

We owe you

Their tales highlight the struggles women still face and the sacrifices and strength they need to overcome adversity. "Confidence and sheer will -- that is why nothing could stop them," one distinguished guest said when they were honoured by The Daily Star and IPDC Finance on Friday night. They are our unsung women heroes whose lives show what real courage and patriotism are all about.



TEPRI RANI

Her war never ended

Tepri Rani, now 65, still remembers the torture of Pakistani occupation forces at an army camp for six months. She was refused by her husband after the country's independence in December 1971. She was rejected by her own society for 40 odd years.

In May 1971, Tepri was newlywed when the Pakistan occupation army picked her up from her home in Bolidwar village of Thakurgaon's Ranisankail upazila.

Using sheer willpower, she fought social stigma and raised her son.

But her struggle and sacrifice for the nation remained unrecognised until she was bestowed with the title Birangana in 2017.

The Thakurgaon deputy commissioner's office built a house for her that year. Since March 2018, the war heroine has been getting her freedom fighter allowance.

But the war crimes committed against Tepri still haunt her.

"They [the Pakistani occupation army] used to torture me if I did not act as per their will," says Tepri.

She has been suffering from hearing impairment due to the torture she was subject to. She does not talk much these days.

The war heroine recalled that another phase of her struggle began once her husband refused to accept her back after the war. "There was no respect for me in society after returning from the Pakistani camp," she said bitterly.

On how she lived her life in those unbearable days, Tepri said, "After the death of my parents, I used to collect vegetables to feed my family. Later, I somehow managed a job at a local rice mill. I was paid Tk 5 per day in those days."

Tepri now mostly confines herself to a small room in her house.

Her son Sudhir said his mother gained some respect from the local community after the government's recognition.



BIVA RANI

Birangana awaits recognition

Biva Rani, 63, fell victim to the torture of Pakistani forces during the Liberation War when she was an eighth grader. Despite applying for recognition of her sacrifice during the war around five years ago, her status is yet to be acknowledged. Meanwhile, to run her family that includes her differently abled son only, she does odd jobs.

Her husband, with whom she was married off a few months after the Liberation War, left her in 1988 when their son was born. Since then she has been floated on a turbulent sea.

In 1971, Biva along with her five siblings were living at their native home. The Pakistani soldiers, local razzakars and some other collaborators set their family shop on fire at a local market.

Her father, who was a small trader in Toriki Bandar, tried to flee with his family to nearby Ramjanpur (Madanipur). But they became separated.

Together with some other women, Biva took shelter in a sugarcane field. Unfortunately, local razzakars found them and they were handed over to Pakistani soldiers. "We all became victims in that field," Biva says, weeping. "They tortured us and I lost consciousness."

When the army eventually left the area, Biva's father found her and brought her home.

Their family shop had been looted and burned. Biva was married off to a local, Anukul Majumdar, not much more than two months later. Both families soon after started on the perilous and long journey by boat and on foot to reach India as refugees.

After liberation, they returned. When her son was born in 1988, Biva says he was "alright" but Sagor later suffered a head injury.

"We took him to the Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital but due to incorrect treatment, the nerves and muscles in his feet, along with his brain, were affected. He became both physically and mentally disabled. Since my husband left, I have had to face the fight for our survival alone."

"I am old now," says Biva. "But I still have to care for my son. I had hoped to be recognised for the events that led to me being a victim of the Liberation War, so some years ago I filed an application online. Since then I've heard nothing."

The local upazila committee has sent a recommendation for Biva's recognition as a freedom fighter to the central committee; a final decision is pending.

Biva still awaits her recognition.



LAILY BEGUM

Fisherwoman against the tide

Laily Begum, Barisal division's first fisherwoman with a licence to catch hilsa, has been sailing on the Bishkhal river for the last 13 years.

The 35-year-old woman entered the traditionally male-dominated fishing industry out of necessity and gradually secured her place.

Laily's family, along with her neighbours at North Dalbhanga village at Dhalua union in Barguna Sadar upazila, never tasted prosperity because of continuous river erosion and other natural disasters. On top of that, cyclone Sidr hit the area in 2007.

A few months after the cyclone wrecked their village, Laily lost her father and elder brother to illness. Her younger brother got married and moved away with his family, leaving Laily and her sick and elderly mother.

Feeling completely at a loss, Laily then decided not to get married and vowed to take sole responsibility of her mother and herself.

For a woman like Laily, who had never gone to a school, work opportunities were limited.

She tried her hand at farming on their family land but that was not enough to cover their living costs.

This is when Laily turned to the Bishkhal.

She asked one of her relatives to take her fishing, but he ignored her and even chided her for making such a request. But she did not give up. She was steadfast in her objective, learned fishing and slowly became adept at it.

Laily borrowed Tk 50,000 from a fish trader. She built a fishing trawler in association with a partner, bought nets and traps, and started fishing.

