

# Reaching everyone, everywhere

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Last year, we met Subita Rani in a tea garden in Sreemangal. A former tea garden worker, Subita walks over half an hour each day, going down a steep hill and climbing up again with two full kalshis, each weighing over 20 litres, to collect water from an open stream for her family. When we showed the video at a national conference, many people were astonished that this is still the reality for many women in our country.

In Bangladesh, as in many other developing countries, it is women and girls who bear the responsibility of collecting water. Like Subita, thousands of women across the country must travel long distances or queue for hours, even though accessible and affordable water is a human right.

In Mirpur, we spoke to Mabiya, a young mother of one, living with her husband in a slum in Bauniabadh. Mabiya cannot afford the firewood needed to boil water for drinking, so she and her husband drink raw water, and only boil a small amount for their baby's bath. Thousands of families like Mabiya's are risking avoidable bouts of illness from poor water quality every day, which can debilitate adults and impair children's nutrition and cognitive status in the long run.

The impact of water on women is perhaps most visible across Bangladesh's long coastline. Rising salinity and the scarcity of freshwater in this region not only mean that women have to travel further for drinking water, but are also much more likely to suffer from diseases like eclampsia and gestational hypertension, which puts both mothers' and babies' lives at risk. Whether in isolated tea gardens or crowded slums, from the city to the coast, women and girls across the country are sacrificing their time and health for what should be a doorstep service.

And the stories do not end there. Even beyond the immediate need of drinking water, women and girls are feeling the pressures of a world where access to water, sanitation and hygiene is not equal for all. In a madrasah in Sonatala upazila, we met Minara, a shy adolescent of 13, who took some time to open up about the problems she faces in school. Every month, Minara misses around five days of school because of her period. The madrasah toilets are over-used,

daily life more difficult.

A key challenge in Bangladesh's water landscape is that the collection of drinking water, from pumping to carrying, is largely a manual process. However, Bangladesh is globally recognised as an innovation hub for development challenges, and investment in creative, indigenous solutions for extracting and transporting water could free up time for education, employment and leisure for millions of women in our country.

While government safety net schemes are meant to support persons with disabilities, water and sanitation facilities provided by these schemes are not designed to be inclusive, and ultimately do little to alleviate the hardship these households face. Without a holistic, equitable approach that takes into account disparities across different populations and geographies, we will not be able to achieve SDG 6 – cleanwater and sanitation for all.



PHOTO: SAIKAT MAJUMDER

dirty and have no space or facilities for girls to change or dispose of their menstrual cloths. Every month, Minara has to invent a story about being ill to avoid awkward questions from teachers and classmates. Whether it is in school, in workplaces or on the road, women and girls have to contend with a world where a lack of adequate, inclusive water and sanitation facilities makes every aspect of

Supporting technical innovations, we need inclusive water services that can reach those typically left behind. This not only means adequate water and sanitation facilities for women and girls both in public and personal life, but also bringing in issues of accessibility and affordability that affect different marginalised groups, such as disability-friendly design and progressive water tariffs.

This World Water Day, we need to recommit to genuine progress, where no one is left behind; where Subita, Mabiya and Minara – and the millions they represent – can live lives free of the silent struggle for water.

Shahrikh Mirza and Khairul Islam are Strategic Support Specialist and Country Director of WaterAid Bangladesh, respectively.

## Private solution for a public good

The Daily Star talks to Ruhi M Ahmed, AGM, CSR, BSRM, about BSRM's initiatives to reduce water wastage and provide clean drinking water in water-scarce regions of the country.



**What are the ongoing water-related initiatives of BSRM?**  
Providing fresh drinking water in disaster-prone and remote areas is one of the top priorities of BSRM CSR desk. We work in partnership with various local NGOs such as TMSS, GBS, GUK and NDP. We want to contribute towards Bangladesh's effort to achieve the SDGs.

Our first project was in Jainta Pahar Hill Tract, Sylhet. There we established a water pump for people living in the hill tracts. This initiative not only solved the water crisis but also saved enough time for the children there to attend school. Now these kids are going to school, have a happy and safe childhood, and are poised to build a meaningful life.

