

Success Story

Asma Begum

Project: WHEEL, Learning Center: Mridul



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Asma Begum, 36 years old is working in Sharat Garment for 11 years. Asma lost her parents when she was 6 months old and lived with her uncle and aunt. Asma, from her childhood was never treated as a family member at her uncle's home rather became a domestic help in their house and never had the privilege of going to school like her cousins. At the age of 17, her uncle and aunt married her off to a day laborer and she started staying in the slums of Dhaka city. *"After a few months of my marriage, I found out that my husband doesn't work. He wanted me to bring money and a cycle as dowry from my aunt. My aunt refused to give any dowry. My husband was not very happy with me";* said Asma. Later Asma started working at her aunt's house as a part-time domestic help for free meals twice a day for herself and her husband. Her hurdles became stronger as she was not able to manage her household expenses.. *"I joined Sharat Garment Factory as a helper with a monthly*

income of BDT 300. I used to work all day though it was tough for me to manage a household with that amount"; said Asma. *"I used to work all day long in the factory with an operator and observed her; how she operated the sewing machine" she added.* After completing her duty she used to visit her aunt's place and clean the dishes, cook for them and returned home having had her dinner there. *"This used to save our cost of meal" Asma mentioned.* But her aunt couldn't continue giving Asma and her husband free meal every day; at one point her aunt stopped giving them meal and Asma had to borrow cooking utensils from her neighbor. At that time her husband remarried leaving 2 children behind

"I always had an eagerness to learn more, to be an operator, to increase my income" said Asma. "I had to increase my salary and I had to survive on my own. I have never seen my parents, didn't understand the love of a mother; whatever I cooked for lunch I used to offer it to my operator so that I could learn from her and become an operator" she continued.

One day while Asma was practicing how to attach collar, she suddenly broke the needle. After the line supervisor found out about the incident, he threw Asma out of her factory without giving her any payment. *"I cried like anything, I begged them on my knees but my supervisor didn't listen to me rather he blamed me and complained to our senior manager" she kept saying.* Finally, she managed to convince her factory's senior manager mentioning that she tried to operate the sewing machine since she was eager to become an operator and earn more to cover her expenses.

A few months later, Asma could finally manage to operate the sewing machines and attach the collars with the help of her operator. With a deep breath, Asma said; *"It took me one whole year to learn to operate the machine and attach the collars accurately". But I am grateful to my operator for extending her support and giving her that space".* Asma continued; *"Then suddenly my operator stopped coming to work and the workload started to increase. During that time, our supervisor asked me to run the machine and show him if I can work in absence of my operator. Finally with the name of Allah I sat at my operator's machine and that day I attached 1,000 collars without taking any break for lunch or wash room; I had to prove myself at any cost" she kept recalling her past! "And finally I did it! My supervisor appreciated my work and recommended to our senior manager to promote me".* After struggling three years, finally Asma became an operator and her salary increased from BDT 300/- to BDT 1,000/- which was still much less than what an operator used to receive eight years back.

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How WHEEL changed Asma's wheel of fortune

