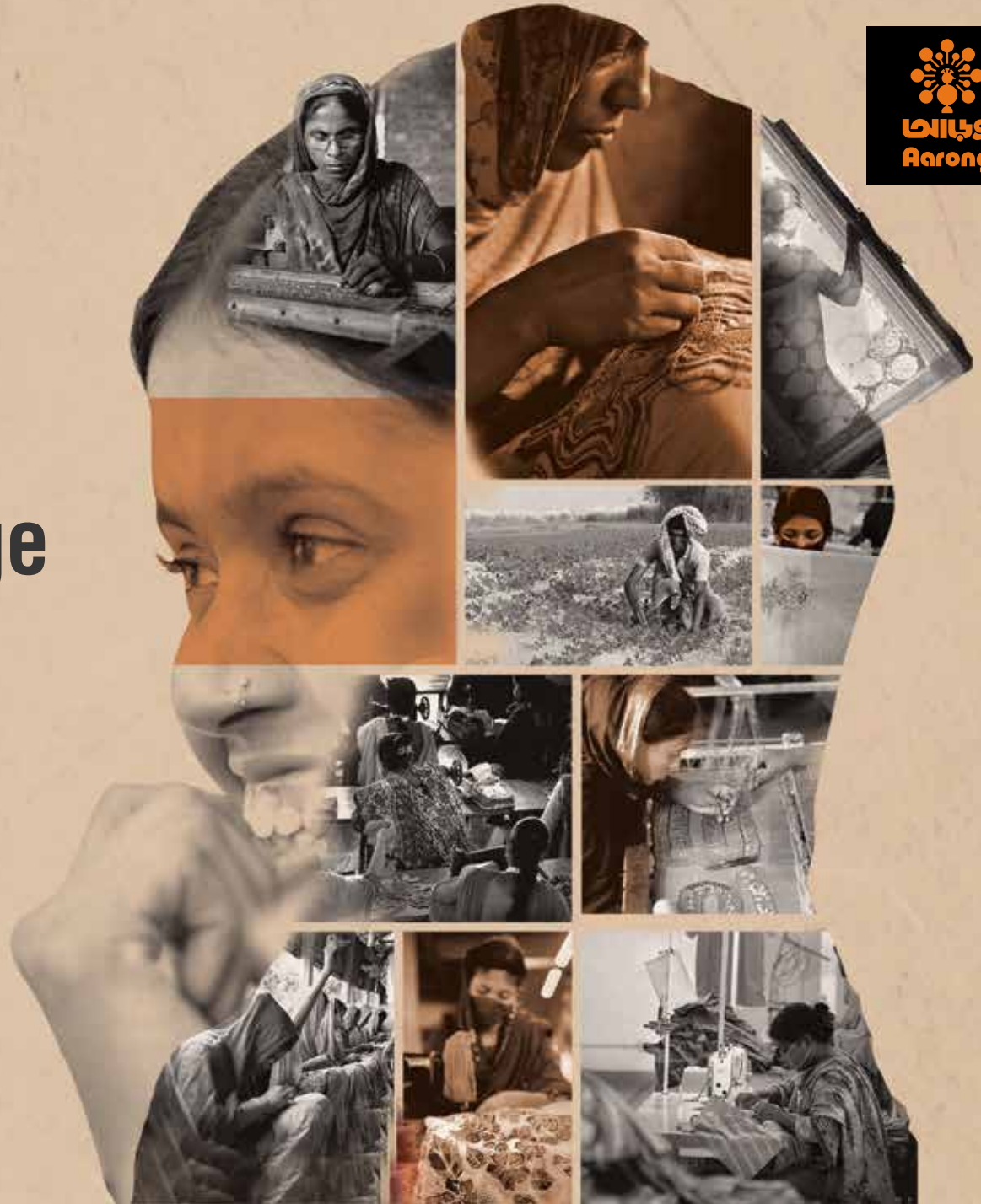




**Building  
Resilience to  
Climate Change  
Through  
Craftsmanship**





Building resilience to climate change  
through craftsmanship

**In 1976, Ayesha Hasan Abed initiated major activities of Aarong by working with women in Manikganj and Jamalpur and experimenting with various crafts that women could produce at home. This and other efforts culminated in the first Aarong shop opening its doors in 1978. Ayesha Hasan Abed passed away in 1981 and in 1982 her family established the Ayesha Abed Foundation (AAF) to commemorate her memory and carry on with the work that she had started.**



By whatever name, Bahar (Ayesha Abed) was the heart and soul of BRAC until her untimely death in 1981. She provided the emotional glue to a fast-changing and fast-growing organisation: listening to and counselling BRAC staff, listening to and advising Abed, negotiating between BRAC staff and Abed. More importantly, perhaps, she provided a moral depth to BRAC's deliberations. Whether we were discussing budgets or plans, Bahar would always remind us of the wider principles to which BRAC was committed. She was our resident philosopher.



**Dr Martha Chen**

Lecturer, Harvard Kennedy School

Emeritus International Coordinator and Senior Advisor

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)

Member, BRAC Global Board





From left to right:  
Ayesha Abed, Tamara Hasan Abed,  
Martha Chen with her daughter Alexis Chen.



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An aerial photograph of a dry, cracked landscape, likely a salt flat or a desert, with various shades of orange and brown. The cracks form a complex, branching pattern across the surface.

### **Story**

Md Abu Bakar Siddique  
Abu Sadat Moniruzzaman Khan

### **Technical Review**

Prof Ainun Nishat  
Dr Saleemul Huq  
Md Shamsuddoha  
Archita Kundu

### **Photo**

Nayemuzzaman Prince

### **Editor**

Dr Md Liakath Ali  
Tanim Ahmed

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# Foreword



This publication is not about proving the obvious point that climate change has a multi-faceted impact on people's lives. It is about sharing the rarely-told stories of rural artisans who have built resilience to the impacts of climate change. It is about their resourcefulness and courage and hope in the face of adversity - the very ethos of BRAC as an organisation. These are stories about Bangladeshis doing the most with whatever they have.

Bangladesh is, of course, one of the most vulnerable countries when it comes to changing climate, and like in any crisis, the marginalised suffer the most. In this case, it's the poorest living in the hard-to-reach coastal belts. Families living in poverty in Bangladesh, who are emerging from ultra-poverty or progressing out of mainstream poverty, are highly vulnerable to a range of shocks due to climate change - shocks that can reverse their social and economic progress.

Adaptive livelihoods, along with access to critical development services, are the cornerstone of sustainable, resilience-building programming. However, in the heart of such programming are the people, who demonstrate incredible resilience and resourcefulness -- which makes them the actors of change themselves. BRAC, with its deep-rooted presence across the country and community-driven approach, builds on what is already there - the ingenuity of people. We provide tools and knowledge and create platforms for people, and the rest is taken care of by them.

We hope that reading these stories urges you to do more to support the fight of so many people around the world who are facing a future that they did not sign up for. This is not just their fight - this is everybody's fight for a greener and a more sustainable future for our next generation.

I sincerely appreciate the hard work that my colleagues of the Climate Change Programme (CCP), Aarong, and Ayesha Abed Foundation (AAF) have put in to publish this book. I hope that these stories inspire, motivate and challenge all of us to come forward and work collectively for our planet, its climate, and for those who are worst affected by its changes.

Asif Saleh  
Executive Director  
BRAC





# Message



The co-existence of Aarong and Ayesha Abed Foundation have resulted in an extensive support network for artisans all over Bangladesh. More than 25,000 artisans are working at its numerous centres, producing various products for Aarong and using their monthly wages to support themselves and their families.

Our artisans are connected to several well-being and empowerment programmes through BRAC including microfinance, education, health, as well as legal support and various types of awareness sessions. Additionally, a health security scheme for artisans and their families financially support artisans for inpatient health expenditures including child birth and surgeries. Annual eye-checkups are performed and glasses are distributed to those in need. Our main production centres have a doctor on site to provide health consultations and mothers have access to day care centres for their toddlers.

Artisans who work for more than five years with the foundation receive retirement benefits.

