

Weaving Dreams amid Salty Waters

Stories of Coastal Women's Struggles, Courage and Resilience

Unlocking the Transformative Potential of Women on the Southwestern Coast of Bangladesh



Learning Exchange Booklet of PORIBESH Project

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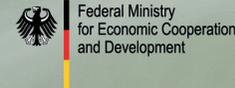
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A Tale of Triumph Against Adversity

In the climate-ravaged village of Kultoli, nestled in Munshiganj Union, Shyamnagar Upazila of Satkhira in Bangladesh's southwestern coastal region, 42-year-old Shankari Rani Mondal's life once seemed destined for hardship. Her days were consumed by household chores and cultivating small amounts of vegetables around her homestead on saline soil, while her husband, Prashanta Mondal (49), toiled as a rickshaw puller. Together, they struggled to provide for their family, marrying off their elder daughter by incurring crippling debts. Financing their younger daughter Sangita's university education in Khulna, however, seemed like an insurmountable challenge.

But Shankari's spirit refused to be broken. Despite relentless financial burdens and the heartbreak of being excluded from local NGO groups due to her inability to repay loan installments, Shankari found hope in 2021 when she joined Dhundol, a grassroots Civil Society Organization (CSO) formed by impoverished women battling climate adversity. Equipped with training, agricultural guidance, and a small productive asset grant, Shankari dared to dream.

With determination shining through every action, Shankari transformed her saline-affected 15-decimal homestead into a haven of life and abundance. Using her grant, she invested in an irrigation pump for BDT 10,000 (€80.64) to draw water from her pond and implemented innovative farming techniques. Vegetables grew in sacks, trellises stretched over her pond, and even rooftops turned green. Today, her once-barren land flourishes with 17 types of fruits, 11 medicinal plants, 15 vegetables, 4 spices, and 3 varieties of taro—a true oasis of fertility and hope.

For two years now, Shankari has not only fed her family but has also shared her bounty with neighbors and relatives. Selling surplus chemical-free, organically produce brings her a daily income of BDT 200–300 (€1.61–2.41) sustaining her family and funding Sangita's education. Beyond her own needs, Shankari envisioned a resilient community. She established a Community Seed Bank of native crops at her home, ensuring seeds are available to her neighbors after natural disasters.

Her freshwater pond, once unremarkable, has been transformed into a fish sanctuary teeming with native species such as climbing fish, barbel fish, catfish, mola carplet fish, snakehead murrel, cotio fish, chang fish, badla fish, swamp barb, Indian carplet fish, salmon, rohu, Indian carp, trout, tilapia, tengra fish, batasio, and shrimp. Shankari's stewardship of biodiversity serves both ecological preservation and economic empowerment, with fish sales bolstering her family's stability.

Shankari's journey has not gone unnoticed. Her environmentally friendly, indigenous knowledge-based farming practices have drawn national attention, with her story inspiring countless others through media coverage. In 2023, her efforts were crowned with the prestigious Joyita Award in the "Economically Successful Women" category, bestowed by the Department of Women's Affairs.

Today, Shankari Rani Mondal shines as a beacon of resilience, proving that grit and grant can overcome even relentless climate adversity.



A Tide of Trust and Love

In the remote village of Vamia, nestled in Burigoalini, Shyamnagar Upazila of Satkhira district, 32-year-old Jamuna Rani has become a pillar of strength and a guiding light for her community. From a young age, Jamuna was deeply touched by the discrimination faced by marginalized women in her village. Their silent struggles etched a profound sense of empathy in her heart, sparking a lifelong dream to stand by those most in need.

Jamuna grew up witnessing the devaluation and neglect of women in society. Her heart ached with the injustice she saw, and though she had the courage to speak out, she lacked the means to bring about change. Yet, she refused to let hopelessness consume her. Instead, she nurtured a quiet determination—to become a self-reliant woman and a voice for the voiceless, standing firmly beside the overlooked and the vulnerable.

Her dream began to take shape in 2021 when she was unanimously elected General Secretary of the newly formed Tia Civil Society Organization (CSO). This organization was established to improve livelihoods and empower climate-vulnerable women in the coastal region. In this role, Jamuna blossomed into a leader. She organized regular meetings, built bridges with other CSOs, and confidently spoke at union and upazila levels, presenting her ideas and advocating for change. As her voice grew stronger, so did her network, expanding from her village to the larger administrative areas.

