



Us in Their Shoes: Changing Livelihoods and Aspirations

Stories from the field

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RCA is a qualitative approach to research which involves members of the research team living in the homes of people and joining their everyday lives for several days and nights. This informal 'hanging out' enables easy and open conversations, first-hand experience and observation of daily life.

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Greeting

Usually, the Reality Check Approach (RCA) team writes up our field experiences in a conventional report format. However, during RCA International Conference the RCA community of practitioners felt that over this last year we had much more to tell about the everyday lives of the families who allowed us to stay with them than these reports could contain.

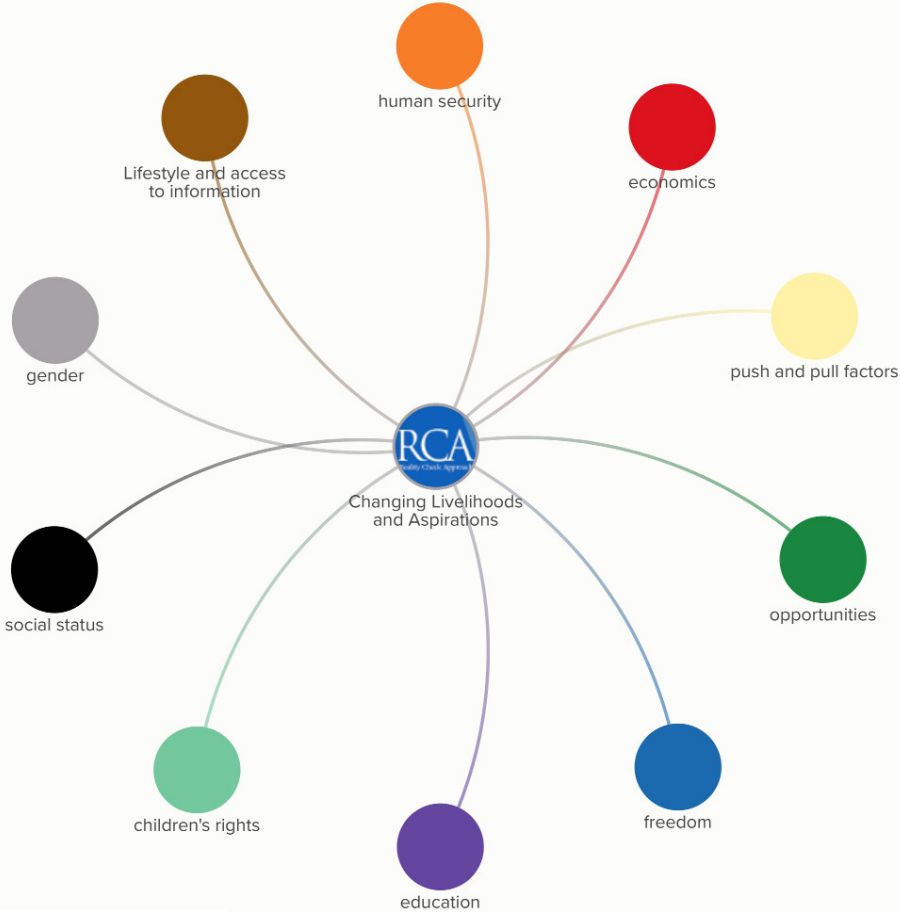
'Us In Their Shoes: Changing Livelihoods and Aspirations' is an anthology of stories from our experiences with just a few of the 'ordinary' families we stayed with in the previous year. The stories are put together from the personal diaries made by RCA team members during different RCA thematic studies in six countries. They reflect the closeness achieved between the families and the researchers and highlight the insights gathered by actively joining in their everyday lives.

Each one of the stories has been written because the author felt moved by their 'family' in some way - their optimism, their wisdom, their humour, their warmth and sometimes their sadness. These are stories of resilience, endurance and aspirations but also of ordinary human shortcomings and foibles. The intention is to share some of the multiple and contemporary perspectives of changing livelihoods and aspirations of people living in poverty.

As always, we say a huge thank you to the families who have opened their homes and hearts and shared their lives with us for a short while. We hope that those who read this anthology will be engaged, provoked and inspired.

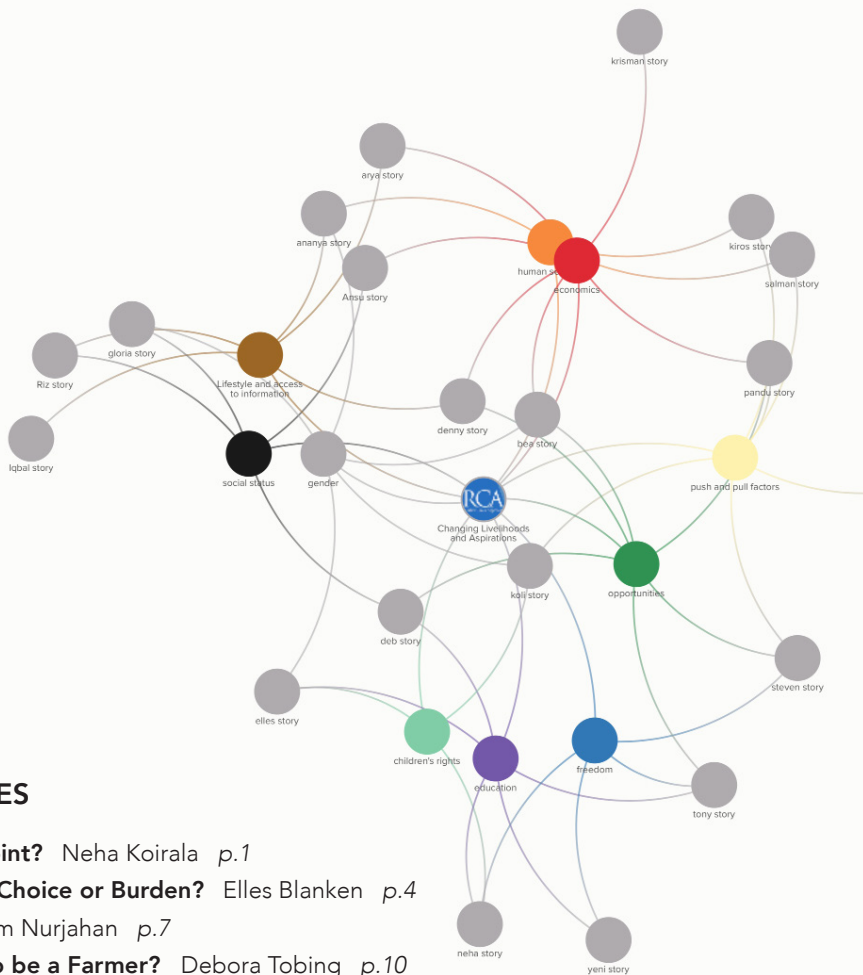
April, 2017

Before the writing process, we jointly discussed some of the different themes, issues and aspects that relate to changing livelihoods and aspirations. These ten aspects appeared after reviewing quotes, stories and conversations that we had during our time with people in these different communities.



We realise that people's stories are not one-dimensional. This complexity diagram helps shows the multi-dimensional nature of the stories as well as how they relate to each other. The color codes on the side of each of the stories will show you this complexity as you read.

Enjoy!



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What's the Point?

Neha Koirala, Nepal

'I am moving to Kathmandu in Mangsir (November/December),' *bhauju* (sister-in-law in Nepali) tells me as we sit drinking a glass of extra sweet coffee in the very hot kitchen. We are talking about the changes that have happened in the village since my last visit there, two years ago. Her planned move is news to me. The last time I had been here, we had talked of how she had been in Kathmandu for one month for an on-the-job training for Auxillary Nurse Midwives (village-level female health worker), which had to be cut short as *dai* (her husband, means brother in Nepali) wanted her home since their daughter, just one year old then, had fallen sick.

I smiled and nodded. *'Kalyan is not doing very well at school in Kathmandu'*, she continues. Kalyan is her 13-year old son who has been in a boarding school in Kathmandu ever since he was nine years old. Last time I had asked, both parents had talked about the government school in the village being unreliable in terms of teacher presence. They had both seemed happy at the time that they had chosen to send their son away to Kathmandu where he would be able to get an English-based boarding school education.

'He's failed in two subjects in grade 6. I want to move there with Bhumika and Sani so I can rent a room and have him live with us. I think it is the boarding school, the teachers do not really pay attention to the children, you know?' she says. And as an afterthought, *'Can you help me look for a job? It does not need to be in a hospital. I just need to be able to support us a little. We are already paying so much for Kalyan's school, and all three of us moving to Kathmandu will be costly. Dai won't be able to pay for the rent, food and all three children's boarding school fees.'*

Though the village is, literally, in the middle of nowhere, cut off from the rest of the country with no vehicular road network and very basic access to public facilities, money has never been a problem for most people this side of Humla (region in far northwestern Nepal). While most families depend on agriculture for subsistence, almost all of them earn a lucrative amount each year from the collection and sale of medicinal herbs. Since I know how much *dai* is making from the *jatamasi* (herb) he sells every year, I don't doubt he would be able to pay for this move.

Then I ask, *'What sort of work are you thinking of?'* *'Oh. Anything. I just want to be able to move around a bit, you know, when the children are at school.'* Before I can say anything further, *dai* comes and asks her to make coffee for three men who have come down from the market with him. *Bhauju* checks to see if the water in the kettle has boiled, asks me to pass three glasses from the shelf and starts putting spoonfuls of pre-mixed coffee and sugar, which she prepared earlier, into the glasses. She explains to me that she usually keeps a glass of this mix ready because *dai* has many people who visit him during the day and it is easier to just pour the mix into glasses and add hot water than to prepare it from scratch every time. *'Dai likes his coffee frothy so it is usually better to mix it beforehand. The longer you keep the mix, the frothier the coffee gets,'* she explains.