In addition to regular training, women recruited by the Ayesha Abed Foundation benefit from a living wage and job security. The centres are often right on the doorsteps of the artisans to enable them to work from home while being able to look after their families.

Taking into account the specific needs of its artisans illustrates how Aarong through Ayesha Abed Foundation has always made a conscious effort to address gender issues and women's economic empowerment.

Aarong's strength comes from its teams of skilled artisans. We hold close the same mission that we started out with - to empower and include women from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

I express my gratitude to BRAC Climate Change Programme for taking the initiative to portray the lives of our artisans, while focusing on how Ayesha Abed Foundation plays a crucial role in building resilience of communities in climate vulnerable regions.

Tamara Hasan Abed  
Managing Director  
BRAC Enterprises



# Background

Home to 160 million people, Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to adverse climate change impacts. The geographic and climatic characteristics combined with the marginalisation of large parts of the population make the nation particularly susceptible to climate change fallouts. The poor, who have the least amount of resources and the least capacity to adapt, are the most vulnerable to climate change.

Climate change fallouts in Bangladesh include extreme temperature, erratic rainfall, salinity intrusion, rising sea levels, and stronger floods, flash floods, riverbank erosion, droughts, and cyclones. These extremes affect livelihoods, public health, food security, water availability, and push people below the poverty line, leading to unprecedented human displacement and increased socio-economic insecurity.

The World Bank estimates the number of climate migrants in Bangladesh to exceed 10 million by 2050. Building adaptive capacity and strengthening resilience to climate change through ensuring alternative livelihoods for the vulnerable population and providing livelihood support to climate migrants are essential in reducing vulnerability.

Since its inception in 1982 when it was set up to address education, training and employment for disadvantaged women, The Ayesha Abed Foundation (AAF) has been working on empowering rural artisans to rise above poverty by creating alternative livelihood options.

AAF facilitates gathering and organising both skilled and untrained artisans from village organisations across the country and providing them training and employment. The 15 AAF production centers and their 696 sub-centres that serve as Aarong's production hubs currently engage about 25,000 such artisans, 98% of whom are women.

Ayesha Abed Foundation is not only playing a vital role as a major Aarong supplier but also as a partner working towards BRAC's strategic priority of building climate change resilience through economic development and capacity building, with a specific focus on women's empowerment. With the help of AAF, Aarong organises and trains rural artisans, allowing them access to the market. To ensure a successful and sustainable business relationship and effective supply chain, Aarong supports different stages of the entire supply chain management.

The process follows several steps. It begins with the Aarong design team conceptualising the season's design and finalising detailed costs of the approved samples. Then the merchandising team determines the quantity. This is relayed to the artisans of the foundation for production with the raw materials provided by Aarong as well. Aarong also facilitates distribution of the raw materials and finished goods.

Products are made at the main centres and sub-centres with the foundation's own management, logistic support, administration and field distribution teams making sure that the production is on track. After receiving the finished goods, Aarong conducts quality control on all the items and it is ensured that Aarong has sufficient storing capacity to conserve the quality of all its product lines.





These items pass through quality checks before they are purchased at a fair price to be resold at Aarong's retail outlets.

Ayesha Abed Foundation which began with an ambition to provide extensive support to artisans all over the country has become a reality. The foundation acts as a platform where artisans find employment and access to BRAC's holistic support including, maternal health care, hygiene awareness and subsidized latrines, micro-credit, legal aid and education for their children.

AAF's other welfare services include free skill-building, day care facilities, retirement benefits, free eye checkups and glasses and a health security scheme for artisans and their family members.

Today, more than 25,000 additional artisans are working at AAF centres, producing and selling goods to Aarong to support themselves and their families, resulting in a total of over 175,000 direct and indirect beneficiaries.

Overall, AAF is equipping artisans and producers in climate vulnerable areas with relevant skills, providing access to resources and inputs for increased productivity, ensuring fair prices for producers and suppliers, preserving and distributing goods to large markets and reinvesting surpluses into development programmes of BRAC to enhance climate resilience.

# Aarong & Climate Change Resilience

The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), defines resilience as the capacity of social, economic, and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance, responding or reorganising in ways that maintain their essential function, identity, and structure, while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning, and transformation.

The approach to 'resilience' is dynamic and system-orientated and has been considered as the ability to deal with climatic shocks and stresses which is derived from interlinked absorptive, anticipatory, adaptive capacities and transformation. These four capacities have synergies among themselves, and efforts to build one capacity can often support the building of another. A social system or individual with these capacities is less likely to be undermined by shocks and stresses, so wellbeing can be ensured and human development can continue to progress in locations exposed to climate extremes and disasters. Climate change resilience building process consists four major components: adaptive capacity, anticipatory capacity, absorptive capacity and transformation.

Adaptive capacity is defined as the ability of social systems to adapt to multiple, long-term and future climate change risks, and also to learn and adjust after a disaster. Actions to improve adaptive capacity includes diversifying livelihoods in resource-dependent communities to improve wellbeing whether or not climatic events affect the beneficiaries in the near future. Ayesha Abed Foundation facilitates building assets, increasing income and strengthening livelihoods of

artisans in different climate vulnerable areas to enhance their adaptive capacity.

Anticipatory capacity is the ability of social systems to anticipate and reduce the impact of climate variability and extremes through preparedness and planning. Initiatives of Ayesha Abed Foundation that strengthen anticipatory capacity tend to be hazard-focused and enhance artisans' capacity by raising their awareness to self-coordinate the preparedness and planning processes based on the severity and frequency of climate change induced extreme events.

