

“Life is to fight back” – The Story of Kulsuma

“Kulsuma” is, sadly, a name of much sorrow, misery and struggle. Born on the *Sagarlal* Tea Estate in Juri of Mouluvibazar district, Kulsuma is 33 years old. But the grief and tragedy in her life started when she was just three, when her mother and unborn twin siblings died in childbirth. Rushing to fetch her father from the tea estate, Kulsuma’s torch was stolen from her by a thief and, in the dark and the chaos, she lost her way. After wandering for hours, she eventually fell asleep beneath a mango tree.

In the early morning an old man woke her up and she found herself in an unknown place and started crying. The man took her to a bazaar and gave her tea and biscuits. She stayed in that bazaar two to three days and survived by begging leftover food from different shops. Upon reaching *Amtoli* in the *Cunarughat* Upazila she got a temporary job in a restaurant with food as her only salary. Yet within a few days the restaurant owner dismissed her. A man then came to her and listened to her story. After listening to her struggle, the man gave her shelter in his house. Kulsuma grew up in that house.

One day, the man sent her to his relatives’ house where she began working as a maidservant. When she was only 12 years, she was married to the house caretaker, but within a week he left the village, stealing a gold ornament of Kulsuma’s. Again her life turned toward sorrow. She took shelter in a neighbour’s house where she lived for seven years, working in different houses of the village as maidservant to earn a living. Again Kulsuma was married, to a UP *Chowkidar* (village police), a man who already had a wife and six children. Kulsuma gave birth to three children, all girls. She and her fellow-wife quarreled almost all the time, resulting in the separation of the families by her husband. She built a separate house and lived there with her children. Yet her husband was unable to provide food for the children and once more Kulsuma began working. She worked in different houses as a maidservant, engaged in daily labour and earthwork, worked in a rice husking mill, collected leftover grain from paddy fields among other things in order to provide food for her little girls. However, her husband, convinced that this would undermine his standing in society, did not allow her to work and beaten her often. He also forced to her to give him money for drugs and for his other personal use. Ultimately he abandoned her.

Having come across Kulsuma and this dire situation, the female ward member of the Union Parishad helped her to gain employment in the Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets (REOPA) Project. Four months after getting the job, her husband suddenly died. While he owned 30 decimals of homestead land, she has no share or control of this land and it was all taken by her stepson and fellow

wife. Kulsuma was ousted from the household. She eventually managed to find a piece of land to live on, with the help of village leaders through the village *shalish*.

The REOPA Project has given Kulsuma an opportunity to survive in society with her children. She has purchased three saris for Tk. 720. Before the REOPA employment she slept on the floor, but after getting her job in the Working Crew Groups, she purchased a wooden cot for Tk. 700 from her earnings. Now she is sleeping on the cot with a mosquito net and warm clothes. She also purchased silver ornaments for her girls and has repaired her house with a new roof made of tin, costing Tk. 2600. Now she and her children are taking three full of meals a day. Kulsuma dreams that one day she will build a good house on her own land, and give her children a proper education and arrange good marriages for them in well-off families. She hopes to start a cow-rearing business financed by her savings. She has visions of a prosperous life, and now, the foundations to make such visions a reality.