As *dai* is a small time political leader of the village, he has many people who come to him for advice or just to talk. *Bhauju* spends most of her time in the kitchen making coffee or preparing food for these visitors and the family. She is constantly on the move; fetching water from the tap that is shared by at least 15 other families, working in the field during planting and harvest time, and washing the whole family's clothes twice a week. She does all this and still manages to give two hours of her time to the local health post where she is employed as the Auxilliary Nurse Midwife. Every time our conversation veers toward her workload, she has told me that her work makes her feel like she is giving something back to her community. In a place like Humla, where most women her age drop out of school and get married at 16, she is one of those few who have gone on to study and work, even after starting a family. And she wants the same for her children. Some of our past conversations have centred around how she wants a better life for them outside the village and her belief that giving them a good education will help them achieve that.

With this outlook she continues to surprise me -an outsider with my head full of assumptions about Humla.

That evening I am talking to *dai* on the terrace. I casually mention to him that the next time I see him might be in Kathmandu. He tells me that *bhauju* is thinking about moving there with the two girls but he does not really see the point. *'Kalyan is failing at school. What is the point of moving to Kathmandu if he does not really want to study. I don't want to spend so much money on his education if he does not study well. If he has to come back to the village and be a farmer then I'd rather bring him back right now than wait for him to acquire city-tastes,'* he explains. What about the girls, I ask. *'Why spend so much money on private school education if all they are going to do is get married at 16,'* he tells me. *'That is what all the girls in the village usually do, and it is still too early to tell if they are school-minded.'* The girls are in grade 1 and kindergarten. As this is a very different perspective from last time, I am surprised.

Then *dai* says, *'The house is going to fall apart if bhauju goes. She used to go for her trainings all the time but it didn't matter then because ama (mother) was alive to look after me. If she goes now, it will be very difficult for me.'*

The day before I am supposed to leave, I am at the tap washing clothes with *bhauju*. I tell her about my conversation with *dai* and she smiles. *'Oh I've been talking about moving to Kathmandu with the girls for a long time now. I am worried that if they stay here, they will become like the rest of us - gaule (villagers). At least if I can take them to Kathmandu, they will be able to experience a different life. They will be able to decide for themselves what they want to do in the future.'* She tells me she understands why *dai* doesn't want her to go. *'It will be difficult for him. He is a man. He needs a woman to look after him. He has so many visitors, if I go, who will make coffee for them?'* she asks. I just keep silent.

Opportunity, Choice or Burden?

Elles Blanken, Cambodia

'My daughter is 18 now. She is in Thailand.' Leakh and I sit next to each other on a bamboo bed in front of her house in a village in rural Cambodia. It is early morning and she has already cleaned the space under the house where the cows stay at night, swept the yard and looked after the chicken. While combing her hair, she tells me about her daughter. *'She had to go to Thailand over six months ago to find work. She works in a factory at night, packaging shrimp for export.'* Leakh ties her hair, looks at mine and gives me her comb. *'She was studying in secondary school. She liked it very much and she was doing so well too. She really wanted to stay and finish school.'* Then she stays silent and looks away.

She doesn't have much time to rest. Her daily supply of *leas*, small fresh water cockles, arrives, and she gets up to start her work. Selling *leas* seven days a week is what she does to earn income for the family. It takes up most of her day: the cockles need to be washed and sorted several times. Then she cooks them and adds salt and spices. By noon they are processed and drying in the sun on the bamboo bed in front of the house. She is the only seller in the village, and many people come to her house to buy some – *leas* are a popular snack in these parts of Cambodia. Just after noon she takes the cockles to her market stall in the center of the village. It is hot and she covers herself with a hat and scarf to protect herself from the sun. Most of the stalls are empty by now, only a few women are selling homemade snacks. *'Rich people can choose to rest in the hottest hours of the day, but people like us*

cannot rest. We have to work', she explains. We sit in the market for hours. 'Sundays are easy', she says, 'because then the garment workers have their day off and they will come and buy in the morning or early afternoon. On other days it is much harder to sell.'

As we sit and wait for customers, a smartly dressed man on a motorcycle passes. The women tell me he is the agent of a microfinance institution, and they start to talk about loans. They say it is not difficult to get a loan, but the rates are high. *'There is only one microfinance institution operating in this village'* they tell me, *'but it would be so much better if there would be more than one because then the rates would go down.'* Later that afternoon Leakh tells me about a loan they took last year. *'We wanted to earn money for the family.'* She explains they wanted to improve the house, and also let their daughter finish school, so she would have more options in life. *'Many people in the village were breeding ducks. It seemed a good way to earn money. We took the loan to buy the ducklings. We had many ducks, but then a disease came and most of them died.'* The investment for the future turned into a burden; the loan plus interest still has to be paid off. Leakh tells me at that point they didn't have much choice. *'My daughter stopped studying'*. Leakh's sister planned to go to Thailand to do factory work. *'My daughter went with her aunt to Thailand. My sister came back to Cambodia after six months, but my daughter still works there. She sends money to help us pay off the loan'*.

By the end of the afternoon, Leakh hasn't sold all the cockles, so she puts the basket on her head and walks through the village, offering her goods. She tells me she may earn up to 4 dollars. On the way home, we pick up a big bag of tin cans. *'I collect these, and keep them in my house. Later, when the buyer comes to the village I will sell them so I can have some extra money'*. As we come home, her 10-year old son has already brought the cows home from the field and her husband has returned home from his work on a construction site. He leaves early in the morning and comes home late. *'But at least I can come home'* he says. *'Last year I worked on a road construction in Phnom Penh, and I had to stay there'*.

My last evening in the village I have dinner with Leakh, her husband and their son, and they show me their photos. The framed and somewhat faded pictures are the only decoration in the house. Some of the pictures show family members that have passed away, but Leakh and her husband

specifically want me to look at the picture of their daughter. They haven't seen her in eight months, since she left for Thailand. They tell me it makes them sad that she had to leave school to find work because she was so keen to finish her studies and have a better future. But the debt is there, large and urgent. After I looked at the picture, Leakh puts it back on the wall. *'Soon I will see her again. She will come home for the Khmer New Year'*.

Chaity

Begum Nurjahan, Bangladesh

The day had a celebration mood. People, including children, woke up early in the morning to celebrate the Bangla New Year. As she promised me the night before, Chaity woke me up when she got up at 4.30 am. After freshening up she cooked rice, leafy vegetables and pulses (legumes) for the family for the whole day. Chaity then cleaned dishes, cleaned the room, collected drinking water from the well, and woke her mother and sister up. Mother recently broke her left hand, which has a bandage and is securely tied around her neck. Chaity helped mother to freshen up and also helped the little sister too. She served rice, vegetables and *daal* for breakfast.

In the afternoon, Chaity went to buy red fabric in the local market for her new dress to celebrate the New Year. In the evening she came to show me the new dress and told me how happy she was to be able to make her favorite dress after so many years. She does not remember when she last bought a dress.

I shared the only bed in the one-room house with Chaity, mother, and the little sister. It was around 10 pm when mother and the sister went to sleep and Chaity started talking with me quietly. Suddenly she realized that after 7 months of near continuous work she had taken a 3-day leave from her job. The joy and happiness of realizing that she did not have to go to office next morning and could sleep in made her emotional and she started to talk about her life.

Chaity said she was 8 years old when her father passed away from a heart attack. The family used to live in a rural house with a piece of cultivable land but they had to sell the land for the father's

treatment. After the father passed away the whole family moved to the city. The area they are living now is an industrial area. There are about 30 families with different professions living in the slum. They share a kitchen, toilet, bathing place and a well. Mother had gotten a job as a house servant.

When Chaity was in the 4th grade, Mother decided to take Chaity out from school to stay at home and take care of her little sister so she could work longer and earn more money. Her brothers also started working in tea shops and construction sites to earn money to help Mother support the 6-member family. The joint earnings were just enough to feed the whole family and pay for house rent and other expenses. Then the brothers got married and started living separately.

When Chaity turned 14, there were only three members left at home. Chaity's brother's didn't make enough money on their own to help Mother and eventually stopped communication. With Mother also often getting sick and the family in debt to their landowner, Chaity did not have a choice but to take more responsibility. Mother wanted Chaity to take over her job as a house servant but Chaity wanted to work at an office.

Chaity said she started to lose sleep and weight thinking about how the family was going to survive. Mother even started chiding Chaity, telling her how useless she is. Chaity said, *'from the stress and tension about money, mother forgot that I was only 14.'* She said Mother was asking everyone to get her a job.

One day, Chaity's brother took her to a privately owned plastic factory to get her a job but she did not meet the required age. She cried, fearing to going back home to face her mother.

After a month though, Chaity managed to join the factory by manipulating her Birth Certificate. Besides all of the regular expenses, including her younger brother's education and Mother's health costs, she also had to think about saving money to repay their debt. She started walking to work, but was often followed home by strangers. Eventually she decided to use the staff bus provided by the factory, which required its own monthly payment.

Chaity told me that she liked to dance when she was a little girl. Now she

hardly has time to listen to music from FM radio though her cell phone. She likes to dress up and put on makeup but there is little time for that as well. She wakes up at 6 am, cooks, does chores, and goes to office at 8 am. After coming back from the office around 8:30 pm she just wants to go to bed. She has been working from 8am to 8pm almost every day for the last two and a half years to support the family and repay their debt. On the weekend she does overtime to earn extra money and the family does not have any savings.