In our Mirsarai Water Treatment Plant, every day we draw around 30 lakh litres of water of which 9 lakh litres are wasted due to backwash or blowdown. To prevent this wastage, instead of draining the water, we draw it back to our lagoon which is an artificial water reservoir. We treat the water once again and make the water reusable. We have established 100 tubewells for 100 households in

eight to ten villages of Gaibandha. We are also working with supply of pure drinking water in Kurigram, Khulna and Barisal. So far, the number of our beneficiaries is 30,000.

Besides setting up water facilities, we provide training to local people on the usage of these machineries so that regular and efficient functioning of the water supply system can be ensured.

Overall, our interventions have helped prevent water-prone diseases leading to reduction in medical expense and absenteeism in school. Easy access to safe drinking water has also lessened the burden on women of collecting water from far-flung areas and thus increased their employment and productivity.

**What is your plan for the future?**  
At present, we have a plan to supply safe drinking water to 1,000 households and 7,000 people in five villages of Satkhira. We will try to reach more hard-to-reach and disaster-prone areas in the future.

The private sector should come forward to support the government's initiatives to supply freshwater in water-scarce regions of the country.

## “Reuse, reserve and recycle water to increase efficiency”

In conversation with Dr Ainun Nishat, Adviser, Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research, BRAC University.

**What is the current state of rivers in Bangladesh?**

There are hundreds of rivers in the northern and central part of the country which have been allowed to be silted up. At present, river encroachment and siltation have emerged as big problems across the country. Additionally, excessive river water is being pumped for the purpose of irrigation. Moreover, the rivers in the southern part are facing an issue of salinity due to the impact of climate change and sea level rise.

The first and foremost thing we can do is restore the river to its original form through the process of desilting and dredging. Instead of dredging, we can use manual desilting process for small rivers. Large rivers may require mechanical dredging. We need to establish a modus operandi to restore rivers back to their original form.

Since cities are becoming more urbanised, what impact is it having on the efficient use of water? In most of the towns, groundwater is used for water supply and sanitation. However, surface water should be used for water supply and sanitation instead of groundwater. Establishing area-based local water treatment plants can be a good solution. Furthermore, if we develop a well-designed sewerage system in the urban areas, it would be possible to recycle the water for further use.

Slums are very congested and are always in need of water supply. At present, the price of water is pretty much the same in both residential and slum areas. In fact, the amount of water spent by a household in residential areas to wash cars can possibly support 10 families in a slum. So, the price of water should be maintained based on affordability. A change in the pricing system will increase water efficiency and allow slum dwellers to have access to water at an affordable rate.



**How can we ensure better access to water in water-scarce regions?**  
For the CHT, the small rivulets are sufficient to carry water throughout the year. But due to deforestation, the water-holding capacity in the ground has dwindled significantly. As a result, many of the rivulets have begun to run out of water, especially in the summer. Therefore, we should go for watershed management in order to increase the moisture-holding capacity of the soil. Additionally, the small fountains and waterfalls should be protected to ensure a constant supply of water.

In the drought-prone region, we need to build a mechanism for storing rainwater, particularly across the northern region. We should implement this mechanism for the southern region as well to avoid the issues associated with groundwater salinity. **How can water be used more efficiently in our everyday lives?**  
For industrial areas, Effluent Treatment Plants (ETPs) should be

the preferable option because they are designed to purify industrial wastewater for its reuse.

If we change the frequency of irrigation and go for the Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) method, we can improve water efficiency and replace the usual system of maintaining continuous standing water in the crop fields.

The level of groundwater is going down due to excessive extraction. We can extract groundwater through two pump systems: suction mode pump and force mode pump. Suction mode pump limits the extraction up to 8 metres whereas with force mode pump, we can extract an unlimited amount of water. We should evaluate the recharge potential and then decide on pumping water. As of today, there is no regulation on the extraction of groundwater.

Full version of the interview is available in The Daily Star website.

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