

# Sahena's Story – Case Study 2

“We are not born to suffer, we are born to fight”



Amin – Oxfam

Sahena is 26 years old. Her family moved to the village after their previous house and land were destroyed in the 1988 flood. The village area they live in is 19-years-old and this is the 9<sup>th</sup> time that they have moved *chars* trying to survive the floods. Sahena is married to Kasim and he is 35-years-old. She had her first child at 18. She has 1 daughter, Kajili (7), and a son, Suman (4).

Sahena passed the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and then gave up school. One of her regrets is that she never continued her education. “Right now I’m a volunteer and I can be a volunteer without a formal education. Just imagine what all I could have done if I had an education. I could have had a proper job. This would have been better for me financially and for my family. I would love to go back to school and pick up where I left off. I could go back to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, infact I’d really like that.” Sahena is not happy with the school in her village and wants to send her children to a private school soon.

Sahena and her husband are day labours and tend to their fields to make a living. They are agricultural farmers and make about 50-60 BDT (Bangladesh Taka – less than £0.50) a day for the days they work. They don’t work everyday.

Their village gets flooded every year. Sahena did not know much about how to be prepared for the floods. She often would lose her house, all her belongings, and her livelihood in earlier floods. She only knew how to save some food but that wasn’t enough to get her, and her family, through difficult times.

Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK), an Oxfam partner in Gaibandha, initiated annual training sessions for the community. The training took place three days every month. GUK came to Sahena’s village to look for labour to build a flood shelter. Most of the

women were too shy to come forward and volunteer but Sahena was the first one to enrol herself for the labour and construction work. She was then chosen to receive training from GUK because of her out-spoken and confident personality.

Sahena began attending the training sessions where she learnt how to raise her house, preserve food, and use the radio (provided by GUK) to know about flood warnings. Since then, Sahena regularly attends the training and tells others in her village about what she learns.

Sahena and her community have learnt to raise their houses so that the floodwater doesn't destroy or damage them. The training made Sahena more aware of how to tend to children, the elderly, and animals during a flood and keep them safe. Now whenever there is a flood warning, Sahena first moves children and the elderly away from their houses and takes them to the flood shelter that is a ten-minute walk from her house.

Sahena encouraged 25 women to also participate in the GUK disaster preparedness training and spread their knowledge to the rest of the community.

Because Sahena had participated in the GUK training and was very outspoken about what she had learnt, she was made President of a women's group in her village. The group, made up of 25 women, meets once a week – "I talk to the women about health and hygiene, I encourage them to send their children to school, I guide them on how to cultivate vegetables, and I'm very keen to reach out to women to advise and help them with domestic issues. If a woman is facing physical abuse by her husband, I go and talk to both of them and try to resolve the issue. It has worked out very well many times and the men have stopped beating their wives. Every time this happens, it is a personal victory for me."

Sahena came to know about the floods that hit her village in 2007 through the radio that GUK had provided her. The alert on the radio spoke of flooding in India and forewarned those in Bangladesh to be prepared for the same in a week's time. The warning also mentioned the speed and extent of the floodwater and this gave Sahena a better idea of the severity of the situation.

"As soon as I heard the radio warning, I immediately called for a community meeting and told the people about what I had heard on the radio and advised them to start preparing to face the floods," explains Sahena.

Sahena also focuses on issues other than disaster preparedness in the women's group. She advises women about birth control methods and family planning – "We're from a poor country. We should not have too many children", says Sahena. GUK also provided training to the community on issues related to family and welfare.

Sahena's mother grew up with the floods not knowing about disaster preparedness. The only way they knew how to survive was to climb on top of the roof of their house and wait for the floodwater to subside. They often lost their house and everything they had. "I'm glad I know how to live with the floods now. At least I can save my family, my belongings, and my animals. My children are lucky too, because they have a mother who can teach them to survive a disaster."

Sahena's mother taught her how to make a portable clay stove so that she can take it with her wherever she goes during a flood. The art of making of clay stove is passed down from generation to generation in Sahena's community.

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### Glossary

*Char* – an silt island in a large river. Chars are at high risk of flooding and erosion.