When Chaity started working, she said she had pain and swelling and needed to take un-prescribed painkillers every night otherwise she could not sleep. Luckily she does not need painkillers anymore but thinks that at a certain age she will not be able to work this long. She told me that she's seen other people that eventually have health issues.

The family is happier again though as the debt has now been paid off and relations between all of the family members have improved. Her elder brother has also started to come to visit them again. Chaity said though that the brother is looking for money. When I asked her what will she do if he asks for money, she replied, *'I am not paying him money. He left us when we were in the crisis'*.

Chaity said she wanted to be an officer in a government-owned jute mill nearby where they produce carpet and sack from jute fiber and export it overseas. The mill has many facilities and benefits for employees such as an 8-hour day, pension, annual leave, and bonuses, but Chaity does not meet the education requirements.

Still, it makes Chaity happy when Mother says she feels proud when Chaity goes to work wearing a uniform. Chaity said that in the community she is the only person working in an environment with a uniform and that makes her proud as well. Although she couldn't be an officer, her nightmare has gone. Now Chaity dreams to become a 'supervisor' or 'madam' (manager). She thinks her hard work will be rewarded and that one day she will be promoted.

Who Wants to be a Farmer?

Debora Tobing, Indonesia

I visited this village first in 2014. It's a small village where villagers are working on their own clove and cocoa plantations. Located on the slope of the hill behind a busy developing city, this village is mostly forgotten. While the city is busy building itself up with many modern buildings, the village remains silent. The villagers here go up the hills to visit their cacao or clove plants and can stay there for days at a time. Although the village is lagging behind, all the villagers are warm and friendly. Most of them migrated from other areas yet they are very welcome to newcomers including my host household mother and all her extended family including her own father.

Kakek Mahfud was quite special for me. I loved spending time with him and his family picking cloves, which they harvested and brought down from the hills, or relaxing in his simple living room until midnight. Kakek Mahfud has five children. The first 2 children are daughters and both now have their own families, leaving another 2 sons and 1 unexpected baby daughter. The younger son, Midin, had just finished vocational school and started his career as marketing staff in a local motorbike shop. He gains a very small salary there which even can't fulfil his own needs such as transport costs and his cigarettes. Kakek Mahfud did not object though to the fact that he has to give some money to Midin despite the fact that Midin already has work. *'As long as he works at the office and not just as a farmer like me,'* he said to me. The youngest, Achmad, was still in the last year of high school. At that time, I was helping Kakek Mahfud to pick up cloves while he was

very happily telling me that actually this was the first year he had harvested his own cloves.

He came to this village in 1999. It has a special arrangement for land use. A newcomer can ask an existing landowner to use their land for planting cloves. If the farmer succeeds in harvesting cloves (it usually takes 4-5 years until the 1st harvest) the farmer and the landowner will then split ownership of that land, including any plants and trees. After working as a labourer on someone else's land, Kakek felt he had gained enough knowledge to start his own plantation. He asked the landowner if he could start to cultivate a piece of land to later split when the clove blossomed. It needed a lot of effort, hard work, sweat and tears pouring into this land. He finally owned his own land. Planting cloves is a long term investment. One tree can be harvested until it is 15-30 years old depending on the type of clove tree. At that time I was very happy for him because I was there and harvested the first cloves along with him after years of hard working. I was happy at that time knowing the fact that they would be fine. Kakek Mahfud shake my hand and said *'please wave from your plane when you are crossing the hills when you return to Jakarta, I can see you from my clove plantation'*. I laughed.

This year, I visited them again for the second time. I was quite surprised finding that there were some changes in the family. They're no longer having the clove plantation.

Now Kakek Mahfud is collecting rocks and waiting for the local construction site to come and collect the rock. I was surprised as the last time he owned some land. There was no need for him to collect rocks with the income from his clove harvest. But now he is to collecting rocks for IDR 250,000 for every truck load that he able to collect. It needs 2-3 days to collect 1 truck load of rock.

'What happened?' I asked to the oldest sister. And she started to tell the story about Achmad, her younger brother. *'I even could not look into Achmad's eyes when he came back to our village from the province after being rejected at the final stage. I really felt sorry for him. He has shaved his hair, he looked like a military man in fact. We were all really hoping that he had been accepted,'* she said, explaining that acceptance would have increased the family's social status in the community. *'Achmad must be disappointed. He*

did not smoke or drink and did exercise since he was in junior high school to prepare for the military enrolment.'

Mahfud, the father, explained that, *'I put my land into mortgage for 5 years because I needed IDR 150 million, the bribery money, to enrol my son to become military officer, but he failed. This is his 2nd attempt and he's now reached the maximum age which is 22nd years old.'* He said that the family had also just come back from the provincial town where he tried to get Midin the younger son a job. The hope was that at least he could work in the shopping mall as a supervisor. *'But getting job is harder nowadays. I have no connection or family who can help me,'* Kakek Mahfud shared while staring away over my head.

'Are you considering to continue to manage the clove plantation when the mortgage finishes?' I asked both Midin and Achmad. They laughed along with their dad. *'No need for me to send them all the way from grammar school to high school if I just planned for them to be clove farmers. No education needed to be a farmer. It just needs hard work and willingness but I do not want them to experience what I've had to do,'* Mahfud answered. *'In fact, I will find someone who can change Achmad's age on his school certificates so he can try again next year to enrol to the military. Or maybe you can help me find someone powerful in Jakarta who can help him enrol? I just want them to work at an office or become an officer. Not just a farmer like me,'* he told me, hopeful.

I looked out over the hills where all the clove and the cacao trees were waving at them...

Tragedy

Gloria Adu Ofori, Ghana

During the RCA study about adolescent and reproductive health, I stayed with a community in a town in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana. At one point I had an opportunity to talk with a young woman from my neighbour, Ama. She was 19 years old and had completed Senior High school, awaiting to go to tertiary education the following year. We talked about a lot of things. Although she initially told me she didn't have a boyfriend, later on as we shared more about our lives she opened up and told me, *'yeah I have a boyfriend but he doesn't live in this region. I started dating him after senior high school.'*

While we were talking, another girl came up driving a motor bike and asked Ama whether she had heard about the cause of death for one of their friends who had just passed away. So after stepping aside to discuss this with the girl, Ama came back and told me this heartbreaking story.

It was about one of her friends at the secondary school who, through the influence of peer pressure, got herself into a relationship. Her relationship with this young man went on for some time and eventually became intimate. Along the way, this girl got pregnant and didn't know what to do.

Ama told me that, one day after school had just reopened after a break, this friend came to school to drop off her bags only to leave again. She told a few of her friends (including Ama) that she had left something at home and was going to get it, but most students thought she just hadn't shown up to school. Days passed, however, and she still hadn't returned back to school. Then one afternoon, the headmistress of the school received a call from a hospital in

the district, asking her to come over. She was then asked to identify whether or not she knew a girl they had admitted that morning. The headmistress identified her as being a student at her school -it was Ama's friend. The nurses explained that a young man had brought the girl to the hospital and that she was sick. Since it seemed to be an emergency, they asked the man to pay for the bills so the nurses could immediately attend to the girl. Afterwards, they wanted to talk to the man about her condition but he was nowhere to be found. Fortunately however, she was in her school uniform and that was why the hospital had called her school.

The headmistress called the parents of the girl so they could also come over. On reaching the hospital, the mother confirmed that it was her daughter but unfortunately she had already passed away. The mother cried very bitterly and told the doctors and headmistress that the girl was her only daughter. Looking at the mother's age, there was no way she could give birth again, said Ama. The doctor explained that her daughter was bleeding profusely when she was brought in to the hospital. Further examinations proved that she had committed an abortion with the aid of some local herbs. They suspected that the man who brought her in was her boyfriend and realising the consequences of their actions, he then ran away.

'Hmmm!!! That is why I didn't want to take a boyfriend when I was in secondary school'. I remember this was the statement Ama made after telling me this story. She felt her friend who died was influenced by her peers to have a boyfriend since almost everyone in their school did. She added that for her, particularly in her own community, if your parents have a position in the church (her father is Head Pastor of a church in the community) or if your parents are respected in the community, you wouldn't want to tarnish their status or image by getting pregnant. If you get pregnant, she told me that you have no option other than to abort the pregnancy so as to maintain the status of your family in the community. I asked her about what local herbs are used for abortions. She said there were various types. The first one is a combination of water, sugar and a blue powdered substance which is used in Ghana for laundry (it is called blue); the second could be grinded glass bottles, sugar and Malta Guinness; and the third could be boiled local herbs although she doesn't know the name of the herbs.

Ama then explained that, she was telling me this story because of the

consequences of committing an abortion, as the rate of abortion has increased in their neighbourhood. She further told me that, her friend who was on the motorbike just came to inform her about the death of another friend who had also committed an abortion. Most of their friends were really terrified and grieving, thinking that if such an incident could happen to their friend, then they too could be victims.

From my experiences as a Ghanaian, I often hear stories such as this. But I had never heard it from someone who was very close to the victim. People in my country mostly talk about abortion as being a bad practice and feel very disheartened when people, most especially young girls, die because of it. Most people advise that if you need to have an abortion it is best to seek medical advice and help, but if it continues to be illegal and if girls are afraid of telling their parents it is likely they will continue to attempt abortions using these potentially deadly non-medical local methods.