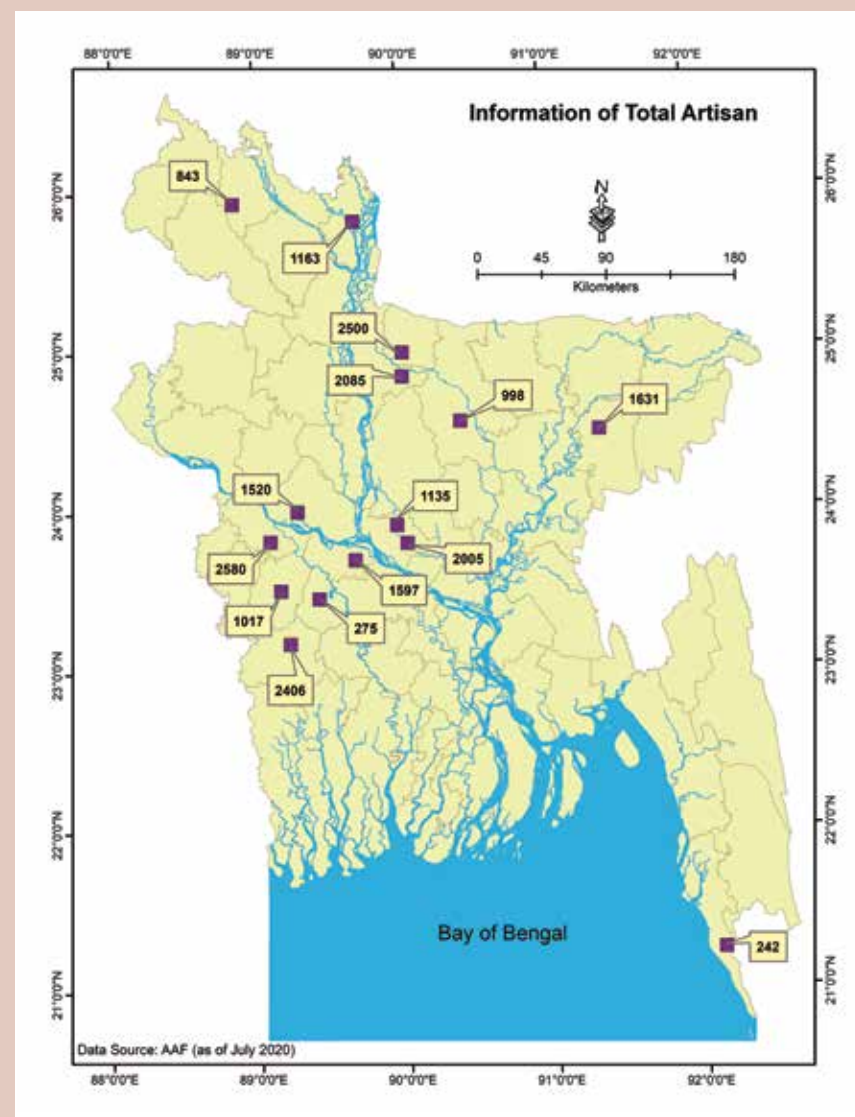
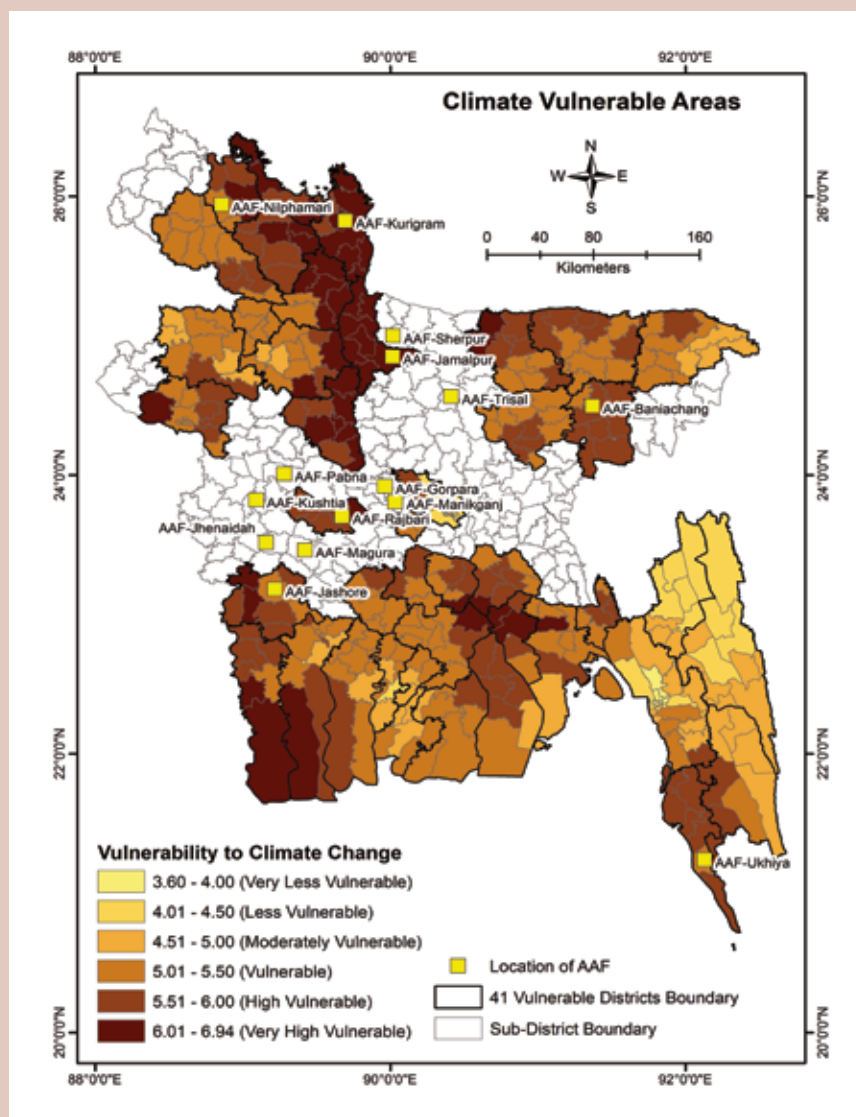
Absorptive capacity is defined as the ability of social systems to absorb and cope with the impacts of climate variability and extremes. Key to communities with a capacity to face and manage adverse conditions is the ability of individuals/households to substitute one critical asset with another. Ayesha Abed Foundation facilitates the enhancement of human capital of its artisans in the form of skills, expertise and knowledge development. Furthermore, the foundation provides access to and helps build tangible assets such as savings and intangible assets like social networks to help its artisans for surviving in extreme events and maintain the same level of wellbeing.





Transformation pertains to the holistic and fundamental ways in which people's capacity to adapt, anticipate and absorb shocks can be built, reshaped and enhanced. Ayesha Abed Foundation has been transforming the lives of rural artisans by empowering them to rise above poverty and climate change vulnerabilities.

# Climate Change Vulnerability and Ayesha Abed Foundation's Working Areas







Stories

# LIGHTS IN THE TUNNEL

Shahanara Begum

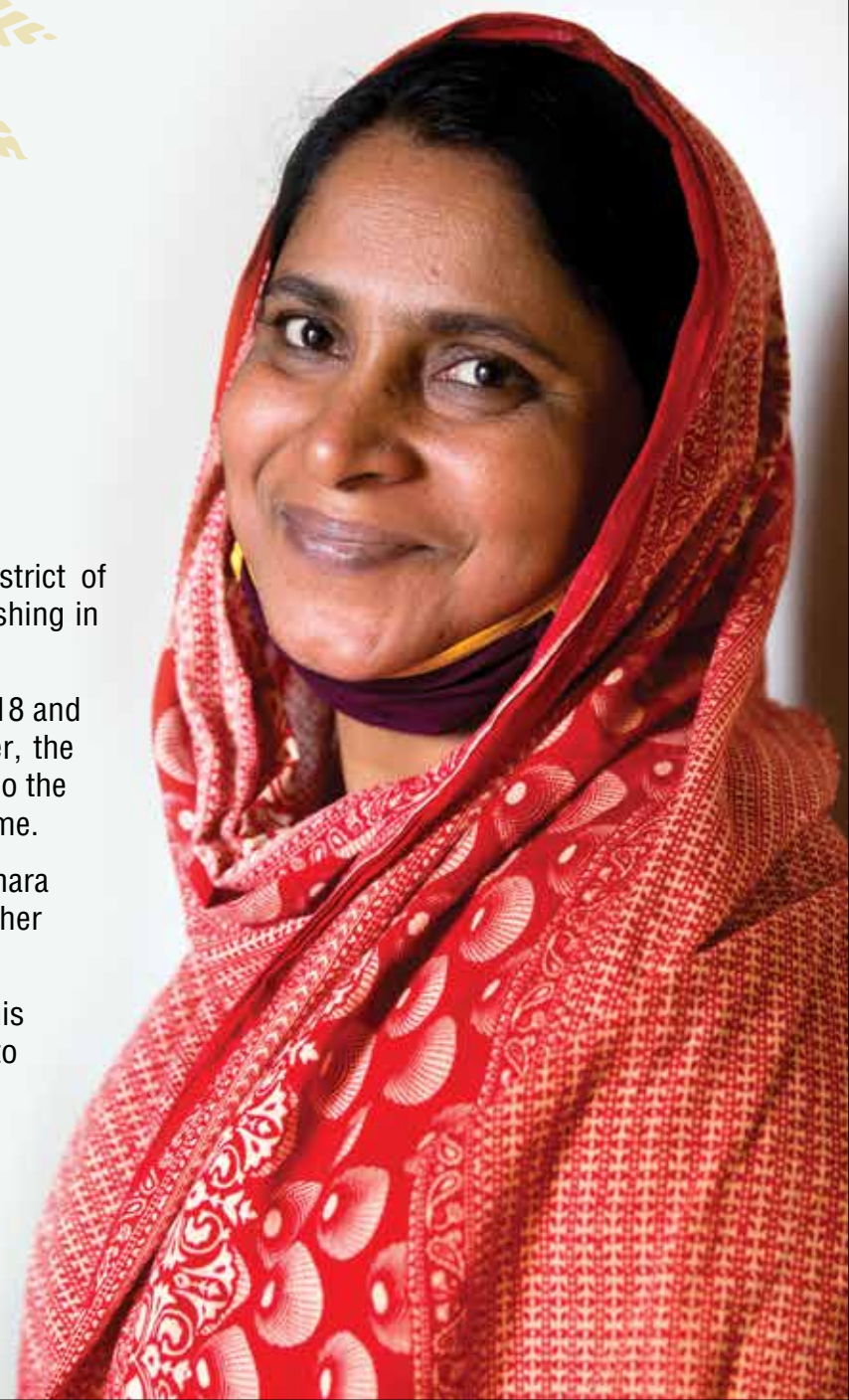
Shahanara Begum grew up in a remote coastal village in the south-western district of Sathkhira. Her husband, Helal Khan, was a farmhand. Sometimes he used to go fishing in the nearby channels close to the mangroves – the sundarbans.

