

## BUILDING HEALTHY FUTURES FOR BANGLADESH'S CHILD WASTE PICKERS



### Context

The National Institute of Population Research and Training expects the Bangladeshi urban population to reach 89.5 million by 2030, up from 39.5 million in 2005. Many migrants to the cities are climate change refugees who have been affected by natural disasters. Others are from rural areas and have suffered from

the changes in the agricultural economy. In 2009 the Bangladesh government reported that in Dhaka alone, approximately 120,000 people were involved in the recycling trade. In 2014 our own studies revealed that most people working on the city's rubbish dumps were migrants from the rural areas.



## The problem

**Waste-picking** in Bangladesh is the occupation of the poorest of the poor. In the Matuail Dumping Site in Dhaka City there are over 2,000 waste pickers, mainly women and children, picking through the 3,000 metric tons of waste deposited each day. They are exposed to unhygienic conditions, toxic fumes and injury from sharp objects and machinery.

Many of the women are divorced, separated, or the wives of drug addicts or disabled men. Their lack of skills, caste discrimination and dire poverty means waste-picking is their only means of survival. Most of them live in slums, on footpaths, in public spaces such as bus or train stations or abandoned buildings.

The dump's nearest primary school is 4km away and mothers do not want to let their children walk there alone because of the busy roads and the threat of trafficking. Yet they are unable to take them because they have to work. Adolescents are unable to develop vocational skills due to the cost and inaccessibility of training courses.

Although the Bangladesh constitution states that the government has a duty to protect the rights of waste pickers as they do all citizens, the women are unaware of their rights or how to change their situation. For children, rather than receiving protection by those in authority, they have been led into a life of petty theft, sexual exploitation, drug taking and are frequently subject to beatings, arrest and imprisonment by the police.



### Project objectives

Our project at the Matuail Dumping Site is ensuring child, adolescent and women waste pickers have the knowledge, skills, rights awareness and aspirations needed to access life-changing opportunities and improve their health. We are:

- Providing primary education to children.
- Providing vocational training and employment to adolescents and mothers.
- Supporting mothers to improve their health and the health of their children.
- Helping women, adolescents, children and men to be aware of their rights.

### Our local partners

Our lead partner is Grambangla Unnayan Committee which has 25 years' experience working with the poorest communities in Bangladesh and runs a school near the waste site that is easier to reach than the public school. They have been a partner of ChildHope since 2009.

### Our donor

Our main donor for this project is the Big Lottery Fund. They have contributed £474,617 for the current project, which began in 2015 and ends in late 2018. If you are interested in finding out how you can contribute to the ongoing support of this work in Bangladesh, please [get in touch](#).



## Our activities

We are providing primary education at the Grambangla School to child waste pickers. As well as being provided with a chance for 'catch-up education' these students also have a midday meal, improving their nutrition, enabling them to better concentrate on their studies and giving an incentive for attendance. This helps prepare them for integration into mainstream schools.

Women and adolescents are being provided with opportunities to train in skills that will help them find ways to earn a living away from the dump site. As well as providing the skills training, we support the trainees to find a job or to set up their own small business once they have graduated from their course.

We are training mothers to be more aware of safety and hygiene, reproductive health, child health and nutrition. They are also encouraged to join together in group saving schemes so they are able to create welfare funds for times of need and save for their and their children's future.

Finally, we are working to raise the awareness of the needs and rights of waste picking communities. We are ensuring the community itself knows what rights it has and how to access them and we are ensuring the government and authorities understand their duty of care and are pressurised to deliver it.

## In numbers

As of 2019:

- **231** students returned to primary education.
- **30** teenagers completed vocational training.
- **328** children and adolescents received lessons on health and hygiene.
- **68** waste picker women received food assistance under a government social safety scheme.
- **570** birth certificates were issued to children of waste pickers.
- **2,549** waste pickers became aware about various rights and government entitlements through community meetings.
- **109** women joined group savings schemes.
- **43** children and **71** women were vaccinated under the government's immunization programme.
- **26** newspaper articles raised awareness of the situation facing waste pickers.







## In their words

# Mira's story

Mira\* is a graduate from Grambangla School and is studying to become a doctor. Mira has worked hard to continue her education into high school.

"I enjoyed primary school and did well in my classes. My teachers were very happy with me and they always motivated me to continue my studies. Inspired by them, I started dreaming of becoming a doctor and starting preparing for the Primary School Certificate exam.

Last year, my brother-in-law brought proposed marriage. My parents were very happy as they had found a guy for me to marry. When I heard this, it made me feel afraid. At school, I had learnt that getting married at an early age can be harmful for a girl's health. I wanted to live a free life as a child. I was not ready to take responsibility of a family. It made me upset and I started arguing with my parents. At first, my parents tried to convince me it was a good idea by telling me about their financial situation. They kept pressuring me, they worried that in future it would be more difficult to find a suitable match.

Fortunately, as soon as one of the community facilitators of Grambangla heard about the marriage proposal she came to our home to find out what was going on. She tried to make my parents understand the consequences of child marriage.

But my parents refused to listen or understand, they reacted by telling me to stay at home and not attend school.

At school, my teachers and other staff had heard about the incident from the community facilitator. As I was now absent from school every day the headmistress stepped in. She visited our home and spoke with my parents. They talked about the consequence of early marriage, the legal obligations and the importance of the upcoming exams. They assured my parents about all the support the school would offer for continuing in my education. Even though my parents were not fully convinced, they decided to cancel the marriage and agreed to allow me to continue with my studies."

"From my experience of school, there have been teachers around me who have inspired me and believed in my potential. Encouraging me to work hard and follow my dreams."

"Returning to school, I sat my primary school certificate exam achieving GPA grade 3.25 out of 5.00. I'm now in high school because of their support and all I can say is that Grambangla School is like a blessing to me."

**You can read more stories from ChildHope [here](#).**