Bicho-billa

Beatrice Sarpong, Ghana

We went back to visit our family in one of the remote villages in the Northern Region of Ghana after nearly two years of not being in touch. We arrived at the village at dusk, and with the absence of electricity, the community was already surrounded by darkness. Interestingly, when we arrived at our house most of the children in the neighborhood rushed to the house to welcome us. This was very different from the first time we had visited, when none of the children would come to us and if we tried to engage them, they would run away.

That evening, we talked about the changes that had happened in the community since our last visit. This led to us talking about people's aspirations. I was amazed as most of the children aspired to move to the south and work there. Though some of the boys aspired to hold salaried jobs as teachers and police officers, I was a bit surprised as most of the girls wanted to travel to the south to work as *kayeyi* (head porters), maidservants for rich women, and in catering. One girl said, '*I want to go to the south and work for a rich Ashanti woman*'. That night, I pondered over this, wondering what particularly would be motivating these girls' aspirations.

The next morning, I observed some big changes in the behavior and physical appearance of one of my host sisters. Unlike our previous visit, she was now the only one in the family that brushed with toothbrush and toothpaste, bathed in the morning and wore 'fashionable clothes'. She changed her clothes about twice a day and washed the dirty clothes regularly. She had been nicknamed '*bicho-billa*' (meaning polished or city girl) by some of the young girls.

In the afternoon, we were having a conversation on education with our host mother under a straw hut as she sifted maize. She strongly made a point that there is no need to send children to school when there are no teachers to teach. Our mother said, *'If a child decides to stay out of school, you cannot force her to go because the teachers do not even come to school. The school here is only up to primary school and they cannot go any further after that.'* I asked her what the children do when they drop out of school. She said they usually stay home and help with farming or travel to the south to work. She then told me that her daughter Amina (age 12) had just returned from the capital city of Accra after working there for a couple of months.

Later in the day, as I was sitting under the straw hut in front of the house with Amina, I told her that I learned that she just returned from Accra. She smiled broadly and informed me that she would be going back the following week. She explained that she was not interested in farming so after dropping out of school at grade 3, there was nothing she could do in this village. She wanted to travel to the south for work and to raise some money for herself and her family. She believed that once one traveled to the south, one could work and buy the things you wanted. She said that her mother was happy about her plans, and willing to help her travel to the south by saving some money. Her mother sought assistance from a woman from the village who has lived and worked in Accra for several years to take Amina with her to Accra. Apparently, this woman usually comes to the community during the off-farming season and takes some girls with her when returning to the city. This is usually like a competition as most mothers struggle for their daughters to be sent to the city to work. This work reduces the pressure on the limited household resources and also enables the girls to buy items they might need, especially for marriage.

Amina told me that she had to start work next week as a head porter in one of the busiest markets in Accra – Mallata market. The trip there would take a tiring two days. With a smile, she explained that her work carrying goods in the market was actually considered not that difficult. Making around 5 to 10 Ghanaian Cedi (~ 2 USD) daily, she said the challenging part of the work was waking up early in the morning (at 5:00 AM) and the regular insults received from traders when she accidentally bumped their goods or missed the location where she was supposed to send the goods. Nevertheless, she thought it was

'better than doing nothing in the village.' She gave almost all the money she made to the woman she stayed with for safe keeping who would then buy food and other necessities.

Amina seemed happy and proud about the new status that came with her work in the South, especially with the nickname *bicho-billa* as she would smile whenever she was called that. A couple of young girls usually visited our house in the afternoon to chat with Amina about her experiences in the city and she always looked bubbly during these conversations. Unlike my previous visit, this time when I asked Amina if I could take a picture of her she immediately stood up, cleaned up her dress and face with her hands, posed and smiled broadly at the camera – happy now as a *bicho-billa*.

We'll Always be *Kami*

Ansu Tumbahangfe, Nepal

While walking through this small *Dalit* (lower caste) settlement in the *Khotang* district in eastern Nepal, you can't help but notice the padlocked houses. Especially when it seems like every fifth one is locked, in a settlement of approximately 40 houses.

Most people told me that the families here had moved to the bigger towns in the *Terai* (plains region of Nepal) and that they probably wouldn't be coming back. '*Who's going to buy their house?*' joked one of the neighbours while we sipped tea outside his house. Others spoke of 'bad harvests' and 'poor farming' whenever the subject of the empty houses came up. Some even predicted that '*...soon there will be no one left* (in the village).'

People explained that if you had money, then you moved out. In recent years this trend had accelerated and the main reason why people were able to do so was due to the in-flow of cash from remittances. I was told that before, it was only the *Chhetri* (higher caste) families who had the means to migrate out of the village. They were the traditional landlords and so had larger farms and were much better-off than the *Dalits*, who had smaller plots or were landless. For many, the options were very limited. '*You either worked for a landlord or as a wage labourer, or both, and even then times were hard*' explained Sita, my *Dalit* host household mother, as we talked about the changes that had occurred since her youth. She went on to tell me that '*...things were improving*' with regards to income earning opportunities, but, then like an afterthought added that '*...something's also never change.*'

She went on to talk about attitudes within the village and how some discriminatory practices still prevailed. I was reminded of

the frequent water collection trips that her daughter-in-laws would make to a nearby spring about 20 minutes away. There was a water tap that was located much nearer, but I had been told that this was for the *Chhetris* and that none of my household members were allowed to go there. I asked Sita if that was what she was referring to, but she replied that it was more than just having separate taps. She talked about her family members having to eat separately from other villagers during social functions and the off-handed, but, belittling comments that they would receive from *Chhetri* neighbours.

Within the village, a couple of the *Dalit* families were also *Kamis* (blacksmiths); a traditional occupation which they had belonged to for generations. Throughout the village there were a few forges dotted around, and I sometimes saw men working in them. Most were quite elderly and on a few occasions when I sat down to talk with them they would inevitably talk about their sons being 'ashamed' (of their profession) and how the influx of cheaper goods from India was killing their business. I was told by one man that his son '*...doesn't want to work (as a Kami). He's ashamed. He says he wants to go abroad and make money. They all do*'.

And it did seem like every other household in the village had had a male member (sometimes even two) who had been to or was currently in the Middle East. Most were working as cleaners, labourers, drivers in factories, workers in supermarkets and construction sites. My host household also had a son who was in Qatar. I had learned that the family had taken out loans to send him aboard. The interest rate was quite high, but the family were confident and optimistic about the future. '*He has already started sending back money*', I was told by the eldest daughter-in-law as we talked about her husband one evening.

Conversations with other neighbors also indicated an eagerness to go abroad. There was one man who was planning to go to Qatar. He had already gone to Saudi Arabia once and had brought back some money, but his savings were running out and he was now planning to go again. When I asked him why he was so keen, his reply was that '*...as long as we live in this village, we will always be a Kami, but, over there (referring to the Terai) we can be a Nepali*'.

He explained that no matter how well-off a *Dalit* household became, they

would always be looked down upon by their *Chhetri* neighbours. 'We eat better now', and '*...we share cigarettes, but, we still can't go into their homes*'. His view was that attitudes would never change in the village. And that by having the resources to settle elsewhere, he hoped he and his family would be able to start a new life.

As Seen on TV

Rizqan Adhima, Indonesia

'You must be rich,' my RCA 'Dad' said on the first night I was there. I responded with a big laugh. *'Why do you say so?'* He pointed to their small color TV showing a soap opera drama with a family having dinner in their fancy house, *'Look, all Jakarta (capital city) people are rich!'*

That night, we watched series of soap operas followed by a Hollywood fiction movie about mummies about which the Dad commented, *'that's the real thing, it's part of Egyptian history'*. The family switched off the TV and went to bed at 1 am.

I was living with a simple family in an Indonesian village almost 3,000km from Jakarta. Dad and Mom are subsistence farmers. Dad also works as a daily labourer in other farms or on construction projects while Mom has a small kiosk selling basic stuff. They have a daughter, Ima, who is in junior high school and a boy, Ilham, who is in elementary school.

Mom switched on the TV early in the morning. She watches it while she cooks and does daily chores. *'Do you know them?'* she said, pointing out a celebrity in a gossip show. I shake my head, feeling a bit sorry and funny that I do not know them. *'How could you not know them? You are living in the capital!'* I told her that there are 10 million people living in Jakarta. *'But you should know at least one of them,'* Mom seemed disappointed. *'Have you met the President?'* I shake my head. The fact that I haven't met anyone on TV surprised her so much.

After school, Ima (the daughter) and her friends came back home with a new poster of a famous girlband. That afternoon, they had

a rehearsal for the school graduation party so they let me and Mom watch them rehearse. Before they started, they put a little makeup on – a thin white powder all over their faces. Ima played the DVD player and turned the sound system on. As the fast dangdut music (a traditional, popular folk music style) played, the four girls were twerking, shaking and having fun.

'I want to be a dangdut singer,' Ima said. The other girls agreed, *'We want to be like Cita Citata'* – a dangdut superstar who came from a poor family, whose story they know from TV. *'So how to be a dangdut singer then?'* I said, wanting to see whether it is something they really want or just daydreaming. (I wanted to be Batman when I was child).

'We will go to the Dangdut Academy audition when we're 16 years old.' 16 is the minimum age to join the popular TV competition shows shown every night on TV. *'Last night a contender from Sulawesi was eliminated,'* Ima says. *'No, not that one,'* her friend chimes in, *'she was saved by the jury panel. But another man from Kalimantan was eliminated this week, he was my favorite.'* Other men and women in the village, including the village chief, also talked a lot about who will stay and who will be out from Dangdut Academy.