Helal and Shahanara, both of poor families, got married when Shahanara was only 18 and started to live with her in laws like every other girl in the village. Three years later, the family decided to move where Shahanara's parents lived hoping for better work. Also the fish stock was supposedly better there. The couple had already had a son by that time.

The next seven years cruised by as the small family fared reasonably well. Shahanara became a mother for the second time. It was a girl this time and they named her Sumaiya.

Then it started getting increasingly difficult for Helal to fend for himself and his growing family. The rising salinity levels hampered agricultural production leading to unemployment and competition over whatever scarce resources there were.

The situation aggravated in 2009, when cyclone Aila hit Bangladesh, destroying large tracts of crop lands. Huge tidal waves brought saline water into the embankment that worsened the situation much further.







With all the farmland gone, Helal soon lost his job. In the meantime, the government had barred people from entering mangrove forests frequently to protect its resources.

Consequently, the family decided to move to Helal's native Jashore in search of work.

Since then, Helal has been employed as a transport helper earning BDT 200 (USD 2.40) every day. But that is not enough to feed a family of four.

In 2016, Shahanara decided to take matters into her own hands, and joined the Ayesha Abed Foundation.

She had never had any experience in tailoring, but with the foundation's training, she soon became one of the finest dressmakers there.

The same family which couldn't manage three square meals a day, now earns about BDT 15,000 (USD 180.7) a month. What is more, it is now

completely climate resilient working for the foundation.

"I make around BDT 8,000 (USD 96.4) from this work. There are no limits really because it is based on my production," she said.

"With that earning, now we are trying to fulfill some of our small dreams," she added.

"For instance, we could not continue our son's education after his second grade. But now we are spending BDT 2,000 (USD 24.1) per month for our 12-year old daughter Sumaiya's schooling."

Meanwhile, the family spent BDT 10,000 (USD 120.5) for a motor driving license for Helal that will further bolster the family income, they hope, said Shahanara.



# A SOURCE OF SECURITY

Rizia Parvin

In 2010, 26-year-old Miraz Molla drowned in Modhumoti river in Madaripur while taking a bath about 100km away from his family in Rupsha of Khulna district.

Finding no work at the farms around his neighbourhood, farmhand Miraz had gone to Madaripur and started working as a rickshaw puller.

Rising sea levels had led to a gradual increase in salinity in different regions of Khulna, including where Miraz Molla lived. This naturally reduced agricultural production and consequently reduced the demand for farm labourers like Miraz.

Being the only breadwinner, his untimely death meant his 4-member (now 3-member) family was nearly doomed. His wife Rizia Parvin and her two children started to live with Miraz Molla's parents who lived in the same area.

Initially, Rizia tried to farm the 60 decimals of land she had inherited from her father. But that did not work out because of salinity intrusion in the area. The soil simply did not yield any crop.

She had leased out the land for a meagre BDT 4,000 (USD 48.2) per year to a large shrimp farm surrounding Rizia's piece of land. The money was not enough to feed a family.





Meanwhile, she tried other means of livelihood including being a housemaid. But they did not pay enough for even food, let alone other necessities. Then Rizia thought of trying her hand in sewing, which she had learnt as a child, and joined a local tailoring shop where she worked for two years for a monthly salary of about BDT 2,500 (USD 30.1).

She had moved to Jashore in 2015 along with her children with help from a relative who lived there. This relative was aware of Ayesha Abed Foundation and the opportunity it offered.

Considering her situation and expertise, the foundation admitted Rizia as an artisan. And due to her expertise, she gradually did well as her earnings rose to about BDT 8,000 (USD 96.4) per month.

Rizia could now send her children to the local madrassah, which cost BDT 1,000 (USD 12.04) per month.

In addition to her regular and stable earnings, what made Rizia really content was the sense of security it brought. She explains, “For the last two months, my son has had his arm in a sling because he had an accident. He is only 11, and no one is there at home to take care of him.”

“But I do not have to worry, as he can come with me and spend his whole day at the day-care centre, and go home when I finish work. That is such a relief.” She adds that now, she has become more resilient to severe weather because her earnings do not depend on rainfall or temperature at all.

Not a single workplace would give me the facilities I am getting here, she added, visibly grateful for the opportunities Ayesha Abed Foundation gave her.













# WITH AARONG CAME STABILITY

Zaheda Begum

Zaheda Begum has seen first hand how climate change gradually turned her once well-to-do agrarian family into a landless one. The 42-year-old was born and brought up in Sonakandor village of Gajaria sub-district in the coastal district of Bagerhat where her father once grew paddy and vegetables on his 3-acre (300 decimals) plot. But salinity grew, as did Zaheda, through the years, eventually rendering the entire area barren.

The barren cropland was eventually turned into shrimp farms, as Zaheda's father kept selling away pieces of his plot to meet expenses. In the end, all they had left was their 10-decimal homestead.

At 16, Zaheda was married to one Rustam Bepari almost double her age. The 34-year-old husband could only work as a farmhand or rickshaw puller. But he found it difficult to get regular work due to low agricultural activity in the area.

Rustam often travelled to other places looking for work and only returned every few weeks or months. That was how life went on for Zaheda for some time. Meanwhile, the couple had two children. The couple was frustrated with their life, living separately for most of the time.







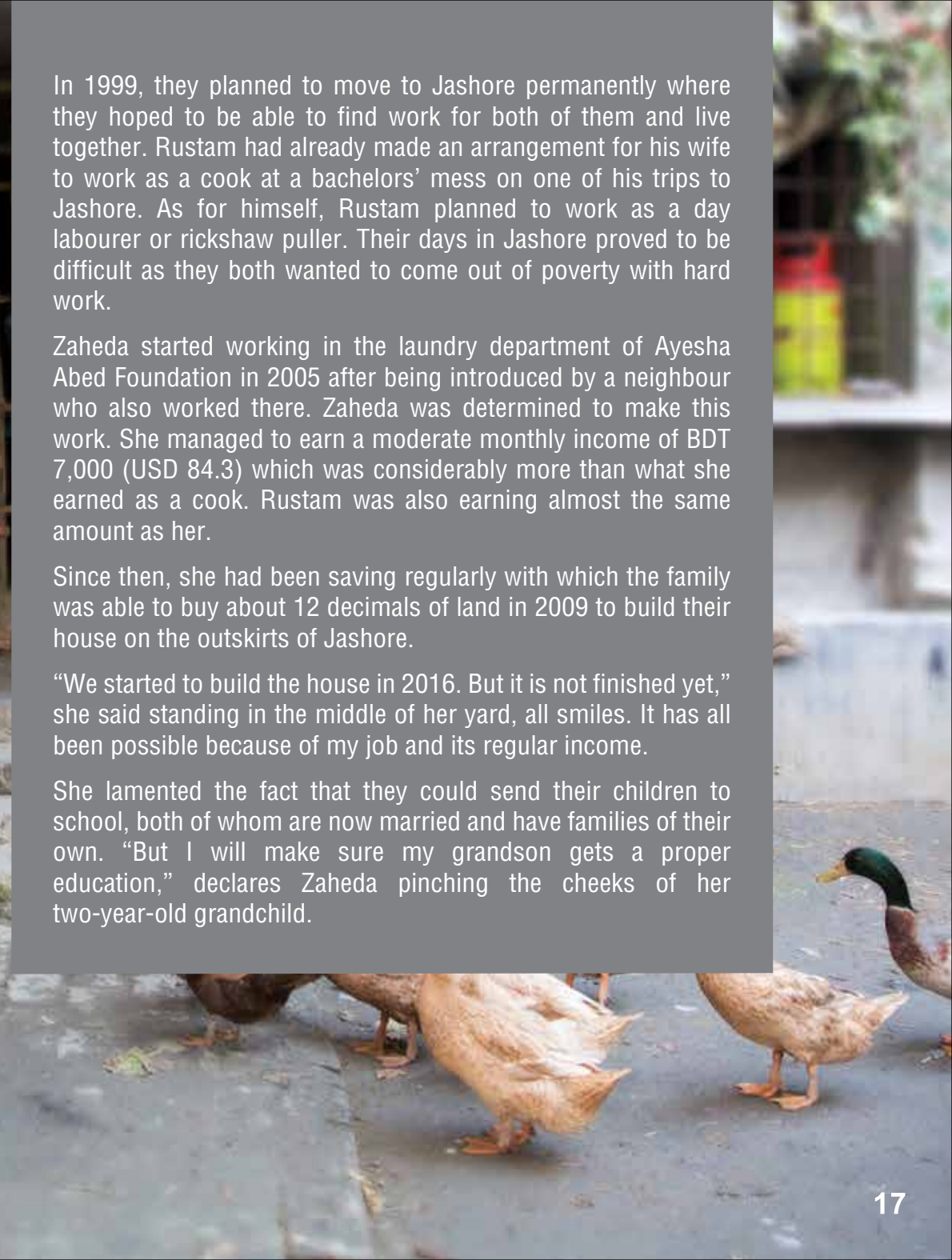
In 1999, they planned to move to Jashore permanently where they hoped to be able to find work for both of them and live together. Rustam had already made an arrangement for his wife to work as a cook at a bachelors' mess on one of his trips to Jashore. As for himself, Rustam planned to work as a day labourer or rickshaw puller. Their days in Jashore proved to be difficult as they both wanted to come out of poverty with hard work.

