sacked since then, had suggested that I return to my husband. My father finally spoke to me after years but questions of so-called well-wishers would still not stop. They still try to pressure me into living with my father or to get married again. It's like they don't consider what I want. They don't want to know whether I prefer staying single or not. For them a divorced woman is the sign of danger. The state and religion gives me the right to divorce and stay on my own but the society will continue to me to give up my independence for the sake of social norms," she says.

While completing her high school education, Farzana Akhter discovered that she was slowly going blind. At first she began to lose the sight of her left eye and later, due to the wrong treatment of a callous doctor, she lost sight of her right eye. Eventually, she could only make out shapes but her eyesight was gone forever.

In their own little way, each of these women changed the way society perceived them. They made sure that their identity was formed by their own choices and not by the labels decided by the world.

Even though she was despondent in the beginning, thinking that she could no longer realise her dreams, Farzana soon began to change her attitude thanks to the unconditional love and support of her parents who didn't want their daughter to give up hope of a fulfilling life. She began to learn Braille, and soon graduated from Dhaka University, where she met amazing friends and teachers. But life outside home and university was a difficult one for a visually impaired person.

"I applied for a job after learning that they were accepting people with disabilities. When they learnt that I was blind, they wouldn't even listen to me stating that it was impossible for them to hire people with visual impairment. When I argued that they had a provision for people with disabilities, they simply said, "But that wasn't meant for blind people."

She then applied to Agrani Bank, as she thought that government banks would be more accepting of people with visual impairment. But she was wrong. Even after 20 days of applying for the job when Farzana did not get her admit card for the written examination, she sent a friend to see what was taking so long. At first the officials were not even ready to talk to him but eventually he found out that they were not willing to let a person with visual impairment sit for the exam, let alone hire her for the job.

Farzana was feeling dispirited but she didn't falter in her steps and sought help from a reporter at the Daily Prothom Alo, who printed her story. The officials sang a different tune after that and she was finally allowed to take her exam. They wouldn't allow her the extra 15 minutes allocated for people with visual impairment and constantly complained that her story in the media brought the bank discomfort and distress.

Despite all that, Farzana passed her written exam with flying colours, emerging first amongst the 1800 candidates who sat for the exam. Authorities were surprised and the president of the bank even extended full support to her. But officials who were against the decision to employ a person with visual impairment were still not done with her. She was offered a job as a receptionist at the head branch or she could go to Savar in a more substantial post. As Farzana wanted to prove her calibre, she chose the job in Savar despite the long distance and evident discmfort in travelling.

Farzana's efforts have paved the way for other visually impaired people to get jobs in the corporate world. A visually impaired man, she says, was recently employed at the Rupali Bank. She has truly overcome every social barrier, fighting legal battles for years to make a position for herself in the mainstream society.

Joya Shikdar has been fighting for years for the rights of the transgendered community of the country. In our society, the 'hijra' community are often blindsided and ignored. They are almost an invisible aspect of the society; a part that we'd readily overlook.

"In this country, no one is willing to rent an apartment to a transgendered person. It's as if people don't want to believe that we exist. We can see open disgust on the faces of many people and that is frightening. The transgendered people are living beings too and it would do people good to remember that," says Joya.

Over the years, Joya has endured numerous taunts, jibes and assault for her role in advocating sexual minorities. But that has never stopped her from continuing her fight. Her courage to come out in the open, to speak out for all those who are rendered voiceless is something that every one of us can learn from. The President of the Sex Worker's Networking and 'Shomporker Noya Shetu," Joya is an inspiration for everyone who believes that gender and sexuality can in no way define a person's identity.

Every woman who spoke at the programme is a seemingly ordinary woman with commonplace jobs. What makes them extraordinary is that they had the courage to call out the hypocrisy of our patriarchal society, they had the nerve to face social injustice even when the society turned against them. In their own little way, each of these women changed the way society perceived them. They made sure that their identity was formed by their own choices and not by the labels decided by the world. ■