



We believe in life before death

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**Christian
Aid Week**
11-17 May 08

**'If we come together,
we can achieve
amazing things.'**



Christian Aid/Mohammadur Rahman

Through the new village *pani parishad* (water council), Minu Basar (centre left) has learned how to harvest rainwater safely so that she doesn't have to travel for a whole day and cross a dangerous river to fetch drinking water

Rekha Biswas from Bangladesh provides the most humbling and inspirational example for Christian Aid Week. This courageous lady goes from house to house, talking to families about the problems they face getting water. And vitally, she challenges gender roles. She encourages women to come to meetings of the local *pani parishad*, the village water council.

Getting clean water is a problem throughout Bangladesh. In the

northeast, water scarcity and lack of infrastructure create difficulties for the many landless communities living there. In the central low-lying wetlands, the land is flooded for more than half the year and underground water sources can be contaminated with arsenic. In the southwest, the rise in sea-levels, partly as a result of climate change, is making fresh water salty. People often have to walk for up to 24 hours to collect water to drink.

And when water's not on tap, as it is for most of us in the developed world, it's women and children who suffer the most. They spend hours carrying heavy pots of water to their families. Lack of water can also lead to family disputes, with women and children bearing the brunt of their husbands' or fathers' short tempers at the end of a day's labour, and risking abuse. Women also have no economic independence as their lives are spent collecting water. And they end up caring for family members who become sick through drinking dirty water. Children lose out on education because they have to spend long periods fetching water.

Rekha has voiced this injustice and given hope to the whole village. Salt water has replaced most of the fresh water sources in her village. But she believes there is a solution to this problem, and the lack of basic human rights in the coastal region of Bangladesh where she lives. Rekha believes that it's through communities – and especially women – finding their voices that change can be instigated.

Christian Aid partner The Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies has set up *pani parishads* in villages throughout Bangladesh. These community organisations discuss and agree the best water supply solutions for their particular villages. The water councils also provide a forum for addressing other community issues. Now that the village has clean water, the *pani parishad* is working to establish schools, as well as looking at plans to reconstruct roads and take action

to stop child marriage. The villagers now have the power to make their lives better.

And the *pani parishads* encourage women to take an active role. Each council must have more than 50 per cent female membership and the president must be female.

Rekha explains that: 'In the *pani parishad*, we give training to help [people] understand what they need and then how to achieve it. But most importantly, they understand that they can do things for themselves.'

Rekha tells people that if they come together, they can achieve things that they couldn't if they were alone. By giving up a couple of hours during Christian Aid Week, you are collecting so much more than money. Your gifts can mean water, rights and courage. By coming together, we can achieve amazing things.

A gift of just £0.50/€0.75 to Christian Aid would pay for one day's gender training per person with BCAS to improve relationships in families and lessen the burden on women. £50/€75 would pay for the monthly salary of a community *pani parishad* coordinator, who helps women and the poor to discover their voice, understand their right to water, learn about health and hygiene, and begin to instigate change. Your gifts can help to give voice to a single woman or to a whole community.

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