Zaheda started working in the laundry department of Ayesha Abed Foundation in 2005 after being introduced by a neighbour who also worked there. Zaheda was determined to make this work. She managed to earn a moderate monthly income of BDT 7,000 (USD 84.3) which was considerably more than what she earned as a cook. Rustam was also earning almost the same amount as her.

Since then, she had been saving regularly with which the family was able to buy about 12 decimals of land in 2009 to build their house on the outskirts of Jashore.

"We started to build the house in 2016. But it is not finished yet," she said standing in the middle of her yard, all smiles. It has all been possible because of my job and its regular income.

She lamented the fact that they could send their children to school, both of whom are now married and have families of their own. "But I will make sure my grandson gets a proper education," declares Zaheda pinching the cheeks of her two-year-old grandchild.





# ARTISAN ANWARA AND HER STORY OF HAPPINESS

Anwara Begum

Anwara's family - her parents and a brother - were forced to move from Sharishabari when she was only five. They had lost all their cropland and even the homestead to river erosion.

This was back in the early 1980s. The resulted in the displacement of the family to Kalapur, which was about 10km from Jamapalur town. Anwara's father chose the area as his elder sister lived there too.

Brahmaputra's erosion is nothing new in Bangladesh, but its intensity was quite high at the time. Coupled with heavy monsoon rain flooding the area, the mighty river seemed even hungrier than usual.

The situation has worsened with erratic weather like sudden bursts of rain in monsoon and much less precipitation in winter, both of which affect farming.

A lower-middle income agrarian family with about seven acres of farms turned into a destitute one in the span of a single night.

Anwara spent her childhood at Kalapur amid harsh poverty as her father was forced to work as a poorly paid farmhand.





Anwara was 19 by the time her father passed away and her brother, now her guardian, married her off to to Mohammad Hanif, from a family that had also fallen victim to river erosion.

But the new couple's situation did not change as they still depended on their meagre income of farm labourers, which is not enough for a 4-member family.

In 1989, Ayesha Abed Foundation started working in Jamalpur. Initially they started to bring together artisans, so that they could use their expertise and interest to produce handicrafts.

Initially, she was directed to organise the rural destitute women interested to work on handicrafts. She liked the assignment, which was to find artisans and organise them, and work as their supervisor.

Since then, Anwara has been working as the supervisor of a sub-center. Her income comes from two roles. She earns from her craftwork and receives 4% of the total value of work that the sub-centre produces.

Her life has gotten better every day since then, she says. She also appreciates that her fate does not swing with the changing tides of the rivers or the sway of flood waters anymore.

Her husband now owns a 33-decimal plot (a third of an acre) and they have married off their two children.

Anwara says she feels most content that she was able to send her son to school and raised an educated citizen.

"My only son Swapan has passed his Bachelor's degree from Mymensingh Government College, and now he is working as a government employee in Ansar (a para military force)," said Anwara, beaming with pride.















# AARONG HELPS FAMILY RESUME FARMING

Milon Begum

Victims of river erosion, Muslim Ali and his family had left their home in Madarganj 35 years ago after the mighty Brahmaputra swallowed up their 40 decimals of land.

Brahmaputra's erosion is nothing new in Bangladesh, but its intensity was quite high at that time which only worsened due to the heavy monsoon rain that flooded the area.


The situation is even worse now as erratic weather, like excessive rainfall in monsoon and lower than normal precipitation during the winter, has affected farming.

Their village home and their crop fields are nothing but memories to Muslim and his family.

The helpless Muslim Ali, along with his wife Milon Begum, migrated to the nearby Jamalpur town, and Muslim started working as a rickshaw puller soon after. The couple lived at a makeshift hut in an open place of Ramnagar village. Muslim earned about BDT 100-150 (USD 1.2- USD 1.8) during this time, but things started getting complicated after Milon gave birth to their third child. The couple was in a fix as the limited income was not enough for them and their three children.

In 1996, Ayesha Abed Foundation (AAF) wanted to expand its activities in the area and was looking for some artisans. Milon Begum went there and tried quilting, as a test, to show her ability to work as an artisan.





In the next few days, she submitted her work and got paid BDT 300 (USD 3.61) for it. Since then, Milon has been a part of the foundation and works as an embroidery artisan. She now earns about BDT 4,000 (USD 48.2) every month.


Following her, Milon's only daughter Sharmin, who is 19 now, also joined the foundation about a year ago, further boosting the family earnings.

Additionally, one of Milon's daughters-in-law, Shahana, has also been working as an artisan for six years and contributes to the family.

Consequently, with the additional income, the family was able to save for the future. So much so that the family has resumed its old livelihood - farming - on rented land.

Meanwhile, Muslim Ali has stopped pulling rickshaws and is gradually turning back into the farmer he was.

Milon Begum says of her husband, "Rickshaw pulling was not his profession, but he was compelled to do it because of river erosion. Now, we are trying to go back to our old ways. And it has all been possible with the support of AAF."

A portrait of a woman, Minufa, wearing a white headscarf and a white garment. She has dark hair and a small nose ring. The background is a blurred green.

# MINUFA IS HER FATHER'S STRENGTH

Minufa

Minufa had just finished 8th grade when she started working for Ayesha Abed Foundation in Jamalpur town. The production centre was about five kilometres away from home. The 10km round trip commute was physically draining and financially taxing.

Three years later, in 2010, Minufa fell in love and got married with one of her colleagues at the foundation. The couple had a son, Mahim, in 2012.

The couple were both employees at the foundation and earned around BDT 10,000 (USD 120.5) a month, which is a reasonably good amount of money for a family living in Jamalpur, more for those living in the villages. Minufa's days of happiness were numbered, though.

She soon found out that her husband had become a heavy gambler and was also having an affair. They fell out and eventually got a divorce. That was in 2018. Her job was the only source of strength behind Minufa's decision to part with her husband.





“Coming back to my father’s makes me happy. And supporting my parents at their hour of need makes me feel good about myself,” she said. Since the flood recurs erratically, Minufa and her father are planning to raise their entire plot of land with extra soil on top, so it does not become submerged. “And we will shift to growing vegetables instead of the traditional paddy,” said Mujibur.

The entire project needs quite a bit of money, though, explains Minufa. “But I can still dream of it because of my income from the Ayesha Abed Foundation.”

