

March 2019

LEPRA CELEBRATES THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF FEMALE COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS TO MARK INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2019

This International Women's Day, global charity Lepra is calling for a more gender-balanced world. Gender equality is something that Lepra is deeply passionate about with evidence suggesting that **gender inequality in leprosy endemic countries is one of the main barriers preventing women accessing treatment.** To mark the day, Lepra is celebrating the work of its female Community Champions and raising awareness of women's right to access healthcare without these barriers related to gender, or from male family members, and to ensure that women affected by leprosy are supported rather than judged.

Community Champions are Lepra's unsung heroes. Every day they venture into new communities across Bangladesh looking for new cases of neglected leprosy, educating people and teaching methods that could improve lives. With the support of Community Champions, **Lepra reached 301,000 children, women and men directly through diagnosis, treatment and care last year.** Without these individuals and their hard work and dedication, Lepra would be unable to reach so many people.

Leprosy affects over **7 million** of the most vulnerable people in the world, causing life-changing disabilities and attracting terrible **prejudice and discrimination, particularly for women.** No woman should be abandoned, divorced or have her children taken away from her because she has been affected by leprosy, a curable disease. Women who have been cured of leprosy are just as valuable and important than those who have never been affected and Lepra, alongside its Community Champions, is on a mission to ensure that this is recognised throughout its projects.

Lepra's Reaching the Unreached project in Bangladesh aims to empower women within communities to detect the early signs of leprosy and lymphatic filariasis. The project, which was started in 2016 is now at the end of its three year cycle, and has helped to train women to detect the disease and support other women who cannot access the treatment due to gender boundaries. Lepra trained 134 Community Champions in the project's first year alone – 50% of these Community Champions were women who were affected by leprosy or lymphatic filariasis. Community Champions helped to detect 1,157 cases of leprosy (43% women) in just two years, highlighting how

it's helped to ensure that women are not missed, and instead receive enhanced screening for leprosy.

One example of the project's success is the drop in reported ulcers caused by the disease. Leprosy affects the nervous system, leading to a lack of feeling. Consequently, some of the main symptoms of the disease are ulcers and injuries which people are unable to feel. As a result of Lepra's Community Champions' training in self-care, patient follow up and referral systems, only 16% of patients report ulcers today, compared to 52% in 2016.

Surveys are conducted predominantly by the female Community Champions in areas with a high prevalence of leprosy, including tribal and marginalised areas. Due to the Community Champions being female, Lepra has found that they were able to **visit and examine women in their homes, overcoming some barriers which previously prevented access.**

Lepra is determined to find even more women who are affected by leprosy. In order to do this, the charity requires even more Community Champions. **For just £13, Lepra can train a Community Champion to recognise symptoms of leprosy.** That skill alone would prevent thousands of people every year from living a lifetime with disability. To help Lepra achieve this, people are being encouraged to host a life-changing tea or donate to <https://www.lepra.org.uk/life-changing-tea>.

Geoff Prescott, Chief Executive at Lepra, says: "For us, International Women's Day is about celebrating the amazing achievements of the women who work with Lepra to support thousands of women affected by the disease every year. Without Community Champions offering their services in Bangladesh and the support of women throughout the countries we work in, we would be unable to reach the remote and rural areas, and those living within them. Our Community Champions help us to ensure that we don't leave anybody behind in our quest to alleviate some of the impact of neglected diseases."

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Notes to Editors

About Lepra

Lepra is a UK-based international specialist charity that has been working to beat leprosy since 1924. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II became Patron of Lepra in 1952, shortly after the death of her father King George VI, who had been Lepra's Patron since the charity was founded in 1924.

Leprosy affects over 7 million of the most vulnerable people in the world, causing life-changing disabilities and attracting terrible prejudice and discrimination. **But there is a cure.**

Lepra works to beat leprosy in India, Bangladesh and Mozambique by finding, diagnosing and treating people affected by the disease. By raising awareness, pushing for early detection and supporting people living with disabilities caused by leprosy, Lepra works towards a day when this disease no longer destroys lives.

Last year, the charity reached 301,000 people through diagnosis, treatment and care. It reached a further 1.7 million people through health education and events to raise awareness of leprosy and other neglected diseases.

Find out more about Lepra on its website and social media channels:

Website: lepra.org.uk

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LEPRAUK/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LepraUK>

You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/LEPRAHinA>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/LepraUK/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/lepra/>