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Women had to shoulder the responsibility of protecting their families in 1971.



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Women at the forefront at a rally mourning the deaths of the devastating 1970 cyclone.

self by swallowing cyanide when she was caught by the British police. There was Begum Rokeya who proved that even Muslim women had the right to knowledge, think for themselves and play an equal role in nation building. Begum Sufia Kamal showed a similar quiet resistance to a fascist government that based its rule on intimidation and exploitation of a particular race. Jahanara Imam carried on her movement to punish war criminals to seek closure for herself and others like her who had lost loved ones in the Liberation War. These women, became larger than life figures for women especially, inspiring them to follow in their footsteps.

Women's inherent urge to fight for their own people was put to the test in 1971 when the need to save one's motherland became an all encompassing determination, more compelling than protecting one's very life. They took up arms training, fought along their fellow male freedom fighters, often getting maimed for life or killed. Those who could not engage in actual combat, took on other roles: they cared for the wounded, fed them and hid their arms or passed on messages for them, risking their lives.

Karuna Begum was only 19 when she decided to leave her little boy with her in-laws to finish the task that her husband had set to do. She had watched with horror Pakistani soldiers shooting her husband, Shahidul Hasan and three other *Muktijoddhas* and then throwing their bodies into the river. The brutal murders made Karuna want to join the war immediately and she joined a freedom fighters camp in Nolchira although she disguised herself as a man by cutting her hair short and wearing men's clothes.

After a gruelling training course, Karuna took part in several guerrilla operations in many parts of Barisal. She collected intelligence, learnt how to crawl towards the target, throw a grenade and swiftly move to safety. It was during a particularly risky operation during which she would have to use both her sten gun and two grenades that Karuna was hit and badly wounded. It was when she was injured that her fellow freedom fighters learnt that she was a woman. Despite efforts by her comrades, the injury cost her a leg and later she developed cancer but she continued to fight for her life till her death in 2009.

There were many other women freedom fighters who had to endure worse fates. Halima, Fatema, Rokeya and so many others were captured while in combat and had to suffer what thousands of their sisters suffered - torture and sexual abuse. Many of those who survived were ostracised by their family, by society and left to rot - for fighting for their country: How many names of women freedom fighters do we know? How many have been recognised for their incredible courage, sacrifice and love for their motherland?