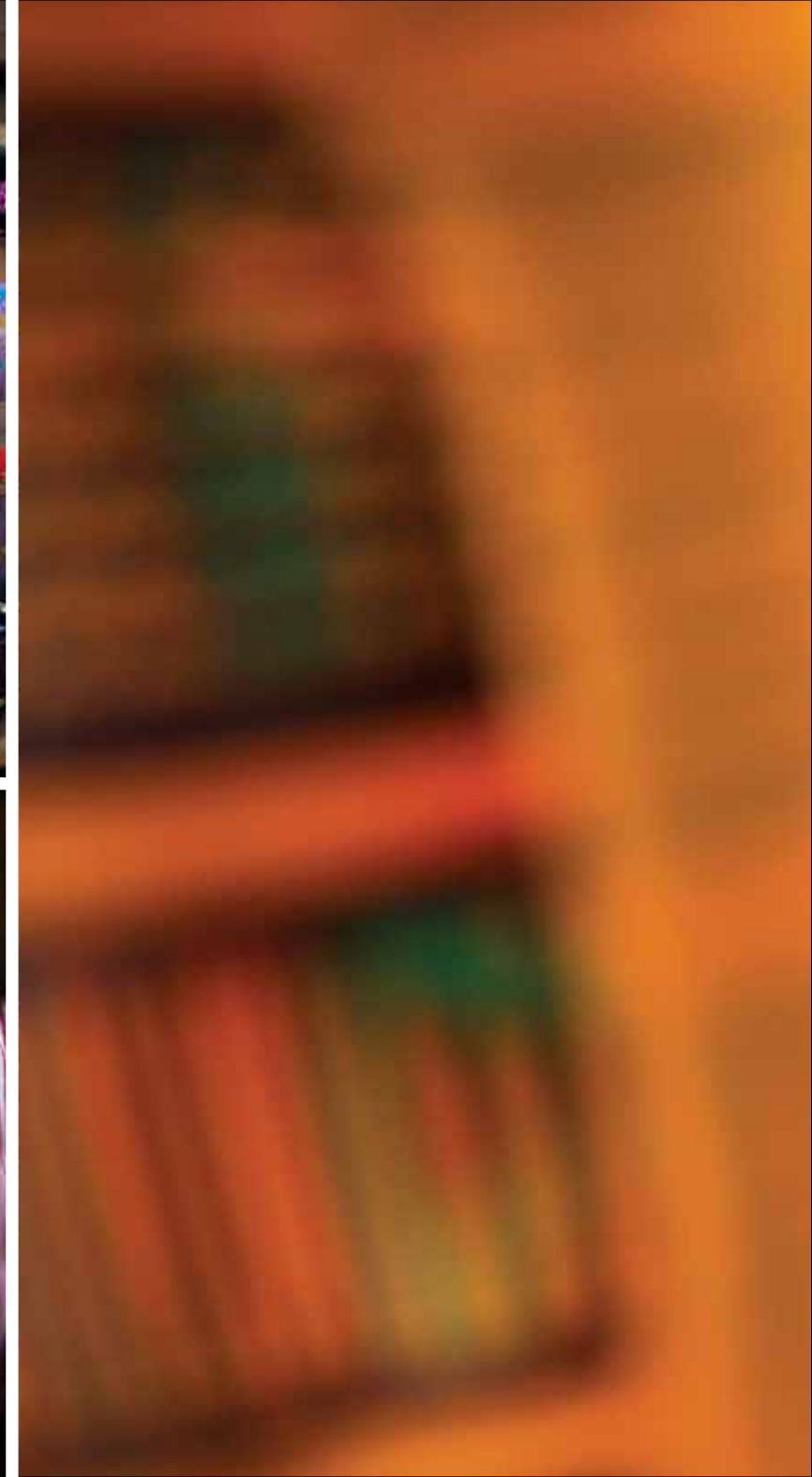
Since then, she has been living with her parents. Although not rich, her father had enough land to get by. But then two bouts of untimely floods along the Brahmaputra basin rocked their fortunes.

Of the two, the first flood came in 2014, literally washing away standing crops on three acres of land. The second flood, which was in 2017, triggered river erosion along the Brahmaputra that took away one acre. This would have been quite devastating for her family as the piece of land was their sole source of income and sustenance. But Minufa’s presence at home changed things. Her father, Mujibur felt stronger now that Minufa was beside him at home. She was able to support the family with her earnings too.

In fact that is what Minufa has been doing since then. This single mother with her income from the Ayesha Abed Foundation has been shouldering part of the family’s burden. With her support, Mujibur earth-filled an acre of low land where he produced vegetables in 2019.













## AYESHA ABED FOUNDATION INSPIRES TO DREAM

Lutfa Akter

Like many others living around the Teesta river in Kurigram, Nazrul Islam, a farmer, has been experiencing the brunt of monsoon floods every year for a long time.

Sometimes the major crop - aman paddy - gets washed away by the flood incurring a serious loss of foodstocks. In such cases, farmers resort to growing vegetables on those lands, awash with the fresh layer of silt, and cover up part of the damages. This practice has been going on for generations.

But the situation has changed recently as floods have become erratic and stopped following any predictable pattern. In 2015, the district was flooded three times in a span of about five months. This naturally meant that the farmers first lost their paddy, then their vegetables and then their winter crops as well.

For Nazrul Islam's family, the eldest daughter Lutfa Akhter's job at Ayesha Abed Foundation has been a saving grace as they were forced to sell off the last acre of land. With no other income, Lutfa has become the mainstay. Further, Nazrul Islam has now developed heart disease and the family has accrued heavy debts. All that is now on Lutfa's shoulders.



She had started working at Ayesha Abed Foundation since she was just 19, fresh out of 12th grade. At the same time, her mother Zarina Begum joined Akij Jute Mills in Lalmonirhat and started earning. Lutfa has to stay away from her family with a relative, however, to remain close to work.

“The money we earn together is what sustains the family,” Lutfa says adding that they have already paid off the loan and her two siblings have resumed school. “And I got admitted to a local college for my bachelors degree.”

She says everything has been made possible for her job. “And the best thing is that I have the opportunity to attend classes and take exams during work hours.” Lutfa says the family has almost recovered from its utter destitution within a short time. “Now my dream is to become the head of a section, which requires a bachelor’s degree,” said Lutfa. She says she’ll keep working towards that dream with support from the Ayesha Abed Foundation.







## SUFIA BECOMES SOLVENT

Sufia

Sufia used to live on the bank of Brahmaputra in a remote northern corner of Kurigram district. Only a fifth of the family's three-acre plot remained. The rest had been gulped down by the river. In 2005, the Brahmaputra turned hungry again and took away the remaining 60 decimals of land.

They went from a solvent family to a completely destitute one within 10 years between 1995 and 2005. Since this land was the sole source of livelihood for the entire family, its gradual loss also meant gradual worsening of the family's finances. Sufia can only reminisce. "Those were the good old days," she says, about the time they had enough to get by.

This loss was so traumatic that Sufia's husband, Chan Mia, gradually lost his mind. The financial crisis turned into a full blown mental crisis for the man. It got so bad that at one point he abandoned his wife and two daughters. They did not have a penny to spend and did not know what to do.

So Sufia and her two daughters went to Sufia's parents'. But they were too poor to feed three more people. That is when her struggle started. Sufia remembers, "There was a time when I could not even buy a kilo of rice." But it has changed since then for Sufia. "I have built my own house on the land I inherited from my father."





That became possible when in 2006, the Ayesha Abed Foundation launched a production center in Kurigram to use the craftsmanship and expertise of rural women in the flood and river erosion prone district. Sufia seized the opportunity and went on to become one of the highest paid artisans at the centre.

Her sole aim was to earn as much as possible so that she could survive with her daughters and live a better life, she said. Sufia worked very hard at her new job as the artisans' income is based on their production. And Sufia's handiwork ranged from hand embroidery to the most coveted traditional nakshi kantha. "All I could think of was to make enough money for the three of us."

Sufia's two daughters - Champa and Surma - have both completed their secondary education graduating out of the 12th grade. Sufia just married off the younger daughter in 2019. "Can you believe it? I spent more than Tk 1 lakh. I had earned all of it."