After 5 years of continuous work for BDT 1,000/- per month, without any leave, festival bonus or attendance bonus, finally Asma's salary increased to BDT 2,000/-. She was happy with this extra increase when she recalled that her initial income was only BDT 300. As time passed, she met WHEEL project's Peer Facilitator (PF) one day and gradually they became good friends. Right after WHEEL started, our PF encouraged her to join the learning center and Asma didn't waste a single second to accept her offer as she used to curse herself for not being educated. She always wanted to write her name like her other peers, read the newspaper, notice board, signboard even the numbers and calculation because she believed that these were the instruments that could have changed her life and her poverty. *"Initially it was a bit difficult for me to attend the classes. My husband did not allow me at first; he was scared that this course might change me negatively and I may use power over him. My neighbors used to pass bad comments and sometimes they used to influence my husband by saying bad words about me"* said Asma. After joining the learning center, she has learnt to write, read, calculate and even how to keep her house clean, practice hygiene and better food intake. She has also learnt about her right as a worker, her duty towards her factory and even rediscovered her socialization skills. Asma, who could never understand a single letter, can now write everyone's name. Earlier she used to give finger print while taking her salary, now she signs and that amazes her factory peers. Her supervisor appreciates her work now. *"Even 2-3 years back my supervisor used to beat me and shout at me for my mistakes. Since I did not have primary education and I could not read, I used to make mistakes with numbers and codes for which error rate was 9-10 per day. This one year of my education at WHEEL has changed my 8 years of struggle. Now I am no more depended on others"* - says Asma proudly. Ever since she has learnt mathematics and calculation of her salary, she has realized that her salary has increased. Earlier she could not count her total monthly income including overtime, attendance bonus. She accepted any amount her factory paid her. But after she joined the WHEEL leaning center, she started maintaining her own mini-note book where she calculated the salary she was supposed to receive and she found that she is getting more than she got earlier. From the learning center Asma learnt the English names of the tools that she uses regularly at her work, such as, scissors, cutter etc. which previously were difficult for her to remember.

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Asma now receives around BDT 7,000 to 8,000/- per month including overtime and attendance bonus. She no more lives in slums, rather rents a one room dwell; has bought a fan and cookeries so that her daughter and son can bring her friends to their home. She even maintains a book for her monthly grocery where she calculates the price of each item she purchases and how much she should give to the shopkeeper. *"The health and hygiene session taught us how to clean our hands, nails and ourselves during menstruation, the necessity of drinking boiled water and how to clean our house"* mentioned Asma. She now buys separate soaps for shower, hand wash and washing the clothes. Asma mentioned that ever since she has started washing her own and her family's hands regularly with soap, their frequency of diarrhea is less. She has taught her daughter and son to be clean, polite and social. Asma has learnt how to practice hygiene during her menstruation and she also taught her learning to her daughter as well. Although she does not use sanitary napkin for herself, she buys napkins for her daughter so that she can maintain proper personal hygiene.

Today Asma is a senior operator. She not only gets appreciation from her factory management, peers and supervisors but also from her family. The aunt who did not support her during her worst time now comes to her home and praises her. Her husband now compares her with his second wife and asks Asma to teach her better management of household chores and to take better care of children. Asma with her earnings has supported her children's education as well. Her daughter has passed 12th grade and her son is in the 7th.

Value addition through Technical Training

When asked to Asma what benefit was added in her work after receiving technical training at the end of WHEEL project, she said that the first benefit was the reduced body ache because of a changed sitting habit at work as taught at the training. *"The chair which our instructors instructed us to use at our workplace is not available at our factory so I asked my supervisor to change our chairs so that we don't suffer from body ache; my supervisor laughed and asked me from where I have been learning all these and what is the mystery behind my sudden improvement"*- said Asma. It is easy for her to work now and she can attach more collars than her target. This makes her supervisor happy and she does not feel tired like before. This is something she never learnt from factory. Secondly, she learnt how to separate her tools. She keeps aside the tools which are not needed frequently and asks her supervisor if she needs to keep those tools with her not. Earlier she used to throw the things that she felt was not important and when her supervisor searched for those tools she used to get scolded. *"One day I threw some ribbon which was lying beside my machine; I thought that was not important so I threw it. Later when my supervisor asked for those ribbons and found that I threw it, he scolded me badly. Now I ask my supervisor before throwing anything, that's what I learnt from training"* said Asma profoundly. During the training, learners including Asma learnt on 5S (Sort, Systematize, Sweep, Sanitize and Self-discipline) with some practical examples relating with each "S". This has helped Asma to remember her lesson and implement those in her work as well. *"I have even asked my supervisor to transfer me to quality section. I am confident now!"* she added.

Asma feels proud to be part of WHEEL. She has not only learnt to read, write and calculate but has gained confidence as well. Previously she used to work for money but now she works with responsibility towards her factory. She is now capable of increasing workplace safety through safety inspection of machines, reducing injuries, and improving productivity because of this training. In next 5 years, she wants to see herself as a supervisor.

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