Jamuna became a fearless advocate for her community. She fights for the rights of the poor and marginalized, often visiting the union council to secure services for them. Her courage shone brightly when she intervened in cases of gender-based violence and child marriage. To date, she has successfully stopped three child marriages, earning immense respect and gratitude from her neighbors.

Beyond her activism, Jamuna took a practical approach to building resilience in her community. She established a seed bank of native crops at her home, ensuring that families have access to seeds after natural disasters. She also encouraged local women to grow salt-tolerant vegetables in their homesteads, empowering them to reclaim their livelihoods in the face of adversity.

During natural disasters and tidal surges, Jamuna's compassion knows no bounds. She tirelessly works alongside disaster volunteers to provide support and comfort to pregnant women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities in disaster shelter centers. Her unwavering commitment to standing by the neglected and helpless has earned her the love and trust of her community.

Jamuna Rani is more than a leader; she is the embodiment of hope, courage, and compassion. To her neighbors, she is not just an advocate but a symbol of resilience and unwavering love—a heart that beats for her people. Her sincerity and selflessness have made her a cherished figure in the coastal region, a beacon of light shining through the darkest storms.

In recognition of her extraordinary contributions to social development, the Department of Women Affairs honored Jamuna Rani with the Joyeeta Award in 2024. Her story is a testament to the transformative power of one woman's determination to uplift her community, proving that even in the harshest conditions, love and resilience can light the way to a brighter future.



A Radiant Dawn

In the remote village of Purbo Jhapa in Padmapukur Union, Shyamnagar, 35-year-old Probhati Rani has emerged as an inspiration of resilience and hope. Her life, once shadowed by adversity and financial despair, now shines as a testament to the indomitable spirit of women who dare to dream and persevere.

Just three years ago, Probhati's days were consumed by laborious tasks—scraping algae from shrimp ponds for a meager daily wage of 170 BDT (€1.37), while caring for her two young children. Her husband, Golok Bihari Mridha, faced similar struggles, battling inconsistent work opportunities as a day laborer. The rise of shrimp farming in fertile fields had drastically reduced employment prospects in their community, leaving the family in a cycle of poverty and uncertainty. Refusing to succumb to hopelessness, Probhati took a bold step toward change. She joined the Golap Civil Society Organization (CSO), a grassroots group of 20 marginalized women striving for a better life. Through this initiative, Probhati received a small grant of 13,500 BDT (€108.87) and turned her tailoring skills into a livelihood. Investing in wholesale fabric from a nearby town, she began selling directly from her home, creating a steady income stream.

But her ambition didn't stop there. Probhati shared her newfound knowledge, training five other women in tailoring through a 90-day program, earning an additional 22,500 BDT (€181) in the process. Simultaneously, she ventured into small-scale livestock farming and learned to cultivate salt-tolerant vegetables on her 10-decimal homestead. Today, her fabric sales and tailoring bring in around 3,000 BDT (€24) monthly, and her assets, including livestock and fabric stock, are valued at over 50,000 BDT (€403).

Probhati's relentless determination has lifted her family out of extreme poverty. Her children now attend school, their future filled with promise. Her financial independence has not only elevated her household but also earned her deep respect and admiration within her community.

Prabhathi Rani's journey is a glowing example of what is possible with courage, resourcefulness, and unwavering grit. From a life of hardship to becoming a symbol of hope, her story proves that even in the face of relentless challenges, resilience can illuminate the path to a brighter tomorrow.



A New Life Through Social Safety Nets or

In the disaster-stricken coastal village of Sora, Gabura Union, Shyamnagar Upazila, Satkhira district, 47-year-old Ayesha Khatun embodies the strength and resilience of a mother fighting against all odds. Living with her three daughters, two sons, and an ailing husband, Ayesha's life is a relentless struggle for survival in a region ravaged by the adverse impacts of climate change.

Her eldest daughter, Moyna, was married off at the tender age of 14. But when Moyna's daughter, Rafiza, was born with a disability, her husband abandoned them. In 2017, Moyna returned to her mother's home with Rafiza, adding to Ayesha's already overwhelming responsibilities. Despite her efforts to remarry Moyna, Rafiza's condition became a barrier. The burden of caring for her granddaughter fell squarely on Ayesha's shoulders, alongside the struggles of providing for her family.

With no arable land of her own, Ayesha relied on a small inherited plot from her ailing husband. Ayesha was forced to find new ways to sustain her family. Her husband's failing health left her as the sole breadwinner, a daunting task for a marginalized woman in such a challenging environment.

