

SPOTLIGHT



**Khurshid Jahan, freedom fighter, hoped for better recognition for muktijoddhas.**

During the 1971 Liberation War, Khurshid Jahan, a 21-year-old student of Bagerhat PC College, Khulna, started training as a freedom fighter under the guidance of Lieutenant Zia Uddin. She joined a group of civilian trainers to instruct new recruits on firing, grenade charge, and other skills, but having a one-year-old toddler deprived her of the permission to fight on the frontlines. Yet she stayed actively engaged in the war, nursing injured fighters from boats, providing logistical support, and on one occasion trying to don a male freedom fighter's costume to go join the combat. The decision earned her a nominal punishment of having to stitch shorts and lungis for the male fighters. Around the same time, Hazera Begum was born in Dhaka. When her mother died giving birth to her younger brother, her father remarried, and her stepmother refused them any food or care. The children were given away. Seven-year-old Hazera ran away from home, fell asleep on a bus, and found herself on the streets, bought and sold over the years for domestic work and prostitution.

In the same city in 1993, Salma Chowdhury's three-year-old son Ashiq Husain Chowdhury passed away from lung cancer. One of his kidneys and a third of his lungs had been removed, and the disease had spread to a point where chemotherapy would no longer help. After his demise, Salma went into depression. Around 1999, Chobi Das Gupta in Chattogram lost her father at age 12 and had to quit studies to join a garments factory, and Bilkis Banu in Kurigram dreamt of Mother Teresa hugging her, without any idea as to who she was and what she did. In 2003, Hiroko Kobayashi, who had suffered financially growing up in Japan, found out about a girl in Jhenidah who had committed suicide because she couldn't gather enough



**Hazera Begum, who fled home at age 7, is Amma to 40 children today.**

money to take her HSC exams. And in 2013, Rupa Dutta, while travelling in Bandarban came across a remote village school struggling to stay afloat with limited land, and a salary of Tk 1,500 for the only teacher in the village.

Scattered around the country and in time, each of these incidents prompted these seven women to take action. Khurshid Jahan lived through some momentous episodes of the war, and went on to reflect on them through her writing and socio-cultural work. Hazera Begum opened 'Shishuder Jonno Amra', a shelter in Adabor, Dhaka where she takes care of 40 children of sex workers. Salma Chowdhury established 'A Shelter for Helpless Ill Children' (ASHIC) in Dhaka, the country's first NGO for children suffering from cancer, along with a palliative care unit in Dhanmondi, a

responsibility to finance and run the entire school in Bandarban, and Hiroki Kobayashi started providing scholarships to poor female students in Bangladesh.

On March 8, 2019, The Daily Star and IPDC Finance Limited awarded these seven women with the 'Unsung Women Nation Builders Award' to celebrate their valour, drive, and love for humanity.

**Khurshid Jahan**

Mohammad Asaduzzaman (Taz), the son Khurshid Jahan had carried through the War, recalls his mother's experiences, collected from family anecdotes and his mother's reminiscences. "The Pakistani Army were attacking us from planes and my mother took shelter with me in her arms under a tree. She was prepared to open fire, but the situation didn't arise, because the Pakistani Army left

family. They were kidnapped and attacked for their political affiliations, forced to flee from place to place, and they struggled to gain recognition as freedom fighters for the same reason. Despite eventually settling down and working as a banker until 2005, Khurshid Jahan remained bitter about the term 'birangona' for women freedom fighters. "The humiliation, deprivation, and assaults that freedom fighters faced after the war continued to anger my mother for a long time," Asaduzzaman recalls. "She believed that muktijoddhas—the country's *sreshto shontan*—deserved practical recognition and not just perfunctory titles." She reflected on these concerns through her words, writing poetry and books on the role of women freedom fighters (Birangona Nah Muktijoddha) and fictionalising true stories to preserve some



**Winners of the Unsung Women Nation Builders Award with Mahfuz Anam, The Daily Star Editor, MA Mannan, Planning Minister, and Mominul Islam, MD and CEO of IPDC Finance Ltd.**

# AN EXERCISE in EMPATHY

## Stories of seven women who channeled their pain into power

SARAH ANJUM BARI

shelter in Bangla Motor, and four play centres in the paediatric units of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital, and Chittagong Medical College Hospital. Chobi Das Gupta opened her own garments factory which employs 108 people today, while also working at four other factories in Chattogram. Bilkis Banu started housing and teaching over 50 orphans in Kurigram, Rupa Dutta took on

immediately after the airstrike. We were stuck for hours. The experience was terrifying but thrilling," he says. "Her role was similar to that of a nurse and a Quartermaster General, and she was also the Commander of the women freedom fighters. She was responsible for rationing and other supplies. Life was harsh for her and those around her in those days. They had to work almost 24 hours every day."