She expresses her gratitude to Ayesha Abed Foundation for all this. "Everything you see in my life is because of the help of the foundation. Without it, I would have been a beggar still."











# RUSAYNA'S DREAM LIVES ON

Rusayna Akhter

Rusayna Akhter always dreamt of becoming a professional at a reputable organisation and provide a better life for her family. But the recurring floods of 2015 destroyed the family's means of income and along with that, her dreams as well.

"We were never rich. But we managed three square meals a day." But the erratic rainfall and untimely floods meant Rusayna's father's livelihood as a farmhand was all but gone. "There were days when we ate just once," she remembers.

During the dry season, her father used to work as a farm labourer. Fishing was their only means of livelihood during the monsoon. Such seasonal livelihood is not uncommon in the undulating flood plains in Bangladesh's north east.

The situation, however, has changed over the last few years due to erratic rainfall and resultant flash floods, triggering a severe loss of livelihoods around the flood plains of Habiganj. Rusayna says she remembers how the sudden rainfall submerged standing crops in her neighbourhood. "My father became very depressed. I decided to step forward and help him."





Fifth of nine siblings, Rusayna was the most responsible one. A few days of frantic search for a job led her to finding out about Ayesha Abed Foundation. "I did not know much about the job. Nor did I have much knowledge about stitching a kurta. However, I managed to get through it with the organisation's support." She joined Ayesha Abed Foundation in 2017 to make kurtas for men. "Initially, I could sew only two kurtas a day. Now, I can make six to seven, without compromising on quality."

Rusayna has become the main earner of the family. She helped her father with the expenses to marry off four of her sisters and pays for the schooling of a younger brother and a sister. She also leased some land and hired farmhands to cultivate it.

"This year's flood came during the planting season. But, I managed to buy enough food for my family," says Rusayna. She does, however, point out that many other families who rely only on agriculture suffered just like they used to. "Many are thinking of giving up farming because of the erratic rainfall and flood."

Rusayna may not have become a professional at a reputed organisation as she dreamed, but she earns for her family, which makes her content. "I am happy to be able to send my younger siblings to school. They all want to stand on their own feet and be something special. Now, my only dream now is to make my siblings' dreams come true."





# SHAMILA DOESN'T FALTER

Shamila Akhter


Shamila Akhter lived in a small dilapidated house with a thatched roof of straw and leaves near the Kaliganga river in Manikganj. Being close to the mighty Padma and several of its tributaries, the area was prone to floods washing away standing crops during the monsoon.

But the risk has increased in the last few years due to the changing pattern of monsoon rains which damage premature crops. “Every year, floodwater would enter the house and damage our food. My children would suffer from diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases.” But it is an expensive proposition to raise the plinth of her house, says Shamila. “So we just lived through it.”

Shamila’s husband used to work as a vegetable vendor. The income was good enough for two people. But when Shamila had her first child, her husband had fallen ill. He could not work the long hours that he used to. Their earnings dwindled. “There were days when we went to bed without food,” said Shamila whose body had broken down especially because she was still breastfeeding.

“I used to feel weak. I became helpless. I did not know what to do. My baby was only four months.” Shamila wondered who would take care of her child if she took up work too.





One day, she came across an old school friend who told her about Ayesha Abed Foundation. Initially, Shamila was hesitant to join, having a four-month old at home. “But then she said they have a daycare centre.”

Although she did not have any experience in embroidery, Shamila learnt it quickly. Almost three decades have gone by since then. Shamila is now a proud owner of 30 decimals of land where she has built a house and grows crops. Shamila has also married off her daughters bearing all the wedding expenses herself.

“My new house is actually at the same location. But I elevated it by 4.5 feet to keep it above the flood waters,” said Shamila. She grows three crops on her land now - paddy, jute and corn. “But the flood damaged my crops this year,” said Shamila without much concern. “I grow these crops mainly to have something growing there. Otherwise people would just start living in the empty plot.”

Shamila says she earns enough by working at Ayesha Abed Foundation anyway. She continues, “Many of my relatives, who rely on agriculture, are having a hard time due to the untimely floods.” Their livestock are dying from diseases. Some have drowned. Raising cattle has become very difficult, she explains. “But none of that affects me anymore. Thanks to my stable job, I have been able to cope with these climate change fallouts,” says Shamila, boldly standing on her land.













# MALIKA REBUILDS HER LIFE

Malika Begum

55-year-old Malika Begum and her husband migrated to Narangayee, Manikganj after their house on a shoal was completely washed away by the flood of 1988.

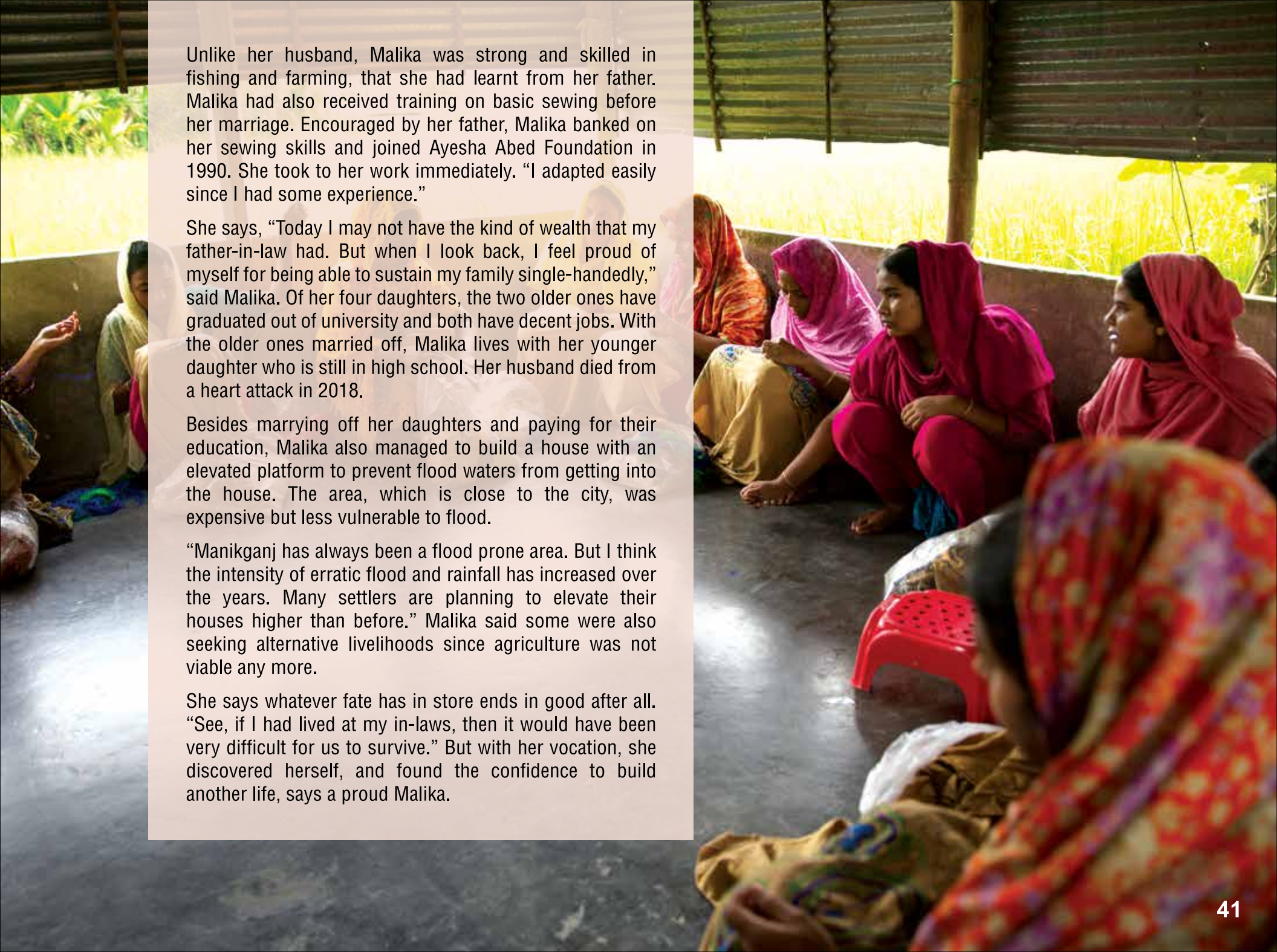
Their large house, built on a shoal, had a backyard full of vegetables and crops. Malika's life was comfortable. Her husband had inherited a lot of land from his rich father. "He was an only child, you see. But all that wealth turned him idle. He became so spoilt that he simply refused to work."

