

# Women of the well

*Bangladeshis take need for water into their own hands*

BY DONNA WHITE

THERE IS SOMETHING magical about Bangladesh. It's as if the present came into the country but the past refused to leave. Rickshaws and donkey carts weave in and out of BMWs and Toyotas on busy and congested streets, vendors turn samosas and parathas in pans set over coal fires in front of Pizza Huts and Baskin Robbins, and if you can't afford a visit to a dentist in one of the spacious, marble floored clinics, you can always sit on a wooden bench on a sidewalk and have your teeth cleaned or extracted as people pass by. It's a place where east meets west or west meets east, whichever way you want to say it.

And there is colour. The cities burst with it — vibrant, rich, energizing — from the bold fabric of the saris and salwar kameezs the women wear, to the flags hanging from the store fronts, to the bright flowers growing alongside the roads — everything speaks — no, correction — shouts of a celebration, a feast for the eyes, a decadence that brings every colour of the rainbow into a frenzy of dance.

But Bangladesh is a country of extremes: extreme wealth and extreme poverty, sparkling marble floors near garbage-strewn streets, boys and girls dressed in uniforms riding buses to school past children in ragged shirts and shorts sorting through garbage bins. It is a place of those who have, and those who do not.

But it is changing.

A country's development is dependent on its ability to sustain a



ONE CITY  
MANY VOICES

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middle class. An economy that encourages a widening gap between the wealthy and the poor has very little hope in maintaining democracy. Those who have will always suppress those who don't.

In a far-off corner in the city of Chittagong stands a well, nestled in the centre of a group of houses. Women gather there in the morning, filling their containers, taking a few moments to share a little gossip, chat about the day's coming events and responsibilities.

Most wells in developing countries are the result of the assistance of humanitarian organizations who drill the wells, set the pipes, and teach the townspeople how to maintain them. In recognition of their efforts, these groups will leave a plaque of sorts on the well: This well provided by Wells for Life or Lifewater or whatever the organization may be.

But this well has no such plaque because it is not the result of any hu-



DONNA WHITE PHOTO

**Two women in the Bangladeshi city of Chittagong get water from a well they helped to buy through sales in their own stores of items they made.**

manitarian organization. It is there because of the women in the community.

Shortly after a group of women received their business certificates through a World Vision incentive to help women with little or no education, they opened their own stores selling their wares: handmade saris and shalwar kameezs, woven rugs and tapestries,

handcrafted purses, etc.

Then they set up their own savings account. Every week each woman would put a few taka from their sales into the account until week by week, month by month, the savings grew until they were able to purchase their own well with their own money.

The results of this collective were

more than just clean water and reducing the number of hours the women had to spend walking each day to get water from a distant well. There was pride, a restoration of faith, and a reassurance of hope. These women were able to see that these positive changes were the result of their efforts and their determination to make their community a better place for them and their children.

And it didn't stop there.

Businesses did well. School uniforms and supplies were purchased and their children started going to school. Businesses expanded and more women were hired and given fair wages. Living conditions were improved. A struggle, yes, but one faced with pride and perseverance.

A lovely story and one that can occur again and again when we realize the power of people when they are given the opportunities to rise out of poverty and be the catalyst for their own changes.

And that is a good thing.

*Donna White is the author of the Stones trilogy. An avid traveller, she enjoys visiting other countries and experiencing everything each culture has to offer. Her writing seeks to reveal situations in the world that aren't regarded as newsworthy but should be. She resides in Canada with her husband, children, dogs, cats and horses on their hobby farm in Northwestern Ontario. You can visit her website at [www.donnawhite-books.com](http://www.donnawhite-books.com) to find photo galleries, teaching resources, and more. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.*