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LOSING her mother to diarrhoea in 2014 ignited a flame of passion in Shomy Hasan Chowdhury to advocate for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 — clean water and sanitation.

The Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) economics graduate from Mymensingh, Bangladesh, was recently awarded the 2019 Legacy Award, which is a legacy of the late Princess Diana and honours the latter's humanitarian work.

Shomy received the award due to her ability to inspire youth to serve their communities.

"My mother's death came as a shock as she was fine the day before. After doing research, I found out that 45,000 children die from diarrhoea annually in Bangladesh."

Four days after the tragedy, Shomy conducted a talk on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to sanitation workers, her first out of many.

"I shared with them proper hand-washing techniques, which can be a life-saving act. I was expected to stay at home and grieve. But I knew that if I wasted one more day in mourning, someone else could lose their loved ones. I had gone through such excruciating pain, I didn't want anyone else to go through it."

In Bangladesh, sanitation workers are ostracised and exposed to health hazards.

"They are considered untouchable and unclean by society. I want to educate them on keeping their hygiene and show our appreciation for their services."

Shomy, who received a British Council Bangladesh scholarship, chose to study in Malaysia because of the country's affordable higher education, as well as UPM's high ranking in the list of global universities.

The 25-year-old joined 19 other youths, who embodied Princess Diana's kindness and compassion. She vowed to continue fighting for universal access to clean water and sanitation.

Together with fellow UPM graduate Rijve Arefin, Shomy co-founded Awareness 360, which champions social change with focus on vulnerable communities, such as sanitation workers, sex workers, women and orphans.

Lack of access to clean water could affect menstrual health, said Shomy. This had led Awareness 360 to campaign at a Bangladeshi brothel.

"We taught 500 women and girls in the community about personal and menstrual hygiene, as well as the adverse effects of steroid use."

Young activist out to save vulnerable lives



Shomy Hasan Chowdhury receiving the Legacy Award at Kensington Palace, the United Kingdom, last year.

"They usually use old clothes, tissues, rags or leaves instead of sanitary pads due to high cost."

"We taught them how to sew napkins and continue to advocate for sanitary products to be tax exempted."

The group also addresses other SDGs, namely quality education, women empowerment and poverty eradication. To date, it has expanded to 23 countries, impacting more than 70,000 people.

"We focus on capacity building. Our training starts with the basics, such as how to write a proposal and what the SDGs are. We teach them about community service."

"We encourage a zero-budget policy and urge members to find the most cost-effective solutions."

The group has made an impact in educating young Malaysians to make a change.

In November, a leadership workshop themed "Score Your Goals" was held in Kuala Lumpur in collaboration with the American Council and Global Changemakers.

"We selected 50 students from local universities, including UPM, to learn about SDGs. They are expected to share their knowledge with other youths."

"Participants who carried out the best volunteering project could participate in a WASH campaign at an Orang Asli village with us."

Shomy is also working on a sports exchange programme with the UPM Sports Academy and the Commonwealth Students' Associations.

"The project will see youths from different countries learning to play cricket and hockey. Sports can be a sustainable development enabler as it promotes social inclusion, which can improve their lives."

As the Commonwealth Students' Association Asia representative, Shomy engages with country leaders in trying to influence policy changes.

She said it was crucial to bridge the gap between policymakers and marginalised communities.

"Rijve and I had worked with the underprivileged at the grassroots level. By telling the decision-makers about what is happening on the ground, we can propose for change."

"In 2018, I attended the Integrated Partners' Forum at the 20th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers."

"During a session on addressing equity and fairness, I spoke on how we are leaving vulnerable people, particularly sex workers, behind."

Shomy has also been invited to the biennial Commonwealth Head of Governments Meetings (CHOGM). This year, she is leading a policy team in the international youth forum task force.

"We are drafting a paper to be presented to 53 country leaders. Focusing on inclusivity, the paper will touch on topics like education, disability inclusion, clean water and climate change."

Getting celebrities to support your cause is beneficial, she added.

"I was invited to speak to the Global Citizen Festival in New York, where I met celebrities like Priyanka Chopra and Hugh Jackman."

"When Priyanka 'shared' about me on her social media account, it spiked an interest in WASH and Awareness 360."

Shomy had previously received the gold President's Volunteer Service Award from the then United States president Barack Obama for her community service. The recognition was a boost to further her advocacy work.

"Young people have the potential to achieve many things. Instead of complaining on social media, it is important to educate ourselves and take action."

"Find your passion and learn from an experienced organisation. Start small and start now."



Shomy Hasan Chowdhury (centre) on stage engaging with the community during a health awareness campaign at a brothel in Bangladesh.



Awareness 360 co-founders Shomy Hasan Chowdhury (left) and Rijve Arefin (right) conducting a safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) campaign.