Malika, on the other hand, came from a poor farming family. Her parents had married her off to a wealthy family hoping that she would lead a happy life. But, she never imagined what fate had in store.

Half their land fell to river erosion and there was little that could be tilled for production. "I was young and my husband had no specific skills. So, we came back to my parents'. I had no other options," said Malika.

Malika's husband took to driving a cycle-van to transport food and other items. But he could not continue this vocation for too long due to his failing health.





Unlike her husband, Malika was strong and skilled in fishing and farming, that she had learnt from her father. Malika had also received training on basic sewing before her marriage. Encouraged by her father, Malika banked on her sewing skills and joined Ayesha Abed Foundation in 1990. She took to her work immediately. “I adapted easily since I had some experience.”

She says, “Today I may not have the kind of wealth that my father-in-law had. But when I look back, I feel proud of myself for being able to sustain my family single-handedly,” said Malika. Of her four daughters, the two older ones have graduated out of university and both have decent jobs. With the older ones married off, Malika lives with her younger daughter who is still in high school. Her husband died from a heart attack in 2018.

Besides marrying off her daughters and paying for their education, Malika also managed to build a house with an elevated platform to prevent flood waters from getting into the house. The area, which is close to the city, was expensive but less vulnerable to flood.

“Manikganj has always been a flood prone area. But I think the intensity of erratic flood and rainfall has increased over the years. Many settlers are planning to elevate their houses higher than before.” Malika said some were also seeking alternative livelihoods since agriculture was not viable any more.

She says whatever fate has in store ends in good after all. “See, if I had lived at my in-laws, then it would have been very difficult for us to survive.” But with her vocation, she discovered herself, and found the confidence to build another life, says a proud Malika.



# REBEKA TAKES THE HELM

Rebeka Sultana

Rebeka Sultana was a mere 9th grader of 14 years when was married off to Shamsur Rahman, a school dropout. It was 1981.

Rebeka started to live at her in-law's at a village in Manikganj Sadar, close to the Kaliganga river. Her husband used to work in his family's farmland. That year, the family lost two acres of land to river erosion brought on by extreme flooding. Livelihood became difficult for the family which relied solely on crops. To make things worse, Rebeka and Shamsur had two daughters - Shamima and Shila - around this time.

Rebeka decided to take matters into her own hands, and joined the Ayesha Abed Foundation as a part-time artisan in the embroidery section. She was a quick learner, and soon became a trainer herself. "I chose to be a part-time timer, because I needed to give enough time for my family," Rebeka says. "But my income as a part-timer was very little. Just about BDT 1000 (USD 12.04)."

Sometime in 2000, another flood devastated the family's farmland. Rebeka came from a family that used to farm as well. She initially thought of shifting back home 15 km away, because the area was not as prone to floods as her in-laws' was. She thought they could continue agriculture by leasing land, but that did not quite work out, as they failed to get any land, and did not have enough money to invest either.







Given the circumstances, Rebeka became a full-time trainer at Ayesha Abed Foundation. Since then, she has been serving the foundation in many capacities - from embroiderer to trainer to sub-centre manager. She soon started earning around BDT 8000-10,000 (USD 96.38 - 120.48) a month. Apart from this, her husband got into different types of small businesses.

Meanwhile, the couple had two more daughters - Ela and Mila.

“Currently, I am working as the sub-centre manager of the foundation in my village,” said Rebeka. Her savings helped them send their daughters to school. Two of the older daughters graduated from the local college and have entered government jobs. The younger two are currently pursuing their studies in Dhaka.

“All this was made possible by the Ayesha Abed Foundation. We would not have survived if it weren’t for this foundation,” Ayesha beams.













## GIVING AYESHA A CHANCE AT LIFE AGAIN

Ayesha Akhter

Ayesha Akhter was left helpless when her husband collapsed and died in a crop field one day. “It was very strenuous for him. Every day, he used to leave home early in the morning and come back in the evening,” said Ayesha. One day, some neighbours carried him home. She thought he had just fainted. “But I saw his face had gone pale and bluish.” Ayesha does not remember what happened after that. It still haunts her. She says they did not have any other source of income.

Now 50, Ayesha Akhter joined Ayesha Abed Foundation soon after that incident, and has been stitching kurtas for the last 18 years. She has a 19-year-old son who aspires to be a farmer just like his father but Ayesha does not want that for her son.

“Working in the field is very strenuous. My husband probably died because of all the stress. Also, erratic rainfall and flash floods have made it quite impossible to sustain it these days. Many farmers are thinking of switching to different vocations,” said Ayesha. The devastating floods of 2017 were a wakeup call for many farmers in Baniachong sub-district of Habiganj. The said acres of paddy fields were completely washed away. “I do not want to see my son in distress. The climate is no longer favourable for agriculture.”





Ayesha managed to buy a Tomtom (battery run tricycle) in 2019, which runs on a daily rent and supplements her income. Ayesha has built a concrete house on an elevated platform so that it does not become submerged during floods. “I am very happy just to be able to have gone through all the troubles,” said Ayesha with a content smile on her face.













## CLIMATE PROOFING WITH AYESHA ABED FOUNDATION

Jahara Akhter

Jahara Akhter thought her future had become uncertain after her father, the only breadwinner of the family, passed away. Jahara's father was a local trader who used to sell food and minor household groceries to barely scrape a living. But now Jahara had to shoulder the responsibility.

"We had no property or land. All my siblings were too young to work. I used to cry every single day, hoping something miraculous would happen. I had nowhere to go," says Jahara, still dreading those days.

Jahara Akhter's mother was a traditional housewife who never stepped out of her small house to earn a living. Hailing from a village of Baniachong sub-district in the conservative Habiganj district, it was not unusual for Jahara's mother to be just a homemaker.

Jahara did not want her mother to work either. "Then who would take care of my siblings? They were too young. Also, I wanted my siblings to study and become independent." Jahara being the eldest of four siblings - two brothers and two sisters - felt obligated to earn a livelihood for the family.





A few days later, one of her neighbours told Jahara about Ayesha Abed Foundation where they had respectable jobs with good pay. Jahara joined immediately without thinking too much since she needed to start earning. She was assigned to the toy section. “I loved it since I always loved to make stuffed toys from a very young age.”

Jahara’s initial nervousness went away in a few days as she made friends at work and found out that some of them were in a similar, or even worse, situation as she. “Now I feel very much part of the family.” Jahara did not stop with just one job. She leased a cow, which produced two calves. Its milk supplemented her income.

In the meantime, Jahara had managed to save some money, some of which she spent to repair her dilapidated house. “My father could not afford to do that with his meagre income and floodwater would come into the house.”

Jahara recalls the flood of 2017. “It was disastrous for the region. Also the rainfall intensity in Baniachong was very erratic.” Since then, she says, it has become rather difficult to predict what will happen. Taking no chances, Jahara spent more from her savings on an elevated cow shed and reinforced the house with raised plinths to protect them from floodwater.

Now a proud breadwinner and an independent person, Jahara is just relieved to have overcome the odds. “I am more confident now and feel blessed to be a part of this foundation.”











**“ Climate change is the existential problem.  
We need to tackle the problems of climate change  
and that will require certain substantial actions,  
including mitigation and adaptation . . . ”**

**Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, KCMG**

















BRAC

BRAC Centre  
75 Mohakhali  
Dhaka 1212  
Bangladesh

T : +88 02 9881265  
F : +88 02 9843614  
E : [info@brac.net](mailto:info@brac.net)  
w : [www.brac.net](http://www.brac.net)