Through the grant of PORIBESH project, Ayesha began raising livestock and learning how to cultivate crop amidst soil salinity in her backyard. Her determination bore fruit—she now owns livestock worth 42,000 BDT (€338.70) and grows vegetables to feed her family. But her journey did not stop at survival; she sought ways to secure her granddaughter's future.

Through community group meetings, Ayesha learned about government social safety programs. With unwavering resolve, she traversed the bureaucratic hurdles to apply for a disability allowance for Rafiza. Her efforts paid off when Rafiza received a "Golden Citizen Identity Card" after a rigorous process, enabling her to receive a monthly government allowance of 850 BDT (€6.85).

This allowance, though modest, has transformed Rafiza's life by covering her medical expenses and meeting her basic needs. More importantly, it has ignited hope—a belief that her disability does not define her future. As Ayesha shares with pride and emotion, "This support not only meets Rafiza's needs but inspires her to dream beyond her challenges."

Ayesha Khatun's story reflects a mother's boundless love and determination. Her courage and resilience make her a beacon of hope, proving that love and perseverance can triumph over adversity.



Transforming Lives Through Technology

Beyond the winding Kholpetua River, in the remote island union of Gabura in Satkhira, bordered by the Sundarbans, 22-year-old Zubayer Rahman's life stands as a testament to the power of opportunity and determination. In a small thatched hut in Chakbara village, Zubayer meticulously works on a mobile phone, his tweezers poised with precision, turning adversity into triumph.

An infant at the age of 2 and raised by his widowed aunt, Rashida Begum, Zubayer's childhood was shaped by her unwavering dream of providing him with an education despite their struggles. When recurring cyclones destroyed their home and hope, a six-month mobile servicing training program for climate-vulnerable families opened new possibilities. With focus and determination, Zubayer quickly mastered both hardware and software skills, transforming his future.

Today, Zubayer operates a thriving mobile repair shop from his home, earning 7,000–8,000 BDT (€56-64) monthly—a lifeline for his family. His small home, now known as the "Mobile Service Center," attracts villagers from across the island seeking his expertise. His success highlights the transformative potential of technical skills for marginalized communities in climate-vulnerable coastal areas.

In a region marked by vulnerability, Zubayer's journey is a powerful reminder that resilience, coupled with opportunity, can illuminate even the darkest paths. He now dreams of using his earnings to pursue further studies at a reputable institution in a nearby city, inspiring others with his story of hope and perseverance.



Journey from Poverty to Prosperity

Laili Khatun, 37, from Kapsonda village, Assasuni Upazila, Satkhira district, Bangladesh, embodies the spirit of resilience, strength, and transformation. Three years ago, her family was trapped in the grip of poverty. Their land, only 5 decimals in size, was too saline to grow crops, and with her husband, Khorshed Alam, struggling to find work due to the dominance of shrimp farms in the area, they faced constant food shortages and financial strain.

But Laili's unwavering determination propelled her forward. She became a member of the Kapsonda CSO, a group of 20 women from similarly struggling backgrounds from climate-affected poor families, and received a modest grant of 6,400 BDT (€51.61) for clothing, 6,000 BDT (€48) to buy a goat, and 1,100 BDT (€8.5) to purchase 8 chickens. This small investment has since sparked a remarkable transformation in her life. Today, Laili owns 3 cows, 2 goats, and a thriving poultry flock worth nearly one lakh BDT (€106.45). Last year, she sold livestock worth 50,000 BDT (€403), using the money to support her family and repair their home.

Through her success in livestock farming, Laili has not only achieved financial stability but has also opened new doors of opportunity. Recognizing the lack of veterinary services in her village, she took the initiative to undergo training, connecting with the Assasuni Upazila Livestock Department. Today, she cares for her own livestock and provides veterinary services to neighbors, offering low-cost vaccines to safeguard their animals. In doing so, Laili has brought a vital service to her village, empowering others to care for their animals.

Her efforts extend beyond livestock. Laili has assisted 30-35 families in securing old-age allowances, maternity benefits, disability allowances, agricultural cards, and child allowance, improving their lives in tangible ways.

Laili Khatun's journey is one of transformation against all odds. Her courage, resilience, and tireless work have not only changed her own life but have become an inspiration for women in her community. Laili's story is a powerful reminder that with a little grant and a lot of determination, dreams can become reality, offering inspiration to countless others in Bangladesh's vulnerable coastal regions.



