

## Climate-displaced Taspia escapes child marriage: Story of a student girl-child in Chattogram

15-year-old **Taspia Akhter** is a Year 9 student at the local secondary school in Chattogram. She enjoys attending school and aspires to work as a Government official in future.

However, Taspia's journey has been a turbulent one. She was born and brought up in Bhola, an island district in south-central Bangladesh, and is the eldest of four children. Whilst her mother Jahanara looked after Taspia and her siblings at home, her father, Hakim Talukder, worked as a farmer earning a modest income. With this, they could make ends meet and send Taspia to the local school.

However, being at such close proximity to the Bay of Bengal, the district was facing increasing natural hazards. Tidal surges, cyclones and land erosion started occurring with higher intensity as well as frequency and the situation got dire when their small farmland came under threat of destruction, with frequent crop failures as well as intense river erosion. Taspia's school also fell victim to erosion due to severe flooding in the Meghna River. As a result, her father Hakim lost his means of generating income. So, in 2018, he sold some family asset and migrated under distress to the nearby district of Chattogram, seeking shelter with a relative at an urban slum settlement in Bijoy Nagar.

Without any potable skills suitable for life in the urban area, the switch from farm to daily wage labour work involving nominal income generation was challenging. Her mother, too, took up a job as a maid to support the reduced household income and the family now fell under the 'urban poor' category. Unfortunately, despite the provision of free education by the Government, Hakim could no longer provide enough finances for Taspia to attend secondary school to meet the high associated costs, including travel fare to reach the distant school, for purchasing books, stationaries, uniforms etc.

At this point, Hakim decided that marrying off Taspia would be the best solution to ease the family's financial burden, despite being underage. However, Taspia's mother was eager for an alternative and spoke to fellow community members for advice. Upon hearing the situation, they were linked with women leaders of the community development committee of Bijoy Nagar, which was established through the support of the Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities Project.

The committee immediately recognised the situation Taspia and her family faced, and sought to provide support. Morsheda Begum, President of Community Development Committee states; *"We firstly held several discussions about Taspia's marriage plans with her*



parents, and tried to convince Hakim not to give Taspia away as a bride. Initially, he was not convinced as the proposed suitor worked in the garments industry and had stable finances, and was good looking. However, we succeeded in sensitising Hakim on the negative impacts of early marriage as well as the legal restrictions. As a result, we could offer an Education Grant for Taspia through LIUPCP's support, and he was finally convinced not to marry-off Taspia”.



Taspia was registered as a community member and received BDT 9,000 as an education grant from LIUPC Project. She is now studying in Year 9 at Ferozshah City Corporation Girls High School in Chattogram. Although this may not be a large sum of money, it has helped pay for her books, school uniform, and transport costs, thereby reducing financial pressure on her parents.

Taspia states, “*This is my second chance in life, and I am thankful for the community support and getting a chance to continue my education. My father was desperate due to our dire situation, but we were not born to be brides. I want to become a self-reliant woman as a Government official so I can work to promote girls' education and prevent child marriage*”.

Taspia is a hardworking, determined student who faced a lot of struggles after becoming climate-displaced. As this phenomenon increases in Bangladesh, the LIUPCP has been playing a pivotal role in providing holistic support to many such women and girls at the community level, across 19 cities nationwide.

Taspia's parents, Jahanara Begum and Hakim Talukder are grateful for the guidance and support they received and join their daughter in thanking the programme that, “*changed Taspia's life*”.

***The Livelihoods Improvement of Urban Poor Communities (LIUPC) Project*** is a product of an effective partnership between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Bangladesh and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The collaboration is reducing urban poverty, and helping climate-displaced people who continue to be climate-affected in urban slum areas, through the development of social and technical infrastructures to achieve systemic resilience.