Surrounded by water but Marufa walks for two hours for a single pitcher of water

On Bangladesh's cyclone exposed southern coast, Marufa Akter is surrounded by rivers and canals yet safe drinking water is one of the hardest things to find. As the Nature Pulse project brings rainwater harvesting system to her community, Marufa is about to spend her days differently.



Marufa Akter (30) is a mother of two sons who have been living in Paschim Padma community for the past 18 years, where families face recurring threats from cyclones, tidal surges, river erosion and salinity. But staying in the same community has not always meant staying in the same place. Repeated erosion has forced Marufa's family to move over the years, constantly adapting to a changing landscape. Then, in 2024, Cyclone Remal brought another devastating setback in her life.

"In the last cyclone, Remal, my nearby neighbour's house swept away, and my own house was affected by the tidal surge. My father had to take us to the cyclone shelter. Even my cow shed and my chicken shed were just taken away by the high wind."

A coast surrounded by water she cannot drink

For Marufa, climate change is therefore not an abstract threat. It affects her family, their safety, and whether they can access something as basic as drinking water. Despite being surrounded by many waterbodies, Patharghata upazila faces a severe shortage of safe drinking water. Its proximity to the Bay of Bengal makes the local rivers highly saline and unsuitable for consumption, while the area's geographical setting makes it difficult to install deep tube-wells. Even where drilling has been attempted, boring to depths of 1,200–1,300 feet has failed to locate a usable aquifer with good-quality water. Rising salinity and limited access to safe groundwater leave families like Marufa's dependent on distant water sources, ponds, or purchased water.

"I need to walk more than two kilometers to collect fresh water. Sometimes it takes around two to three hours because there are so many people waiting in line."

For a mother of two, the journey is not simply tiring but its physically challenging too.

"I have a problem with my hand, so sometimes I cannot go to the pond and collect water myself. When I cannot manage, I need to buy water from people who sell it. Sometimes the water does not last more than a day. We must ration it because we are afraid it will finish."



Winter without enough water

The water crisis becomes particularly difficult for this community people during the dry season.

"During winter, we suffer a lot because we do not get enough fresh water. Sometimes we have no choice but to drink saline water or use pond water. We try to boil the pond water, but it needs a lot of fuel, and even then I do not feel that the water is completely pure. Due to the unhygienic water, especially the children suffer a lot from stomach diseases."

Her concerns are consistent with wider evidence from coastal community of Bangladesh, where saline and contaminated water sources are associated with health risks and where children can be particularly vulnerable to the consequences of unsafe drinking water.

During the monsoon, Marufa collects water from the roof of her house using whatever containers she has available.

"During the rainy season, we try to collect rainwater from the roof and store it for drinking and cooking. But we do not have a proper system to filter it, so sometimes there are water insects (microorganisms) in the water."



Bringing safe water closer to home

Marufa has watched her neighbours receiving rainwater harvesting systems (RWHS) through some NGOs and hoped her turn would come. Now, under Nature Pulse Project, supported by the British Red Cross and implemented by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, 60 vulnerable households in Patharghata will receive rainwater harvesting systems. Marufa is one of the selected beneficiaries.

"It will help us especially during winter, when we suffer the most from water shortages. I will be able to store rainwater safely and use it for drinking and cooking purposes. I will not need to walk such a long distance to collect water. It will save my time and energy, and I can use that time for other work at home."

For Marufa, the value of the system is measured not only in litres of water, but in hours saved, physical effort reduced and fewer worries about her children becoming sick.

A simple solution to a daily struggle

For Marufa, that means being able to look beyond the next water collection trip. For years, Marufa has lived in a difficult situation. Every journey to collect it costs time and energy. Every dry season brings greater uncertainty. A rainwater harvesting system cannot stop cyclones or prevent salinity from affecting the coast. But it can give a family safer and more reliable source of drinking water when other sources are unavailable.

For Marufa, that means being able to look beyond the next water collection trip. ***"I am glad that I have been selected for this support. I hope that once the system is installed, my family will have safe water at home."***

A responsibility she is ready to take on

Marufa is already thinking about how she will care for the system once it is installed.

"I will keep the tank clean because it is connected to my family's health. It will be my responsibility to keep it clean. If it needs minor repairs, I will try to maintain it myself. I want to take good care of it because this water will be for my family."



But for Marufa, safe water is not something that should belong to one family alone.

"Most of the people here are suffering like us from the same problem. I would definitely share water with anyone who needs it. Even now, if I have stored water, I try to help my neighbours."

Now the journey for drinking water will not begin with a two-kilometer walk. It will begin with the rain falling on her own roof. With continued support to reach the remaining households in Patharghata, the Nature Pulse project can help more families like hers turn Barguna's abundant rain into the safe, everyday water they have always deserved.