Lovely Khatun's Journey of Empowerment

Lovely Khatun, 36, from Sadar Union, Assasuni Upazila, Satkhira district, and a mother of two sons, once led the quiet, limited life of a rural housewife. Today, she is an inspiration of empowerment and a symbol of transformation in her community. Her journey has not only revolutionized her family life but has also made her a courageous, independent, and admired front-runner in her village.

In the past, Lovely's husband, Anarul Islam, 39, a shopkeeper, struggled to provide for their family of four. With only a small 5-decimal plot of land inherited from his ancestors and no means to make it fertile due to salinity, their prospects seemed bleak. Yet, despite these hardships, Lovely never gave up on her dreams of a better life. Repeated rejections from local development organizations, who deemed her too poor to be included, did not dampen her spirit. In 2021, she joined the Shreekolosh CSO—a grassroots Civil Society Organization (CSO), where she received crucial training and small grants that allowed her to begin raising livestock, practicing tailoring, and cultivating their land. These steps turned her family's fate around, making them self-sufficient and setting an inspiring example for others in similar circumstances.

With newfound skills in livestock rearing, tailoring, and homestead gardening, Lovely transformed their barren land into a thriving source of income. Her family now boasts assets worth approximately 85,000 BDT (€685), and she can proudly send her sons to school—an achievement that once seemed out of reach. Today, Lovely's success is a testament to resilience and determination.

Her economic prosperity and active involvement in the CSO have given her newfound confidence. She has become a vocal advocate for social change, taking the lead in various community activities. She assists her neighbors during natural disasters, raises awareness in disaster shelters, and stands as a beloved and fearless female leader for the women in her village. Her voice is now one of strength and wisdom, inspiring others to take action and believe in their potential.

The transformation in Lovely's life has also reached her household. Three years ago, her husband was hesitant to support her activities outside the home. Now, he not only encourages her participation in community initiatives but proudly supports her endeavors. Local Union Parishad members and the chairman seek her counsel, further fueling her passion for serving her community.

Today, Lovely Khatun is a respected pillar of her family and community. Her intelligence, hard work, and determination have earned her the respect of her husband and children, who now seek her guidance. Lovely's story is an evidence to the extraordinary strength within every woman and how, with the right grant, the most marginalized can rise to become leaders and change-makers.



A Courageous Entrepreneur Defying All Odds

In the southwestern coastal region of Bangladesh, along the Kholpetua River in Doyar Ghat village, Assasuni, Satkhira, lives 60-year-old widow Jharna Rani Biswas. She cares for her two differently-abled sons, Panchoram (36) and Haripad (30), along with Haripad's speech-impaired wife. Together, this small family endures life's challenges with remarkable resilience and determination.

Jharna married Sushil Biswas, a man with physical disabilities, and together they built a life on a tiny three-decimal homestead. Despite their struggles, they were blessed with two sons, Panchoram and Haripad, both born with physical and speech impairments. Their hardships deepened in 2014 when Sushil passed away, leaving Jharna to care for their sons alone. Unable to work, Panchoram and Haripad relied entirely on her. Although Jharna arranged for Haripad to marry a girl with similar impairments, the burden of supporting the family remained solely on her shoulders.

In 2020, tragedy struck when the Amphan cyclone breached the embankment of the Kholpetua River, swallowing their home. Jharna and her sons were forced to seek refuge on the riverbank, surviving on daily labor and the support of neighbors. Despite her tireless efforts, Jharna struggled to secure steady work or meaningful assistance.

However, a turning point came in 2021 when she joined the Paramanikpara CSO, a grassroots Civil Society Organization (CSO), aimed at livelihoods improvement and empowering climate-vulnerable women in coastal areas. Through this initiative, Jharna received a grant of 13,500 BDT (€108) in grocery items to start a small business. With unwavering determination, she set up a modest grocery shop beside her makeshift home on the embankment.

Today, Jharna's shop generates daily sales of 1,000 (€8.06) to 1,500 BDT (€12), providing her with a profit of 200 (€1.61) to 250 BDT (€2.01). Alongside her widow's allowance and her elder son's disability allowance, she has brought a sense of financial stability to her family. With the CSO's support, Jharna is now advocating for disability allowances for her younger son and daughter-in-law.

