kept asking where their father was, and she always had no answer for them. The burden of looking after three children while doing two jobs a day was taking its toll on her mental and physical health. Hafeza worked as a house-help in the one of the richer homes in the morning, and as a labourer in a betel leaf garden, belonging to the local *sardar*, in the afternoon. Her three-year-old child, Hamim, was with her all day, while the other two children stayed at home, with little food, and only occasionally venturing to school when a neighbour could take them.

For some time there was no news of from the men. None had contacted home. There were no reports of storms during the voyage, or of a boat sinking or being captured by Myanmar coastguards. They had simply vanished. Day after day Hafeza sought news from wherever she could. She kept in close touch with the other women whose husbands, sons, or brothers had been on that boat, and every time, she was met with the same blank looks. Hafeza was becoming desperate. She was struggling to feed her children, and they had already become malnourished, while Hafeza herself was suffering from various complaints, and had no means to get to a doctor. So when the Imam of the local mosque announced from the mosque loudspeaker that 15 men had been rescued from prisons in Myanmar, Hafeza felt life springing back.

Hafeza stared at the empty boat bobbing on the waves. What had been a symbol of her hopes and prayers, was now one of despair and loss, and somehow, that loss was now more absolute.

The price to pay

Name: Shahanara Begum
Village: Katmarchar
Union: North Bedkashi

Upazilla: Koyra
District: Khulna

A loud clap of thunder jolted Shahanara Begum and brought her back to reality. Shahanara's dream, as she leant against a palm tree in the *gher* she worked in, had been about her childhood and the lush green meadows she played in with her sister.

"Woman! Do I pay you to sleep?" shouted the *gher* manager. "Get back to work or there'll be no pay for you today!"

The sky had darkened, lit up by bolts of lightning, and the rolls of thunder sounded the start of the monsoon. Shahanara's immediate concern was for her two young boys left at home alone. Murshed, the younger, was six years-old and afraid of thunder. She had to get back home quickly to console him, but also had to earn the little money she received from working in the *gher*. It was the only income source for herself and her two boys living in the small village of Katmarchar in the North Bedkashi Union of Khulna.

Ghers were the only source of decent income for a woman nowadays. Ever since the devastating

cyclone Aila in 2009, Shahanara's life was on a downward spiral. Her husband had worked in the agricultural fields neighbouring their house, and although it was a struggle, their lives had been decent and they the family was together. The cyclone changed everything.

The cyclone struck the village in the daytime. Shahanara had been getting ready to take her husband his lunch in the fields. Although it had been raining for several days, no one could have imagined what was approaching. The violent gusts of winds started, and within an hour the village had been ravaged, with houses, cattle, poultry, and even people said to have been blown away. Huge surges of water swept inland, flooding everything in their wake. Shahanara's neighbour, Nargis, had been washed away as she was fleeing, her husband's grip unable to hold her.

Somehow, Shahanara and her family had been saved, and yet she wondered whether it had been worth surviving. The storm had deposited large amounts of salt on the fields, and the crops stopped growing. No amount of rain would wash



away the salt, and hundreds of people became jobless. They began migrating: some in search of temporary jobs, and others forever. Shahanara and her husband knew that this was the only option, and shortly after had packed his bags and left for the city of Khulna.

Initially Shahanara's husband had worked in a spice-making factory and stayed for a year. During that first year he had been unable to send any money home, and Shahanara had to find work wherever she could. This also meant bringing her youngest son with her when she worked, causing both of them stress.

Shahanara's husband had come back after a year, bringing a small lump sum with him. They managed to get by for a while. There was also some work available, mostly in the rainy season, so her husband could stay in the village and work in the fields, where crops could be grown a little. But in the dry season there was little or no income, hence her husband migrated for six months every year to cities such as Barisal, Khulna and Dhaka for whatever work he could find.

During these six months, Shahanara had to work in strenuous jobs, while looking after her children, and cooking, washing, cleaning, and bringing in water. It was 18 hours of work, non-stop, and every day Shahanara would pray that the next day would bring some sort of hope.

In the *gher*, the thunder continued. Shahanara approached the *gher* manager to ask to leave early.

"You can go," he said with a leer. "But I won't pay you."

"But I've worked seven hours already!" protested Shahanara.

"Doesn't matter woman! You don't work full, you don't get paid. I'm not your husband!"

With a heart torn between motherhood and necessity, Shahanara looked anxiously in the direction of her house. Murshed would be petrified by now. But she had no choice. If she did not work for longer, she would not get paid, and without any pay, they would not be able to eat the next day.

"That," she thought, "is a bigger price to pay right now."

A ray of hope



Name: Shima Rani Biswas
Village: Shinghartali
Union: Munshiganj

Upazilla: Shayamnagar
District: Satkhira

Shima Rani Biswas was two months into her solitary life, feeling that she was doing reasonably well on her own. The floods would be back soon, but this time she thought her family would be adequately prepared. She had a new latrine installed in her front yard where the flood waters could not reach, and she had also arranged for transport for her daughter's school, which her husband could also use for work when he returned.

Shima's mind drifted back to three months before. Her husband had been out of work for almost two months by then because of the floods. The floods had been particularly bad this year. The water had risen fast, to heights that nobody was prepared for, with powerful waves in the waters that had already claimed two lives. Most people in the area had to shut down their businesses. Many had to leave their homes and move to makeshift shelters on higher ground, while communication was close to

impossible. Although Shima and her family were struggling, their house was at a safe height from the water. But her husband's trickling income was not enough to sustain them with food, and their latrine was submerged. This was a serious problem for her and her daughter.

Shima's husband had heard of people migrating to nearby towns in search of work, with the potential for a steady income. He decided to migrate to a town close to Sylhet, where there were carpentry jobs. Although Shima did not want to be left alone to fend for herself and her daughter, she reluctantly agreed, trusting in his decision.

Two months into this upheaval for their family, they were doing well. Her husband had been able to get a reasonably good job as a carpenter, although he was a farmer by profession, and within a month was able to send home a considerable amount of money. Furthermore, as the flood waters subsided for the beginning



of winter, Shima was able to get a job in a nearby farm that grew winter vegetable. The combined incomes lifted them above the rut they were in, and after Shima had paid off loans from her in-laws and neighbours, she had been able to install the new latrine.

Her husband had decided to come home to work as a farmer again until the next flood season. This was good news for Shima and their daughter, as Shima wanted her family to be together no matter what the situation. But then again, one lesson all this had taught her was that sometimes you can find good in some of the most unexpected places, and trying new things or taking calculated risks paid off.

Shima felt that she was a new person because of her experiences. She felt more bold and ready to take risks in order to progress. She had recently started working, which for her, was a big step. She had never worked outside the house before. Her mother had never worked, nor her mother-

in-law. Nobody in her family saw the situation positively, but for Shima it was liberating for her. She felt a new sense of freedom in her life: a freedom to choose who she wanted to be and what she wanted to do. For the first time in her life she felt that she was not bound by restrictions, or the scrutinising eyes of her in-laws. For the first time she felt that her life had a purpose beyond that which was chosen for her.

At first Shima's in-laws strongly opposed the idea, but when they saw how she managed to earn a decent income and take care of her house well – with a little help from her supportive husband, who had spoken with his parents over the phone – they finally agreed to the idea.

With a new day starting, and the comforting rays of sunshine warming the cold November air, Shima felt the satisfaction of knowing good things awaited her and her family: as if the ray of sunshine itself were her ray of hope.

