

Adolescents engaged in dried fish processing look for alternative livelihoods



Nasima Akter (14) showcasing her work after receiving handcraft development training from Swopnojal

Nasima Akter is an ambitious, 14-year-old girl of Nazirartek, a suburb of Cox's Bazar Sadar. She is one of the many adolescents to engage in the handcraft development and skills training from Swopnojal, an NGO providing alternative sources of income to those engaged in dried fish processing.

One story among many

Nasima's father is the main provider for the family

but struggles to support the six-member family with his limited income. As a result, Nasima engaged in child labor. Nasima was a sixth-grade student at the school near her community when she had to give up her education and start working in a dried fish processing establishment to earn additional income for her family. Even though she dropped out of school, her mind was always on her classroom, teachers, classmates, and the adorable playground on the school grounds. Often, she would come across classmates when they were returning home after class and miss the days when she too was coming back from school, but she had no alternative.

Nasima did not enjoy the work. The unhealthy environment of the dried fish processing often made her sick due to the exposure of drying agents affecting her breathing. Additionally, she would often develop skin rashes as a result of working under the direct sun throughout the day without any protection. She worried about her long-term health and wellbeing should she continue to work under those conditions, concerned she might develop a serious illness.

Nasima is not alone. There are several girls engaged in the dried fish sector. According to research by the U.S. Department of Labor funded Child Labor Improvements in Bangladesh project (CLIMB), of the 2,876 children working in the dried

fish sector (DFS) in Cox's Bazar, 2,080 girls work in dried fish processing.²

In late 2019, Nasima, along with her father, met Mr. Helal, the Community Counselor at the Information Service Center (ISC) run by Young Power Social Action (YPSA) with support from CLIMB.³ At the ISC, Nasima learned about a one-month skill development course on handcrafts. The free workshop was organized by Swopnojal, a philanthropic organization that advocates for human rights, education for underserved children and prevention of early and forced marriage, domestic violence and child labor. Swopnojal also provides skill development training on handcrafts to disadvantaged women and adolescents to earn an alternative livelihood. The skills development course taught participants how to produce goods to sell at the local tourist markets, where there is demand for baskets and home decor pieces. Nasima instantly expressed her desire to participate in the course to her father, who helped her enroll in the course.

Nasima's determination helped her complete the one-month comprehensive course successfully. She can now confidently make her own unique pieces, evaluate market demand, sell her products in the local market and create a sustainable income. Additionally, Nasima profits from orders by local vendors. The Swopnojal course allowed her to have other opportunities to help her family, moving away from the dangers and risks of working in the dried fish processing establishments. By building her capacity, the training has also given her the confidence to plan for her future. She intends to further her education and skills training by learning sewing and tailoring.

**"I AM VERY HAPPY THAT
I CAN MAKE BEAUTIFUL HANDMADE
PRODUCTS RATHER
THAN PROCESSING FISH UNDER
THE SUN THOROUGHOUT THE DAY,
I AM EARNING AND CAN GO
BACK AGAIN TO SCHOOL"**
- NASIMA



Nasima Akter (14) working on creating unique handmade pieces

CLIMB is working to develop the capacity of local civil society organizations like Swopnojal so that they can continue to support child workers, like Nasima and their family members in gaining access to services and alternative livelihoods while advocating for the reduction of child labor in the hazardous dried fish sector. Nasima is only one of the many girls engaged in child labor in the DFS. From 14 year-olds to 17 year-olds, many other young women that work in the DFS today are looking forward to having an alternative livelihood so that they too can pursue their dreams.