

Healing the wounded: Another field of battle

Besides taking up arms to directly fight in the war in 1971, many women also joined the war effort as nurses and doctors to provide medical care for injured freedom fighters. The following are the experiences of two such women who participated in the war as nurses, Sultana Kamal, lawyer and activist, and Minu Haque, dancer and choreographer.

The narratives have been transcribed by Eresh Omar Jamal, editorial department, The Daily Star from his conversations with both of them.

SULTANA KAMAL

The contribution of women during the war, and in the eventual liberation of Bengali people from the oppression of Pakistani forces are immeasurable and difficult to categorise. When many of the men were going to Sector 2 to join the war effort, many women I knew were gathering information like intelligence officers and passing it on to their fellow freedom fighters.

They were collecting money and supplies, helping other freedom fighters



Sultana Kamal

PHOTO: STAR

wanted by the Pakistani Army avoid capture by accompanying them during their travels, as they were less likely to be stopped with female companions. What I'm trying to say is that almost everyone, including all women, did everything they could for our liberation.

Squadron leader Hamidullah, who was living in our house, came to my mother one day and told her he had been summoned to the Pakistani Army Headquarters—no one used to come back from there. With the help of my contacts he managed to escape. But the Pakistani forces captured a young boy who was working for him. And we feared that they would torture him and force him reveal the whole chain of operation.

That is when on June 16, my sister and I, as well as others, left to join the Bangladeshi forces at Sector 2. When we landed in Comilla, there were rickshaws already waiting to take us to Sonamura border to cross into India. As I said, everyone was helping, including rickshaw pullers.

I was only 21 years old, and my sister was 19, so we didn't know at all what to expect on the other side. We stayed with Akhter bhai in Shonamura. He was a doctor who, when fighting broke out, took as much medical supplies as he could, stuffed them into an ambulance and crossed the border into India. He was given a room in the forest bungalow to

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start his medical practice there, where wounded soldiers of the Mukti Bahini would come for treatment.

Zafrullah Chowdhury and Mubin Hossain had started their practice on the other side. Some of the women who were with us left to help them but we stayed back. Most of us were amateurs who were trained on the spot on how to give treatment. But we were joined later by Daliah Salahuddin, who was a professional doctor. And doctor Sobita Mondol for a few days.

When the Mukti Bahini started their big

offensive in June, the wounded came pouring in. Surgical procedures were done in that one room and we somehow managed to give treatment and help them recover. Besides being a medical centre, it also became a transit camp.

By July the Pakistanis had figured out its location and began bombarding it with mortar shells. Since the hospital was unsafe the forest department gave us a few more rooms and asked us to move to Melaghar. It was during the rainy season so we had tents set up on the floor for doctors to operate and nurses to give care to the

wounded.

Midway through the next month, a generous man, Habul Mia, emptied out his garden to allow us to set up a field hospital. We were able to set up two medical units and two surgical units. More and more women kept joining, some of them had received basic training as a nurse—but they were very young, most of them were only university students. Now when I think about it, it's actually funny how we women, without any experience or training—other than a few exceptions—managed to run an entire hospital. Among those who joined was Zakia apa, an English teacher who had led the intelligence collection effort back in Dhaka before leaving. As the hospital grew, people were assigned their specific duty. I was in charge of the surgical unit, and saw people suffering from horrific injuries—bullet wounds to the face, infected legs, some totally hysterical. It was difficult, but we had to make do. Many of the wounded needed blood. Sometimes we ourselves would give it, other times we would get our contacts to arrange it from

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An Indian Red Cross nurse vaccinating a Bengali refugee at Salt Lake, Kolkata.

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