



# SALMA CHOUHDURY

BANGLADESH

**Salma Choudhury is Founder Chairperson of ASHIC, (A Shelter for Helpless Ill Children), a non-profit charitable organization for improving the Survival Rates of the Cancer Fighters in Bangladesh.**

Salma completed her college education in 1972 and got married that same year. In 1992, her youngest son, Ashiq, was diagnosed with cancer. His sudden diagnosis, prolonged treatment in London and eventual death at age 3, brought a calamity into her family's life.

During her son's treatment, Salma came across the miseries of many children and their families. She also experienced the activities of benevolent societies, charity organizations who offered comfort to these children during their darkest days.

After the loss of Ashiq, Salma was inspired to stand next to the cancer warrior children of Bangladesh. She transformed her thoughts into reality by founding the Shelter for Helpless Ill Children (ASHIC), a charity organization dedicated to improving the quality of lives for children with cancer.

Salma has attended many international seminars, symposiums and training programmes at home and abroad. As a member of Childhood Cancer International (CCI), she regularly attends SIOP and CCI Congresses in various locations of the world as a selected speaker.

She is now working actively with 11 different need-based programmes for Childhood Cancer in Bangladesh.

**"Together  
we can  
fight against  
childhood  
cancer."**

## On Relationships that Influenced My Career

My biggest influence is my youngest son, Ashiq Husain Choudhury, whom I lost to cancer when he was only 3 years 3 months and 3 days old. Since that fateful day on May 20, 1993, I rose up to keep the memory of my son alive through the activities of ASHIC, which aims to improve the survival rate, give quality of life to, and reduce the sufferings of the cancer warrior children and their families living in Bangladesh.

Another person is Dr. Cynthia Goh of Asia Pacific Hospice Palliative Care Network (APHN) in Singapore, who was a pioneer in palliative care in the Asian Pacific region. Our primary bond was as bereaved mothers. When I first visited her in 1995, I mentioned to her how my depression from losing my son Ashiq had propelled a housewife into starting ASHIC. At her invitation both ASHIC, and I personally, became members of APHN. Cynthia's high quality work with her Palliative Care team prompted me to request her to come to Bangladesh and teach our medical community about the practice. She gave trainings from 2013 till 2018, twice a year for 5 days. As one of the organizers of the 2004 SIOP Asia Congress in Bangladesh, at my invitation Cynthia and her colleague Rosalie Shaw held a session on palliative care, which was well received. In 2005, when ASHIC received grants from UICC and Sanofi-Aventis to establish Bangladesh's first Palliative Care Unit (PCU), the first person I gave the happy news to was Cynthia. With her guidance, I designed the ASHIC PCU to be a South Asian center of excellence for palliative and holistic care for our cancer warriors. We have also presented the programme at CCI/SIOP Congresses as a replicable model for other developing countries. Since her passing in 2022, I miss Cynthia greatly.

## On Challenges and Overcoming Them

ASHIC is the first non-profit charity organization dedicated to serve and improve the quality of life to the cancer warrior children by providing hope, physical and emotional support through conducting 11 different need-based programmes in Bangladesh.

As a pioneer in the field, we faced much resistance. Especially, when we established a Palliative Care Unit, it was totally a new concept in Bangladesh in 2006. We had to redirect a significant amount of funding towards unanticipated awareness raising programmes so that doctors would prescribe palliative treatment over curative treatment for terminally ill patients. The active collaboration paid off and now palliative treatment is an integral part of the care system for the cancer warriors.

Another challenge was to establish an accommodation facility for cancer warriors. In 2000, ASHIC Shelter was established in a rented house. It was the first "Home Away

from Home" facility in Bangladesh for children coming from rural area for treatment in the capital city of Dhaka. The Shelter plays a pivotal role in improving survival rates. However, many landlords refuse to rent facilities when they understand the kinds of children we serve, with their risk of death. Later in 2018, ASHIC Shelter opened doors for the cancer warriors in ASHIC's own property. The Shelter is equipped with 20-bed free accommodation facility which is within 2 km of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Hospital, the Primary Pediatric Oncology Hospital. Families are motivated to complete the treatment protocol which is the direct positive impact on survival rates. Now there is widespread recognition and support for both programmes.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I started my career at 40 becoming a dedicated social worker from being a housewife. By then, my surviving children were all grown up. Work life balance was not so difficult. My husband, Mr. Afzal Husain Choudhury, who is a life-long entrepreneur, was my great support and inspiration. He is also the Founder President of ASHIC, which he conceptualized as a way to bring me back to life after the loss of our son. I can never forget the support of my daughter Maheen Hamid, who was deeply affected by the loss of her brother. She started helping out with ASHIC from a very young age with a profound desire to help improve the chances for the disadvantaged cancer warriors in Bangladesh. As the Director of Outreach and Content Management, she plays an important role in establishing the strategic direction for ASHIC, including its fundraising and marketing initiatives. The continuous support of my mother works as a strength for me. I am grateful to the Almighty for the blessing I received to continue my work.

## My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders

I would tell my 25-year-old self, "Never underestimate the power of motherhood. It can move mountains." Pediatric Oncology chose me as its ambassador once I lost my son at age 40. Otherwise, this field might have been neglected for longer in Bangladesh. My mother's heart couldn't bear the suffering of another child or mother, and I found my healing in the work we do.

Childhood cancer is a very sensitive and touching field. In our country, very few children can survive. I would encourage the young generation of professionals who are just now embarking on a career in Pediatric Oncology to consider doing research on Childhood Cancer and help create an accurate database of the real scenario in Bangladesh. With a focus on improving survival rates to reach Western standards, the youth has the opportunity to define new career paths.