'So you do not know anyone from TV?' The village chief said as he passed me when mom and I were washing clothes in the river. I shook my head and smirked. He said, *'How could you? I am living in the village but have shook hands with the President. He came over with Rhoma Irama, the King of Dangdut, for the last district anniversary. But unfortunately I couldn't shake hands with Rhoma.'* He sounded a bit disappointed as we continued washing clothes. *'The king of dangdut had more bodyguards than the President'* he said. Next to me, Mom had not stopped pouring detergent in to my bucket. *'Come on Riz, where are your bubbles! Add more detergent.'* It was already the most bubbles I'd ever had washing clothes.

Later at night I asked Dad and Mom about Ima's aspirations. Dad said, *'Yes I will support her. Do you know the last Dangdut Academy winner? He is now living successfully in Jakarta.'* I said I did not know him and Dad saw me as hopeless. Mom added that, *'On the final night before he was announced as the winner, they surprised him by bringing his parents onto stage. First they made a fake phone call like they were still in the village, but suddenly they came out on the screen! Oh so emotional,'* Dad said. *'All flight costs and*

everything were covered by the TV station. They must be proud parents.'

The previous winner came from this province, so just after he won the competition he came back to make a 'homecoming' concert. *'I was there watching him be paraded by police cars and he sang songs for us. Now he is very rich; he got paid 10 million by the district government for one performance'*. There was also a rumor that this man built a house for his family and sent his parents on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

I wondered about Ilham, does he want to be dangdut singer as well? *'What I want is to have a motorbike, a big 250cc one,'* Ilham said. He told me he knows his parent couldn't afford to buy one so he plans to work after graduating from elementary school. *'Now everyone has a motorbike. I want one too but I don't want to be a burden for my parents.'* He knew about opportunities to work in a restaurant or tailor workshop in the city so that he could save to buy his dream motorbike. *'I want to be like Boy, the motorbike gangster on TV.'* So far all he can do is copy the actor's Mohawk hairstyle with a special hair gel.

'I want my children to be a nurse or a teacher if I have the money to support them. But I can not force them', Dad said. He knew that Ima wants to be Dangdut superstar and that Ilham was really keen to have his own motorbike. *'But I just don't want them to be like me.'* Dad sees his work as a farmer as too hard for their children and also uncertain for gaining cash. *'My body will crumble if I work on a farm,'* Ilham said, telling me that none of his friend go to the fields anymore.

My last night there, we all watched an episode of Dangdut Academy. Beautiful singers with sparkling dresses, illuminated by light, music, cheer and dance. It was dreamy night as I tried to imagine Ima someday standing on that stage. The next day when I was just about to leave, Dad said, *'Please say hi to Cita Citata if you meet her in Jakarta'*. Until today I haven't been able to fulfill his wish.


Civil Service v. Farming

Arya Gautam, Nepal

I went back to the Humla district of Nepal (located in the far northwest) this year, two years after my first visit. Like the first time, we walked for three days to reach our village, as the district is still not connected by road. Two years back, I remember expecting dry barren lands, no vegetation and being worried about not getting much food during my four days stay. That is what is commonly shown to us by the media. Four days later however, I had completely changed my mind. While many areas of Humla were dry and barren, the village we were staying in had the most fertile land in the district. And there were many families who relied on the herb trade. I kept wondering, is Humla itself poor or is it that the people living in Humla are poor?

Like most people in the village, my family relied on farming as well as herb trading. Back in 2014, when we were talking about the future of his children, my host father had told me that he wanted his children to be educated. He wanted them to study, get a job, earn money and have a better life than he felt he and his wife did.

His children had similar aspirations about education and the job that supposedly comes with it. The eldest son, Kalibane had just finished high school back then and was awaiting results for his JTA (Civil Service Agriculture Assistant) exams. He was also helping with the work on the road that was being built in the village. He did not want to be a farmer and wanted to work for a project. The youngest son, Narabhadur was too shy to talk to me back then. I had asked the daughter, Ujeli, and her friends to make some drawings about what they wanted to be when they grow up. Ujeli drew money while her friends drew a doctor and a teacher.



My father was conflicted. He told me that he had been weighing his decision about educating his children beyond the 10th grade. He said that *'I want them to study and get good jobs, but I am also worried that they will not want to work in the field.'* He could see that his children had no interest in being a farmer. He was worried not just for the future but also for the present. He said that they were always giving excuses to get out of doing the farm chores. It was clear that farming was not regarded as a job. I remember asking him time and again what he considered a good job, but his answer remained the same: being a teacher, working in the government, working in an NGO or a project.

When I went back to Humla in April 2016, Kalibane was in Surkhet, a small city in the plains, to prepare for the civil service exams. The father seemed discontent with Kalibane's decision to sit for the exam and had very little confidence in him, although he was still supportive. He had given him 100,000 rupees (around USD 950) for his stay in the city, but was now worried that his son was wasting the money on alcohol and other 'useless' things. Thinking back on the conversation we had two years ago about his children and their aspirations, I wanted to know if anything had changed for the father.

'I know he is going to fail the civil service exam, so he has no other option but to come back to the village and work on the farm.' I was surprised to hear him say that he believed Kalibane will not pass the exams. He said that there is too much competition and the family doesn't know anyone in 'higher and right' places for him to pass the exams. Many others hold the same belief in the community. Most of the youth I spoke to told me that getting a 'degree' was not enough to be competitive anymore as everyone could now get one.

The conversation then veered towards Narbahadur, the youngest son who is not shy anymore. We are talking about school and a very important exam that he will have to sit to clear 10th grade. I ask him, what do you want to do after the school leaving certificate exams? Do you want to study for JTA like your brother? He smiles and says *'no, I don't want to study further. I want to stick to agriculture and be a farmer. I like studying but what is the point of studying when I won't get any jobs?'*

Father, who was sitting close to us, spinning sheep wool into yarn with a drop

spindle, agreed, saying that *'it would be better if he learned the skills now and became a farmer rather than get a degree and then still be a farmer.'* His view that education leads to a job and a better life seemed to have changed.

A few months later, I got a call from Kalibane who told me that he passed the civil service exam and got a job in the district headquarters. I wonder how the father is feeling...

Hunting

Krisman Pandiangan, Indonesia

This is story of a man whom I respect in the same way I do my own father. He is a humble man. His gestures and face always show a sincere and friendly look. Every time he talks, it will always be gently and slowly, as if he wants to ensure his companion could listen to every single word he says. At age 50, he looks fit and healthy. Muscles clearly showing on his arms and no grey hairs, it would be easy to believe if he said he is just 40-something. He was my father during an immersion in one very remote village in Central Kalimantan. A traditional farmer, father of 7 children and later, I realized, also a respected figure in the neighbourhood.

On the first day of my immersion, I extended a request to my 'mother' to go to the field to meet my father, who had been there since 2 days before I arrived. She immediately replied, '*Are you serious? It takes around 2 hours walking from here, up and down the hill.*' '*It is fine, I can handle it,*' I replied. After all, for me this is merely just another journey. Getting to this village already took 9 hours by car from the provincial capital, then another 8 hours upstream by boat before finally arriving at this small village along the riverbank. With Mom's permission, I headed off with my little sister (Fitri, 12 Years old) and one of the neighbour boys, Yoel, who is also Fitri's classmate.

As my mother had warned me about, it really was not an easy trip. I had to frequently ask for a rest to catch my breath and drink some water. Fortunately, the kids were so patient. The trip took on its own pattern: 15 minutes walking, 3 minutes rest. After three a half hours, we finally arrived at the farming field and met my father.


Reuniting with my father was very emotional. He hugged me

tightly and could not stop tapping my shoulder. It took minutes before someone finally spoke up. He curiously asked, *"Where is Peter"*, my fellow researcher who came along with me on my first visit. *"Unfortunately he couldn't join this time,"* I said. Soon we were exchanging stories and laughing until he offered to take me around the field.

He seemed to notice how amazed I was seeing how wide the field was. He said that it is around 10 hectares wide. The rice paddies were already turning yellow, marking that it was already approaching harvest time. I was so curious to know how he manages this huge farming field, and how he manages to carry the crops back to the village. *'It is only your 'mother' and I who look after this field, and we simply carry as many crops as we can by hand'*. He later told me that many of the crops are saved initially in their field hut because they're only able to carry 15 – 20 kilos in one trip. *'We do not sell the paddy, it is for own consumption so we only carry some back when the stock at home is running out.'*

It was already almost evening so we finally decided to go home. Here we go again, I thought. However, it was actually a blessing in disguise for me because I could have some long conversations with Father during the trip. Along the way back home, he told me a lot of things about life in the forest; the trees, the water, the birds, and most interestingly the life of his own people, the Dayak. How they live in harmony with nature but also how they hunt animals. *'You see that small stripe over there, that's for trapping the pigs.'* He pointed out the animal trap only two meters away from where we stood. He later told me that it was just a week ago he got a big wild pig. *'Your 'mother' sold the meat to the gold mining workers, who happily bought it for 50 thousand rupiah per kilo.'* He added while laughing, *'it is quite a lot of money.'*

He seemed excited to tell me stories about what he could get from by hunting animals. He explained how he is finally 'aware' about its potential to generate money, something that he did not realize in the past. *'I used to hunt only for our own consumption,'* he said. *'But you know, day by day, this family demands more money to finance daily needs and send the kids to school, and I could no longer afford to count on my older sons and my daughters for providing some money.'*



His reasoning made sense to me. Since my first visit to this family, I have been aware that both my mother and father here do not actually have exact work that could generate regular income. Yes, they sold paddy or vegetables, but this was only occasionally. When it comes to money, they were apparently counting more on the remittances delivered by their older sons and daughters who live away in the city.

