

**Urmi, the Change Maker in Rural Bangladesh:  
Preschooler and Her Friends Lead WASH Efforts**

**By**

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When you think of a community leader, you might not picture Urmi, a six-year-old girl in rural Bangladesh. Despite her young age, Urmi inspires improvements in health and nutrition for children and adults in her village.

Every morning, Urmi, an active young girl with black hair and sparkling dark eyes, rushes to wash her hands with her pre-primary classmates before entering the class. She is one of the 78,712 Bangladeshi children enrolled in Save the Children's PROTEEVA Early Childhood Development and Education Support Program. With its language and math activities, the program helps young children like Urmi establish the foundations for success in primary school and beyond. Sanitation and hygiene education is an important component of the program in which children learn about cleanliness and hand washing.

Urmi's village, Mondalpara, is a farming community, where only one third of the adults are literate. Like other villages in the region, Mondalpara struggles with health and sanitation issues. Before Save the Children began working in the community, it was common for villagers to defecate in open spaces. They rarely washed their hands and, if they did, it was without soap and enough water.

Urmi formed a group with five friends to spread messages to other classrooms about the importance of hand washing with soap. The children drew pictures, made flipcharts, and created flash cards with hand washing and other health-related information

they had learned from their preschool teacher. Excitement about handwashing and other hygienic behaviours quickly spread through the school.

School sanitation has also improved significantly. Thanks to PROTEEVA more than 630 latrines in primary schools now have necessary supplies, like a bucket for hand washing, soap, and water. PROTEEVA plans to ensure that more and more schools have these supplies to make the latrine areas more usable and child friendly.

The school health and nutrition (SHN) component of PROTEEVA works at various levels – school, community and government - to address health and sanitation needs of preschool and school-age children. PROTEEVA will have reached more than 950,000 children by 2014. The community assists as well by refilling supplies and helping to maintain cleanliness in the toilet areas.

Before the program, children often missed school because of diarrhoea, dysentery and other common water-borne diseases; but now the community has noticed a striking improvement in school attendance because of the increased attention to hygiene.

Open defecation rarely occurs at the school now because the children use the toilets much more consistently. One girl's mother said, "We are thankful to PROTEEVA. We could not think of a solution like this. Our children, especially the girls, are more comfortable using the toilets now".

Urmi's mission extended beyond the school walls, as she and her team went door to door sharing information about cleanliness and hand washing with her classmates' families. Because of her commitment to sanitation and hygiene education in her school and the community, Urmi has become the face of Save the Children's PROTEEVA in her district.

Urmi and her peers demonstrate that even the youngest children can be agents of positive change.

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