Jharna Rani Biswas's life is a profound lesson in resilience and hope. Despite overwhelming challenges, she has never given up. Her story is a shining example of the extraordinary strength of a woman who defied all odds to care for her family and build a future, inspiring us all with her unwavering spirit.



A New Home, A New Beginning

Sushila Rani Das, a marginalized woman from Naktara Rishipara village in Sriula Union, Assasuni Upazila, Satkhira district, had never known the solace of a secure home. Her two sons and daughter, though married and raising their own families, were too burdened to support their aging parents. Sushila and her husband, Narendra Das (68), lived in a fragile hut with a thatched roof and mud walls that offered little protection from nature's wrath. Every monsoon night, as the relentless rain battered their shelter, Sushila lay awake, gripped by fear and uncertainty.

Their fragile existence shattered completely on May 27, 2024, when the devastating Cyclone Rimal swept through their village, reducing their home to ruins. Homeless and heartbroken, the elderly couple was left clinging to hope amidst their despair.

In their darkest hour, the members of Sushila's Naktara CSO became her guiding light. They offered her temporary shelter and mobilized support from local leaders, ward councilors, and the union chairman. Their tireless efforts brought a miracle to Sushilara's life—the Upazila administration allocated a home for her under the Sriula Naktara Balur Math shelter project.

Today, Sushila Rani Das lives in a sturdy and secure house, a sanctuary that has brought peace and hope to her life. This new home is more than just a structure; it symbolizes a fresh start, a second chance to live with dignity. With the support of her CSO, Sushila also secured medical treatment for her ailing husband, Narendra, who had been silently battling a chronic illness.

This newfound stability gave Sushila the courage to rebuild her life. She began crafting baskets, trays, mats, and fishing equipment from bamboo and selling them at the local market. Her modest but steady income has not only brought financial independence but also restored her sense of self-worth.

The transformation in Sushila's life has touched the hearts of her Naktara CSO members, leaving them deeply inspired. Witnessing her journey from despair to hope, they have come to understand the boundless power of empathy, unity, and collective action. This experience has strengthened their commitment to supporting others in need, fostering a spirit of cooperation and resilience within their community.

Sushila's story is not just a tale of survival—it is a witness to how compassion and unity can transform lives, turning anguish into hope and a shattered house into a home filled with love and new beginnings.



Turning Salted Soil into a Garden of Nutrition

Lipika Rani Bairagi (28), a marginalized woman from Sadar Union, Assasuni Upazila, Satkhira district, lives with her husband, Anup Bairagi, a day laborer, and their two children near the Kholpetua River. Their modest 6-decimal plot of land is frequently battered by river erosion and coastal cyclones, leaving the soil saline and barren. With no arable land and worsening soil conditions, growing vegetables to meet her family's nutritional needs seemed like an impossible dream.

But Lipika refused to give up. Armed with knowledge from climate-resilient agriculture training, she embraced the challenge with determination. Lipika began cultivating salt-tolerant vegetables such as beets, turnips, cabbage, sweet pumpkin, winter melon, ridge gourd, spinach, cucumber, okra, radish, papaya, Indian spinach and eggplant—all without using agrochemicals.

To combat soil salinity, Lipika embraced natural solutions. She raised livestock and transformed their waste into nutrient-rich manure to restore soil health. By composting chicken manure, creating liquid fertilizers from legumes, and preparing bio-pesticides from medicinal plants, she established a sustainable cycle of organic farming. Through these practices, Lipika rejuvenated her soil, nurtured her crops, and preserved seeds from native vegetable varieties, securing a steady supply for future seasons.

Despite living on a riverbank prone to coastal disasters, Lipika transformed her homestead into a vibrant nutrition garden that thrives year-round. Her efforts have not only ensured her family's food security but also provided a source of income and self-reliance.

Today, Lipika's family owns livestock worth approximately 80,000 BDT (€645), including cows, ducks, chickens, sheep, and goats. These animals contribute to her farm's productivity and economic stability. The vegetables she grows are sold to neighbors and at the local market, earning her enough to buy essential household items like meat, oil, and salt. In a testament to her generosity, Lipika shares her harvest with neighbors living on the embankment, nurturing a spirit of community and resilience.

Lipika's story is one of firm determination and ingenuity. Her transformation of a saline, disaster-prone homestead into a flourishing nutrition garden stands as an inspiration to her community. Her neighbors, inspired by her success, have started cultivating vegetables on their own plots, proving that one woman's resolve can ignite a ripple of hope and change.