'If I have better rifle...a rifle with a bigger caliber, I am sure I would be able to hunt more pigs and small deer', he said.

They Keep It Secret

Iqbal Abisaputra, Ethiopia

My father in Ethiopia called to me one morning as my interpreter and I had just finished drinking coffee with our mom at the back of the house. *'Meet this guy, he is smart and can talk in English with you.'* I saw a young Ethiopian man who said his name is Daniel. I smiled to him and he smiled back. The first thing he asked is *'Where are you from?'* and I said *'Indonesia.'* He looked surprised but then said, *'ah.. Jakarta?'* and now I was the one looking surprised. I had been in this village three days and no one had known where Indonesia is. I was drawing maps over and over in the dirt with a stick to explain Indonesia's position in the world, always saying, *'No, it's not where the Bollywood movies come from.'*

Daniel had stopped going to school when he was in the 10th grade. *'It was too hard; a lot of my friends failed at that grade but I learned my English when I was there.'* Now he is married with his long-time girlfriend, he has his own house and stays near his family. He told me that his wife used to go to the Middle East for work, that it's something common in the area. Both men and women travel by foot to reach Yemen and if they're lucky they'll reach Saudi through there. Daniel said that a lot of migrants never reach their destination; Yemen is not safe now. He said the reason his wife went to Saudi was because *'there are not many jobs in the village and if you don't have land, you're jobless.'* His wife came home last year after working for 2 years in Jeddah. Daniel invited me to their house to meet her. She is very pretty, with beautifully braided hair. She asked me if I would try tella, a local drink made from roasted corn and barley.

Both Daniel and his wife received land from the Ethiopian government. The land tenure system in Ethiopia is quite

complicated in my view. In Ethiopia, it's not easy for people to buy land or inherit it from others. For those who wish to have land, there is a lottery system. If you're lucky, you get land and can farm but if you're unlucky, you need to rent. Daniel and his wife got very lucky to pass this lottery system. Daniel's wife said she got her land because she is an ex-migrant worker from Saudi. *'The government wants people to stay at home and not go abroad anymore,'* she told me. She said Daniel got his land because he finished 10th grade. *'If you have some higher education, they will give you land.'* Now they've become farmers.

Daniel's land has an irrigation system which uses ground water with a big pump, while the wife's land is not irrigated. They both plant different crops. Daniel's wife only plants staple crops like teff (a species of lovegrass similar to millet), sorghum, barley and they use it just for their own consumption. Daniel's land on the other hand can be used for planting tomatoes, green peppers, chilis and other vegetables which they can sell. Daniel said it's progress that they have an irrigation system as they can earn lot of money from the land. But sometimes it's not easy growing vegetables. *'They didn't teach us how to use fertilizer or pesticide, and the price for pesticide is also very high and we can't afford it.'* When he showed me his land, I could see that some of the tomatoes were rotten.

The market is the another problem for him. Daniel said, *'I want to take my crops directly to the city because I can get higher prices there for my tomatoes,'* but that he can't afford going there directly because he has no network or friends that can help him there. He said the only way he can sell his crops is by waiting for a middle man to come with a big truck directly to the farmland when the harvest season comes. *'They will come and tell us the price that they will pay; we don't have any say when the middle man comes.'* This situation is being compounded by the fact that the farmers don't really talk to each other. *'Everyone keeps their price secret. They won't tell each other how much the middle man was willing to pay for their crops.'* Daniel feels that this problem actually can be solved easily, *'if only we shared information with each other, we could have a better bargaining position with the middle man.'*

Daniel is grateful for having farmland and being able to earn money as a farmer, but he also feels this situation needs to be addressed quickly or the farmer will always be at the bottom of the market chain without bargaining power. The land ownership system in Ethiopia has brought some benefits for him, but now his goal is to become a farmer with greater knowledge of the market and hopefully, greater prosperity.

The Estranged Wife



Tazin Ananya, Bangladesh

Helena is a young girl from Bangladesh. She is 22 years old. She went to local school until class 4, then she stopped. She lives with her parents, four brothers and her eldest sister-in-law, as well as a nephew.

Helena's father is a saw-mill worker and her eldest brother is a tiles-worker. These are the two breadwinners in the family. They live in a rural area, but it has good access to a nearby town. Her dad also has cultivable lands here, and there is a family home where they can live with other relatives. Although Helena's father has had his disagreements with some of these relatives, he shared that he does not want to untie his bonds with them. Therefore the family lives in a rented house just on the other side of the road.

Helena works in a nearby machine embroidery factory that is just a 7-8 minute walk from her house. She has learned machine-operating and other tasks. She works 11 hours per day, and 26 days per month. Her salary is \$62 per month. When I asked her about her expenditures, she replied that all her basic needs are taken care of by her dad. If that's the case, I wondered, why is she working so much? When I asked this, she just giggled but did not give any reply. Gradually I came to know that although she is living with her parents, she is also married. She has a husband and in-laws living not so far away. Nevertheless though, she cannot go and live with them. The reason is that after an initial agreement, her in-laws have now increased the amount of dowry that Helena's dad should pay. Because of this change, her dad is adamant that Helena remain at home for now.

Helena told me that her husband fell in love with her at the



moment he saw her. I wondered then, what must her husband be thinking about all of this? Later, from Helena's co-workers I came to know that her family are low-caste Muslims. They are known as *Bajondar* in the locality. On the other hand, the husband, an auto bike driver, is from a higher caste Muslim family. Though he fell in love immediately and quickly asked her to marry him, some say his family is now trying to make sure that they are getting at least some economic benefit from taking in this lower caste woman into their family.

After all of this, Helena said that she felt sad just sitting at home with her mom and helping with household chores. Working in the factory, she can at least have something to do and keep herself busy. She also has a circle of colleagues there. She can earn money which is her own pocket money. She could ask for money from her dad, but she does not want to put any extra burden on him. With her monthly earnings, she can buy cosmetics, personal goods, and even small gifts for her family members. She enjoys this life, rather than sitting at house and worrying about her future. Although it is not an easy job and the hours are long, she is ready to keep going, at least for now.

Life Must Go On

Pandu Ario Bismo, Indonesia

'It was so much better when the price of the rubber was good, now I live in uncertainty everyday.'

It was a cold and windy night when I first met him in a riverside village in rural Kalimantan. It was really dark as there was no street lamp at all. He warmly accepted me to stay in his modest house. The house was located in the edge of the village. It was the only house there. Their nearest neighbor was around 400-500 m away. Not many people knew about the exact location of his house, including the shopkeeper that was only 5-10 minutes walking distance from that house.

I found out that this father and his family just moved to this village less than a year ago. The father was originally from this village, but he had lived away from the village for years. It was their second month living in this village as a family.

The father was a really cheerful person in his late 30s. He lived there with his pregnant wife and two sons. Both of his sons were in kindergarten. We spent a lot of time together. I went to the place where he worked as a construction worker, he asked me to accompany him to his relatives' houses, and he took me to go around the village with his old motorcycle. One night, we had a long conversation after dinner. He told me about so many things, including about his life before moving back to this village.

The family had lived in the other village for a long time. That village was around 1-2 hours away by motorcycle. They had inherited a rubber plantation from the mother's family there. The father and mother sapped rubber and this had been their

livelihood for years. He told me that it was possible to have a decent life back then from only sapping rubber. It was enough to make him able to buy a small boat, a modest floating house and even to buy his wife some jewelry, including a necklace worth 2 million rupiah.

Everything started to change when the price of rubber started to drop. When they began sapping rubber, the price of rubber was IDR 14,000/kg. Then the price gradually dropped until the price hit IDR 4,000/kg. The father found it impossible to live as a rubber sapper with that price. The yield was not equal to their efforts.

After this, the father's brother advised them to come back to this village and work with him as a fisherman. His brother catches fish illegally using electricity. The father did not really want to do this because he said he has always gotten into fights with his brother ever since they were kids. However, he was also told about an opportunity to work in a coal company that was located just across from the village. He heard that the minimum wage he could get from working in the company might be at least 9 million rupiah per month.

This opportunity presented a big temptation for the father, and in the end he decided to move back. He bought a house by installment from one of his friends and applied for a job in the coal company. He even manipulated his birth year in his ID card to make him younger because he felt this would increase the possibility to be accepted. While waiting for the result of the recruitment process, he worked with his brother. This didn't last long however because the two got into a fight again and the father decided that they wouldn't be able to work together.

Then he failed at the recruitment process. He was very frustrated. *'I do not know what I should do, for so many years I only sapped rubber.'* He has tried so many things since because life must go on and he has a wife and children.

I have been to the village twice now, with my second visit around 10 months after the first one. There had not been any change in his livelihood since my first visit. He was waiting for another company's vacancy to open up, working odd jobs in the meantime. If there was a construction project he would be a construction worker; if people needed some wood he would be a lumberjack;

and if there was nothing else to do he would go to the port to be a porter. This provided enough for food and daily needs for now, but he was not sure about the longer term. The mother told me, *'Since we moved to this village, my husband has done so many different jobs. Whenever there is a chance to get money, he will do it. Thank God until now it is enough for us to buy food.'*

With a new baby daughter and one of the children about to enter elementary school this year, their daily needs are only going to increase. The father still hopes that he can get a job in a company so the family can have a better life. Lately there has not been much construction work, and he has only been working as a porter. Meanwhile, the inherited rubber plantation back in his wife's village has been neglected. He also sold his small boat because they needed the money and they only used it to go to the rubber plantation.

After all of these changes, the father now hopes that education can provide his children the security that he is still trying to get back. *'I hope all of my children can get a high education so they can work in a company and have a better life,'* he said. Making sure his children can achieve this is very much uncertain, but I have no doubt that the father will keep trying to make sure that it does.

