

Rahela: Inspiring Change

Participant Profile	
Name	Rahela
Date of Joining CLP	2006
District	Gaibandha
Village	Pashchim Golna
Marital Staus	Married
Implementing Organisation	GUK



In Bangladeshi families, women are traditionally the homemakers: caring for children and managing household chores. Although women make an important and vital contribution to society, it is the male role of providing financially, that is seen as having greater value. In rural char areas where CLP works, people’s lifestyles remain very traditional and women have limited opportunities to participate economically, either through starting their own business or having an independent income.

Rahela Begum joined the CLP in 2006. She currently lives with her husband and three children: two daughters and one son. Prior to this, she had been the victim of river erosion four times and has experienced tragic losses as a result. In one of the more extreme floods, 16 years ago, her son fell into the water. The floods were so severe that Rahela could not save him. Soon after, her daughter fell sick from diarrhoea. Rahela said “We were poor and could not provide her with good food, we could not take proper care of her and so she died.”

Each time the flooding hit, Rahela lost almost all her assets: her land; her house; and most of her livestock. On the last occasion, she saved her two cows, the roof of her house and a tube well, but she was unable to rescue many of her possessions. She said “I had two plinths and a large number of trees which were lost due to the river erosion.



Rahela, with her son, who will one day continue the livelihood she has worked hard to develop



Rahela, with her family, picking chilies ready to sell at the market

The trees were worth more than two lac taka (around £1,667)." She relocated to a nearby char that had not been as badly affected, however she did not have any land to build on. Her husband is almost 30 years her senior and due to his age is now unable to work. Her family were forced to sell their cattle and tin roof in order to earn some money for food. Rahela described this period of her life as "sorrowful" saying, "...we just survived day by day, hand to mouth."

When Rahela joined CLP she was not sure exactly where it would lead her, but she hoped that it would enable her to make a better life for her family. She received a bull and two sheep from CLP, worth around £108. When she sold her bull she made a 30% profit. She realised it was important for her future to reinvest her money wisely in livestock that could increase in value. Rahela purchased two bulls and when she eventually sold these cattle, she again, made a healthy profit. Rahela proudly says that "After selling those two bulls, I bought another three with the profit. With this continuous process I leased land to grow chili. Then we built our house, set up a tube well and planted trees all around our house."

Today, Rahela has managed to vastly improve her livelihood. She now produces enough chili to sell at the market, enabling her to financially care for her family. She now feels that she is in a good position and should help other women do the same. If people come to her for help she will offer them support. She advises other women in her village to protect the cattle and other livestock they receive from CLP. If they do this and work hard, then their lives will improve.

She explains the importance of being economically empowered by saying "Listen, money is God in society. If I have enough money, my son, my husband and all others will love and respect me.

If I don't have any money, no one will consider me important. No one bites a fleshless bone."

In the future, Rahela hopes to keep her land safe from erosion so that she can pass it on to her son. She has found a way out of extreme poverty and hopes that her son, too, can maintain this productive livelihood.

When we asked Rahela what makes her feel empowered, she replied, "I have a house, two thirds of an acre of land, a tube well and other belongings. If there are any conflicts in the village, people will ask for my opinion and they value what I say. I am invited to festivals and other social occasions. People respect me."

Rahela has become economically empowered. Her determination and good investment decisions have enabled her to establish an independent income and provide for her family. As a result, her family will grow to be healthier, have greater access to resources and opportunities, and continue to strengthen their livelihoods.

Increasing Rahela's economic empowerment has also had wider implications. She is better respected and is able to take on a more equal role in her home. She and her husband now both make decisions regarding their assets, whereas before, she had little or no power over decisions being made.

She said, "My husband used to earn and provide food for us and we had to listen to him. All decisions used to come from him but now I can make decisions independently. My husband listens to me now and values my opinions." Achieving economically has also increased her status among the community. This has had positive effects on her overall happiness and increased her confidence to participate in society. Rahela has shown that despite adversity in her past, she has taken control of her life and created economic change for herself and her family.

CLP is committed to increasing the empowerment of women. Between 2010 and 2016 CLP will work with 78,000 households impacting over 1 million people living on the chars, in 8 districts of northwest Bangladesh. All of CLP participants are women and are provided with an income generating asset when they join the programme, worth Tk. 17,500 (around £146). For most, this is the first step towards economic empowerment. Women choose and purchase their asset at the market: an activity usually undertaken by the male in the household. Contributing such a significant asset to her family also raises her status in the home.

This is combined with a monthly stipend and social development training which covers topics such as violence against women, dowry, and the prevention of early marriage. CLP also enrolls our core participants' husbands in couples' training and deliver a one day training to raise awareness among influential men in the community.