She spends about six to seven hours waiting for the tidal cycle while fishing in the river. Out in the sea, it is a six to seven days' task.

She said she was somewhat frightened during her first few fishing trips but her fellow fishermen gave her courage.

Now she earns between Tk 500 and Tk 1,000 per day.



MOMOTAJ MOHAL BABY

Librarian enlightening a village

Momotaj Mohal Baby has been enlightening people of Dashiarchhara, a former Indian enclave in Kurigram's Phulbari upazila, through a library.

With a hope of doing good to her community, Momotaj established Golam Maola Alor Dishari Library with her limited resources in September 2015, a month after 162 enclaves were exchanged between Bangladesh and India.

Momotaj particularly wanted to develop reading habits among the girls and young women of Dashiarchhara as they were less exposed to the outside world.

The 37-year-old woman started collecting old books in 2009 and loaned those for free. After the enclave exchange, she inspired her husband Golam Maola to donate two decimals of land and later built a tin hut spending Tk 45,000 from their joint savings.

She said the library was named after her husband for his generous contribution of land and money.

Spending Tk 500-600, she buys at least two to three books every month and subscribes to a daily and a monthly newspaper for the library.

Momotaj, who currently works as a teacher at a mosque-based literacy programme run by the Islamic Foundation, also received Tk 29,000 in cash and books worth Tk 29,000 from the National Public Library in Dhaka in two installments.

Her library now has a collection of 450 publications which includes novels, poetry, children's literature, travelogues, science fiction, religious books, and guidebooks for high school and college goers.

After completing her day job, Momotaj spends most of her afternoons at the library, which is open six days a week, except Fridays, from 4:00pm to 5:30pm.

Anyone can enter the library free of cost, read books and newspapers there, and borrow one book for three days.

With the monthly salary of Tk 4,500 from her teaching job, Momotaj could not afford to keep up with library users' demand for new books.

Momotaj applied for library registration to the Kurigram District Public Library authority. Once the library is registered, she hopes to increase her collection of books.

Through the library, the visionary librarian looks forward to continuing her task of enlightening the young people, and especially women, of Dashiarchhara.



MARJIA RABBANI SHASHI

Soul of resilience

With the help of her advocate father, 26-year-old Marjia Rabbani Shashi became the first blind female lawyer in the history of the Faridpur Bar Association. She has been practicing in the Faridpur court for the past year.

"As a lawyer, I want to help poor people. My father advised me to help the poor," she said.

But it seems her spell of bad luck is not yet over.

Her father, Golam Rabbani Babu Mridha, who used to read out case documents for her before court appearances, died on January 21 this year.

Marjia herself is currently admitted to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU). She needs a kidney transplant to live, but her family members are yet to find a perfect match.

She has needed dialysis twice a week since she was a second-year student at university. Marjia is also blind since birth.

Marjia's husband Md Zahangir Alom runs a cosmetic shop in Faridpur. The couple lives with Marjia's mother Afroza Rabbani.

"I fell in a great problem since my husband's death. We need Tk 48,000 every month for Marjia's dialysis twice a week but I have no source of income to meet her treatment costs. I don't know what I shall do for my daughter's treatment in the future," said Afroza.

"If someone gives a kidney to my daughter, she will survive. I lost my husband a month ago, I don't want to lose my daughter too," she said.

"As a mother it is very painful to see that my daughter is nearing the end of her life."

Before her father's death, he would help Marjia by reading court documents out loud to her. Since his passing, her husband does it. Her younger sister Abida Rabbani Dorin wrote on her behalf when Marjia sat for public exams.

Marjia is the only blind female advocate in the 135 years' history of the Faridpur Bar Association. She completed her Bachelor of Law degree from Southeast University in Dhaka in 2015.

"We first suspected that she was visually-impaired six months after her birth. We took her to several doctors in Faridpur and Dhaka. We also went to India for treatment, but nothing helped," said Afroza.

"Ever since she was young, she was very bright. She learnt everything by heart just by listening to it once," added the mother of the 26-year-old, who is currently fighting to survive at BSMMU.



KAMRUNNAHAR MUNNI

Sports against child marriage

Kamrunnahar Munni, an assistant teacher at a government primary school, is also manager of the district U-17 girls' football team. She works simultaneously for the physical and mental development of girls and to prevent child marriage.

Despite members facing social and family barriers and financial hardships, the Tangail girls' football team is moving forward, thanks to her dedication and intensive efforts.

Munni believes sports raise a girl's confidence level and makes her aware of her future. "Moreover, when a girl engages in sports after overcoming all these barriers, the people who have the mentality to marry children do not want to marry such an open-minded girl who has already got a taste of freedom," she said.

Munni first engaged with football when the school authorities gave her the responsibility of forming a girls' team to take part in the Bangamata Fazilatunnesa Mujib Football Tournament in 2011.