Hope Amidst Calamities

Kiros Berhanu, Ethiopia

Birhan, a woman from rural Tigray lives in a hamlet beside some hills. It's located about 40 minutes walking from the main village but is very close to an asphalt road. Birhan and her family live in a single room. There is a latrine and kitchen in the compound. Birhan lives with her two grandchildren. Her older brother also comes to live with her most of the times. She looks strong and active, and always busy in her daily activities. Her face is usually filled with a smile. Birhan is very sociable with her neighbors. She has a small backyard which she uses to grow some crops and to keep a cow and chickens.

'I have children who are living and working in Arab countries,' she said, pointing far away with her hand. She continued, 'There are many people from our village who are working in Arab countries. Here, I am a farmer. I also get a small salary working at the communal water station. It is where I first saw you on your way here.'

She told me that farming is what her parents used to do for a living. She also has her own land but she can not till it by herself, so she is renting it for share cropping. Through this system she gets half of the harvest from her land. When I asked her what she thought about farming as a livelihood, I saw a face with little hope on it. Squeezing her lips she said, *'It is as you can see. There is no rain. I am worried and every one in the community is worried by the delay of the rain. You see, the sky is dark, there are clouds, but there is no rain. It has been like this since last week but no rain until now. Our life here in this rural area highly depends on rain. If there is no rain now we can not grow crops.'* She kept gazing at

the sky with a look that suggested she was waiting for an answer.

We gathered outside in the evening to have dinner. There was a wild darkness where you can hardly see things even that are nearby. It was calm except for some dogs barking and the whisper of some people talking when passing by. There was a fire at the traditional stove outside, which gave us at least a blurred look of some things. There was nice scent from the coffee being boiled and the hot *shiro* (a stew prepared from chickpea flour) which was served for dinner. It was a relaxed atmosphere to have chat with all of the family.

Zaineb, the grand daughter, was helping Birhan boiling the coffee. Zaineb is a very sharp 7 year-old girl. She does what her grandmother tells her and she helps around on her own. Yasin, the grandson, brought small cactus fruits in a container. Birhan said, *'In the past, the cactus used to be abundant and healthy, but now it is affected by disease which turns the leaves into white patches. You may have observed it on your way here, the cactuses that are being used as fences have become white. Healthy cactus fruits and leaves would have helped a lot for hard times like now, with the scarcity of rain.'*

The next morning Birhan went early to open the communal water station. When she came back, she was looking at a cow which was tied up in the small and dry compound. Pointing her hand to the cow Birhan said, *'The lack of rain also affects the animals. There is no animal fodder, so for now what we are doing is giving cactus leaves to the animals.'* In the evening I went with Yasin to meet some young men who were burning the thorns off the cactus leaves in order for them to be edible by the animals. They told me that this is how they are coping with the drought since it is not easy to find grass to feed their animals.

At one point Birhan showed me the yellow booklets with maps inside which explain about her land. She has both residential and farm land. *'The government measured land and gave us this card. It is good to get this. If there is any land conflict though, we would rather go to the traditional land judges rather than use this card because these judges are the ones who distributed the land a long time ago.'* She further explained that having this certification doesn't really change their land security because if the land is needed for a road or railway, the government can still take it. She told me

about a place outside of their community where people's land was taken to construct a railroad.

I asked Birhan about her aspirations for the future, including for her children. *'There is a scarcity of land here and as you have seen there is no droplet of water since you came. Fertilizer is not suitable for our land but the government forces us to buy it. In the end, I just end up selling it to others with a cheaper price. Farming is not as good as it used to be during our parents' time. I want my children to open some kind of business in town.'*

Later on I took a walk with Yasin to see the farmland, grazing land and the places where there are fruit trees. *'This soil is better land to grow crops,'* he said. I asked Yasin about what he aspires for the future. He smiled and said, *'I am going to school and for the future I do not want to become a farmer. I also do not want to live here, I want to go to town.'* For now though, he continued directing his herd of sheep towards the grazing land.

A Little Cloud: Encounter


Salman Mehdi, Bangladesh

It was the first day of the Bengali New Year when I arrived in this village. It was very green and comfortable, though it was summer. While walking through the village I meet some very friendly young boys who were hanging around the village and one of them recognized from my previous immersion in the village next to them. They invited me to visit nearby *Boishakhi Mela*, a traditional New Year Fair.

Opu was one of them, and he was very curious. I had a long conversation with Opu, who is 21 years old, about many things including his life in the village. He lives with his parents, two younger brothers and one sister. He and his younger brother Mustakem, who is eighteen years-old, work in a construction job. His youngest brother and sister are still in school, just next to their house. His mother works at home and helps his father to work in the farm.

In the afternoon Opu asked me to have lunch with him. I went to his house and met his mother, youngest brother and sister. Then on the way out to lunch we met Opu's father, Mr. Rashid, who was just coming back from the field for lunch. Opu introduced me to him as friend from Dhaka. Mr. Rashid wanted to know if we had our lunch and asked me if I will stay in their house. When Opu said that I am going to stay, he smiled and said he will meet me again when he comes back from the field later in the evening. Opu told me that most of the families in his village are farmers. His father farms on other people's land and shares the crops with the landowner. It was harvesting time when I was there.

Opu and I met then his friends in the local market. Most of them



were working in various sectors. Because of the New Year they were on holiday for two days, so they were enjoying their free time. It was dark outside when we reached Opu's home again in the evening. Mr. Rashid was sitting in front of the house with his wife. He said, *'Come son, come. Sit here,'* when he saw me. He asked me about their village and whether I liked it or not. He was very happy when I said that their village is very beautiful. He shared that he is now around fifty-years old and has seen many changes in the village throughout his life. While we were talking, suddenly the weather changed and a strong wind started to blow. Mr. Rashid stood up and with a panicked look said to Opu that he had left all the cut bunches of paddy in the field because he thought he could bring them home tomorrow.

Everybody began to panic when they saw the storm approaching with thunder and lightning. Opu, his parents and his youngest brother started running to the farm land. They were afraid of the rain because it could harm their crops. I followed them to the field. I worked with the family until we brought all of the bunches of paddy under shelter. All the time when I was in the field, I was scared of the thunder. But I saw something else in their eyes. They were determined to save their crops at any cost. Fortunately, it did not rain that night.

Later during dinner, Mr. Rashid said, *'See! This is how we live -rain for a few hours can ruin our fate.'* He became emotional when he said that their life is full of uncertainty and farming is often affected by natural disaster. He told Opu that he does not want his sons to become farmers because the work is very industrious and uncertain.

'That's why I am keen to work in different sectors' Opu said. He and his brother do not want to work on the farm. They have tried different work, whatever they could do. Now both of them have become skilled in construction work. They are satisfied with the decision they took three years ago. They feel farming is very risky and as they don't have any land, it is not profitable because they have to share the harvested crops with the landowner. We talked about many other things that night and slept late. I went to bed with a lot of curiosity about the lives of farmers.

Time to Go Home

Steven Ellis, Indonesia

My host father is only 34 but he's an accomplished farmer and one of the most respected men in his sector of the village, so I was surprised when the mother told me that they had just moved back to this village 4 years ago.

Not long after getting married and having their first child together here in their home village in Maluku, the family moved to a large town in Papua where some of the father's extended family had settled. His parents were regularly going back and forth between Papua and Maluku and encouraged him to go there because of the job opportunities. The father thought it made sense. After all, being able to earn cash would be necessary now that he had a family and growing responsibilities. At that time, their home village still lacked phone signal, a passable road, and the island itself still belonged to a district with a capital that was hours away by boat. While there was a lot of land, people did mostly subsistence farming or fishing. In Papua, the father was able to earn good money driving a tractor for a logging operation, although it wasn't particularly safe. In fact, he initially got the job because he was the only one that wanted to drive the tractor after an accident had killed the Papuan man previously driving this type of tractor. After a couple of years this work was also repetitive, and as it turned out there was not a diverse range of other opportunities in the area. So they decided to move to the provincial capital in Maluku, which they felt could surely provide a lot of opportunities.

There the father switched between periodic construction work and odd jobs. They were able to build a small home and there was almost always some work, although it could be sporadic. The mother started making traditional fabrics from home to provide

additional income. A year after their second child was born, they began to consider a move home. They were making money in the provincial capital, but they also had to spend a lot of money. Mom said that in the capital, they had to buy almost everything, whereas here in the village the need for cash is much less. Plus in the village they have more support from their neighbors – people share and trade a lot, and it's easier taking care of your children. Mom said that in the village she doesn't need to worry about her kids if they go running off to play with other children. With these things in mind, they decided it was time to go home. Right after moving back, they had their third child, a boy, to join their two daughters.

Since returning home, the father was able to use some of the money he saved from his work to buy animals and get started farming the land that had been given to him by his parents. The father has a quiet confidence and discipline which has resulted in a fairly successful trial and error approach to his farming activities. Along with a grove of coconut trees which provides a fairly consistent income, the father has experimented with rice, cassava, potatoes, bananas, watermelon, soybeans, cashews, seaweed, timber; and raising pigs, ducks, chickens, and cows. His first attempt with cows didn't go so well after all three ended up getting sick and dying, but he spoke of this as a learning opportunity rather than a huge disappointment. He was the first person in the village to try planting avocado and pineapple trees.