Later, after observing Munni's keen interest in football, Mokhlesur Rahman -- then the additional deputy commissioner (education) in Tangail -- requested her to take charge of the girls' school team that eventually became district champions in 2016.

Munni was afterwards made manager of the U-17 girls' football team in Tangail in 2017; the team went on to win the Jubo Games that year. Another Tangail team, also under Munni's guidance, became champions in the 2018 JFA U-14 Women's National Football Championship.

Most of the players come from poor families and many of their parents were initially reluctant to allow their daughters to play football.

Munni said she convinced the parents to allow their daughters to play, by assuring them that it will make their children physically and mentally strong. "And a mentally and physically strong girl can make a future on her own."



SONU RANI DAS

The first graduate

She is one such woman who despite all the odds, achieved the distinction of being the first graduate among the Dalit community living in the sweeper colony of Tanbazar in Narayanganj.

She got married at an early age. But she was lucky to have a supportive and understanding life-partner who always stood by her.

After completing her BBA, Sonu has now gotten admitted to a master's programme.

"I was brought up in an environment where people are marginalised to the extreme partly by religious sanctions and partly by social and economic deprivations," she says.

According to Sonu, language is a barrier as they communicate mainly in Hindi whereas the academic curriculum is in Bangla. She says many are held back by language. Other problems facing the Dalit community include, of course, child marriage.

Sonu, an icon amongst women of the community, wishes to work on raising awareness to overcome these barriers. Children in the community are now following in her footsteps.

Along with studying, Sonu works in Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) and in a project under the Narayanganj City Corporation to improve women and children's health.

As part of the recognition of her struggles and achievements, Sonu got the opportunity to participate in various international programmes in Scotland, Switzerland, and Brazil.

Being an inspiration to others who came from underprivileged backgrounds, Sonu has the confidence and courage to move ahead. She has created history in being the first graduate in her community, and she believes that she can bring about many more positive changes.

Sonu dreams of diminishing the problems she faced while growing up -- so that her children and future generations do not suffer in the same way.



KOHINOOR BEGUM

A social leader of poor villagers

Borangile village lies on the char land of the Jamuna basin; villagers are mostly dependent on finding work as day labourers to survive. They are able to grow some crops when the water in the river recedes and the char lands are exposed. Situated around 100 kilometres from Sirajganj town, Borangile often falls out of the purview of government amenities or relief, even though its people are among those critically affected by flood and other natural disasters.

Early in 2018, a few women including Kohinoor Begum, going to collect relief materials from the local government, had to walk a distance which took a couple of hours by foot.

They were turned away as relatives of the local member-chairman had got the relief items instead of them. At least 3,000 families in her union were gravely affected by the floods that year.

Taking matters into her own hands, Kohinoor called a meeting in her village -- gathering around 40 women to help set up a community food bank for times of need.

The community is itself poor, but there are some who are needier than the others, Kohinoor said. "We should do something for them. During hard times, any member can take rice from our bank."

Set up in 2018, the food bank is independent of government support. "We are trying to gather financial support from other villagers as donations," she said.

The food bank also works as a crisis fund for the poor -- used to meet wedding expenses of poor families, treatment costs, and educational costs.

Members of this food bank also started setting aside whatever little they could manage. It now has 48 members and their savings have crossed Tk 40,000.

The initiative and its founder are now a source of inspiration for neighbouring villages.

Kohinoor, 55, has suffered extreme poverty since childhood. She is now mother to four daughters and three sons. To feed their children, she and her husband worked together as house maid and day labourer in their neighbours' houses.



JOYA CHAKMA

Football is her life

While other girls ran after university degrees, "better" careers, and a secure future, a girl hailing from the hill district Rangamati devoted herself to football.

Her struggles, devotion, and hard work have afforded her the privilege of being the country's first female international referee recognised by FIFA, the world football governing body.

Joya Chakma is the only Bangladeshi among five FIFA-enlisted female international referees in South Asia.

As a child, Joya used to compete in sports and run races in her childhood, but loved football the most.

Her outstanding performance in an inter-district football tournament in Dhaka, where Rangamati won, earned her a call up to play in the women's national football team. She went on to play in various national and international tournaments including the SA Games in 2010.

Joya then got admitted to the history department at Jahangirnagar University. But she was already garnering hopes of being a football referee.

"I was in a dilemma about whether I should start studying for a job or work towards building a career in football," said Joya.

She then decided to sit an examination for referring.

Her career as a football referee started in 2012 through the Bangamata football tournament. Joya went on to referee matches in football tournaments in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Tajikistan. In 2015, Joya refereed 10 football matches in an international football tournament in Berlin, Germany.

Joya joined Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protisthan (BKSP) as coach; under her guidance, the BKSP women's football team became champions in the 'Subroto Mukherjee Gold Cup' tournament in India where she also received the 'best coach' award.