The village itself is also starting to change. The road to town is currently being paved, and cellphone signal has finally arrived. Although the village is starting to develop more rapidly, Mom still acknowledges some challenges, like education. The village now has a combined primary, junior and senior high school but she feels the quality of the education is not very good. Their oldest daughter is now 12 years old and the mother said she will suggest that she attends high school in Papua rather than here in the village. On the whole, life is still simple here, but they don't mind. Although there are still more opportunities outside, this family found that its sweet spot was right where they started - at home.

Trapped

Tony Dogbe, Ghana

We trekked non-stop for two hours, along dusty trails, across rivers, meandering through fields of millet, maize and beans. All the while, we struggled using sticks, a familiar trademark of the Fulani people, to constrain the herd of cattle from straying into the nearby greeneries, damaging the crops and incurring the wrath of the locals. Finally, my Fulani host herders and I arrived at the site they had selected for the herd of cattle to graze for that day.

While the trek itself was insightful for me, herding has been the main livelihood of the Fulanis for centuries and it is what they are known for across West Africa. While the majority still do this as nomads, moving either across countries or from place to place within one country, a few, like my host family, have settled down to a sedentary life style. Though the trek was not different from the one I undertook on my first visit two years earlier, this time I became more aware of the tension between the native people in this area and the Fulani herders, who despite having lived in their current settlement for over fifteen years were still regarded as foreigners by the locals. It was a relief when we arrived at the grazing ground without any incident.

Once the herd had settled to graze, we found shelter under a big tree. As we settled down, I was getting ready to take a snooze when Abbas, one of my host father's children, suddenly asked, *'How do I get a passport?'* It turned out I was about to learn a lot more about the lives of the younger generation of my host family.

During my first visit, I had had a chat with the older generation about education. They said that their children would love to go to school but that when they do, they are seen as foreigners and

get bullied. For these reasons the parents stopped sending the children to school. To my surprise however, later that night after supper the children were stumbling over each other looking for their books from boxes hidden up on the roof. Before long, there were nearly fifteen children sitting on and around the trunk of a felled tree, being taught in Arabic by one of the sons of my host father. It turned out my host father had sent this son to neighbouring Burkina Faso to train as an Arabic teacher. I saw an opportunity for a teacher who could teach the children while they are out in the fields because once the cattle settle down, there is the opportunity to have some lessons with those of school going age.

Here two years later with Abbas, I was learning about another challenge for the lives of the Fulani youth. He is one of the nine children of Hussein, my host father. At 20, Abbas looks older for his age and is slim, tall and handsome. Most young men of his age have mobile phones from which they are able to connect to the local radio stations, download music videos and be aware of what is happening around the country and the world as a whole. Still, a passport was not the line of conversation I had expected.

I asked Abbas, *'What do you need a passport for?'*

'To travel', he replied.

'To travel to where?'

'To Europe,' he answered back.

'Why Europe?'

'That's where I will find freedom', he said.

This was to be the start of a long and insightful conversation. I learned that the upcoming generations are generally not interested in herding cattle for the rest of their lives. At birth, a child is given a calf which as they grow up they have to take care of and by the age of fifteen, they will have a small herd of their own. This compels them to continue the traditional livelihood of herding. As a family enterprise, their only form of payment is the herd from the one calf they were given at birth, along with food and shelter.

However, although they have a herd of their own, if they want to sell any they have to seek the permission of their father and explain what they would use the money for. At age 20, Abass does not feel he could make his own decisions until he gets married and moves from his father's house. Moreover, herding animals is hard work, and a constant fight with the local people who still treat them as second class citizens. He felt trapped. He wanted a way out and for him, it was to travel to as faraway a place as possible. A brother of his had set the precedent by migrating to the nation's capital city, Accra.

'Yussif is working for a white man, he is free, and he is prospering. I want to be like him', says Abass.

When we returned home, I took up the topic with my host father, Hussein, and some of the herders of his generation. Hussein will not tell me the number of cattle in his herd, nor the number of other animals. *'We don't count our animals'*, he said. My estimation was that he and his family have at least 400 cattle, over 200 goats and sheep, and two motorbikes. He has three wives and nine children. Though by the standards of his tribe he is a wealthy man, he and his fellow Fulani herdsmen live on a barren stretch of land on the outskirts of the community and are still regarded as outsiders.

Hussein does not fit the stereotypical description of the Fulani who is slim and light skinned with a long face. On the contrary, he is a little over six feet tall, he has a bigger frame, a slight bulge around the stomach, and a round, kind face which reflects the kind and gentle person that he is. As the first herder to settle in their current location in the Sissala District of the Upper-West Region of Ghana nearly 18 years ago, he is respected and held in high regard by his fellow herdsmen. There isn't a single day during my visit that someone does not come to solicit his help to resolve an issue with the locals, the chief, or to report the theft of an animal.

Not so unlike the younger generation, Hussein and his generation also find herding difficult, and less and less rewarding. What Hussein finds even more despairing is that despite the length of time he has lived in this community, he and his family and other countrymen who have migrated to Ghana and contributed to the economy here are still seen as strangers and treated like non-citizens. However, when it comes to the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections which are held every four years the politicians come to get them to

register as voters and get them to vote for them.

'After that they have no use of us. We get no support whatsoever for ourselves or for our animals', he said.

He noted, for example, that they have to pay for the services of the veterinary technician who comes to attend to their animals. And of course there is the issue of education. Despite all these challenges and difficulties though, for his generation this is the only livelihood they know. *'We cannot opt out of this. It's our life, it's our world', he concludes.*

'What about the younger generation, your children?', I asked.

'It is because of them I settled down so that some of them can go to school and have some education and get proper job but as I told you they had to stop attending. Without education, I don't see what else they can do apart from what we have taught them from their childhood. Like us they have no choice but to continue herding cattle. It is better than nothing.'

I Still Want to be a Farmer

Yeni Indra, Indonesia

Emak (also 'mother' in Sundanese language) is a woman with 5 children, 2 sons and 3 daughters, and at 57 she still looks healthy and strong. Every day with her boots on, she carries a big bag of tools on her shoulder and walks easily on the narrow, slippery and hilly walking path to the field. Emak does not talk much but she loves to laugh. A simple story of how I fell down in the paddy field and came out with face full of mud made her laugh over and over every time she remembers that story.

It was a hot sunny day when Emak and I finally take time to sit after hours of cleaning weeds in the field. She sat down on a woven bamboo mat to catch her breath and, wiping the sweat off her face, asked me 'are you tired?'. 'Yes,' I admitted. Then I asked her if she likes working in the farm. She looked straight at the paddy field and said, *'I don't understand why you look so happy coming to the field and doing hard work like this.'* It was silent for a moment, then she continued, *'I have been working on the farm since I was only 5 or 6 years old. Farming is the only thing I know and can do for a living. I never went to school. Back then I never thought that school is important. When my father passed away, my mom needed to work in the plantation to survive.'* Emak explained that from the beginning her mother asked her to help picking and collecting cloves and that she's been working on the farm ever since, *'as long as she can remember.'* While her two brothers went to school and learned to read the Quran, Emak said she didn't like school. *'I prefer working in the farm rather than sitting and learning.'*

It was silent for a moment before Emak continued, *'But I don't want my children to be like me. I want them to have better life. This is hard work and we don't earn much from this. I always tell them to go to school. I tell them school is important. I tell them school will help them to have a better life.'* Then her eyes were filled with tears as she told me how she has been very disappointed by her two daughters because they did not continue their school. *'But Aa different, he is a good son, he listens to me and now he has a good family and a good life. I don't need to worry about him because he is fine,'* Emak said proudly.

Aa (meaning 'older/big brother' in Sundanese language) is Emak's first son who lives in Purwakarta. He is working in a factory as an IT staff. I got the opportunity to meet Aa on my second visit to Emak's house. With light skin, wavy hair and average height, it's easy to recognize Aa as Emak's son. Having just come back from his sister's house Aa sat down in front of the TV and started the conversation. *'How is the paddy field?' he asked me. I told him what I had seen with Emak, that the eastern part of the field was ruined because of mice that had eaten the paddy's straw. He said, 'Too bad I cannot help Emak in the field any more. I love working in the field you know, but Emak told me not to because we will not get money from farming.'*

Relaxed and lying on the floor he told me that during his younger years all he wanted was to be a farmer. He could spend the whole day in the farm, doing many things with their plants and enjoying it, feeling happy. But Emak forbid him from continuing to do this. He explained, *'My mother said that to make a living as a farmer we need to have our own land. The land that we use belongs to the government and they can take it any time.'* He said that Emak kept telling him that he needed to go to school, get away from the village, get a better education so that he could work and earn more money.

Not really paying attention to Emak's presence, Aa continued his story. He said that as soon as he finished primary school, Emak told him to go to the city for work and that he needed to save most of his money for school. He did as he was told. *'First I studied in a pesantren (Islamic boarding school), then as soon as I had enough money I went to junior high and then continued to high school. During that time, I went to school in the morning and worked the night shift as a construction worker.'*

Then with a big smile Emak proudly said, *'he got a job in a factory because he finished high school. And then got a higher position after he finished taking a computer course. He has a good salary now and can pay for his brother's school fees. This would be impossible if he worked on the farm.'* Aa said that while he still loved farming, he also wanted to make Emak proud. *'One day if I have enough money I will buy myself some land and I will work on my own land, farming,'* he said. Again Emak showed her big smile. *'Yes, you can farm on your own land. I will not worry because when you can buy land for yourself then I know that you have enough for you and your family, that you have a good life.'* *'This is why I should listen to her, because she turns out to be right.'* They both laughed.

Social status

Lifestyle and access to
information

Economics

Human security

Push and pull factors

Children's rights

Opportunities

Freedom

Education

Gender





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