But the first couple of years after the war also proved miserable for them as a

people's privacy, among other things. She also continued to provide financial help to orphans, to those struggling to pay for education. All of this she managed personally and not through any official charities.

Despite her role in these historic episodes, however, her family remembers her today as an introvert, an impartial leader, and a very attentive mother. She loved gardening and also enjoyed taking her grandchildren to swim at the village



**Chobi Das Gupta, who had to quit school at 12, employs 108 workers at her factory today.**

river. Having lost her to oral cancer in February 2019, her sons are now planning to release new editions of her out-of-market books to keep her experiences alive.

**Hazera Begum**

"After ending up on the streets, I sold paper along with other street kids. I was picked up by a stranger in a car and taken to Narayanganj to work at a man's house. I was too young to work and ran away again. The police took me to a shelter for a while. I ate on the Sadarghat footpath and slept in the terminal. At 11, when I became too 'old' to stay among the street kids, I was sold off as a sex worker. I didn't want to stay in the profession—told the police on multiple occasions only to be beaten up for it—but I had no other option. Eventually, I left the work behind and became involved with the Durjoy Nari Sangha organisation," recalls Hazera, now 46.

In June 2010, Hazera sought the help of Durjoy and student volunteers in Jahangirnagar to open a shelter for children. She started the project with her life's savings—Tk 9 lakh—welcoming kids who are frequently tortured, stolen, and ostracised because of their mothers' backgrounds as sex workers. The shelter faced registration issues for over two years due to bureaucracy and struggled to admit the kids to schools that would accept their backgrounds. But through donations and media attention, she manages to meet her need of Tk 91,000 per month to look after her 40 children today. Over the course of the journey, she taught herself to read by asking people to read her headlines on the streets. Today, she is literate in both English and Bangla, and loves reading Sarat Chandra and Tagore.

"The kids first come in kicking and



**Bilkis Banu wants to spend her life taking care of children in need.**

screaming. They yell profanities at me, they cry for their mothers who leave them here and try to run away. But eventually they settle in when they find the love and care here that they're deprived of elsewhere. They become friends with each other, start calling me Amma, and often refuse to go back to their mothers when they return. They study together, learn to sing and paint. Some have passed Class 5 and became chauffeurs. The one house rule is that they cannot swear at each other. If they have a complaint, they have to come to me," Hazera explains.

"If their parents were rich, they could've had a good life. If I can help them learn and give them a good life, my life's experience will have been worthwhile."

**Salma Chowdhury**



**Hiroko Kobayashi visits Bangladesh every March to encourage young girls to study.**

Going into depression after losing her son, Salma Chowdhury was advised by her psychiatrist to focus on a new goal. Hence the beginning of ASHIC Foundation in 1994. She started visiting the hospitals and discovered that many child cancer patients from outside of Dhaka would stop their treatments due to travel and accommodation costs. The patients, as a result, would relapse and pass away. In 2006, the foundation started offering palliative care in Dhaka by recruiting doctors and bringing in trainers from London. They also offer training and counselling support to parents, and remain in touch with them even after some of the patients have passed away.

"The centres allows the children to make friends and recuperate together, and the parents to form a support network among themselves," Salma Chowdhury explains. But she complains, "I try to take survivors to hospitals to share their experiences with other patients, but many of the well-off parents don't allow their children (especially daughters) to talk about their illness."

The PCU has treated 6,457 patients between 2006 and 2019 so far. They can hold an average of 270 patients per month free of cost. Asif, a 13-year-old leukaemia patient living at the PCU right now, shared how excited he was to visit the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Novo Theatre earlier this month as part of the centre's 'Make A Wish' initiative. His mother expressed how pleased she is with

Today, she employs 108 people.

The journey was fraught with hardship—former employees have harassed, abused, and overworked her; but others have been immensely encouraging. She uses these experiences to set the tone at her own workplace now. The women working for her live like sisters. They get days off to study and sit for exams. And the supervisors have orders to never behave rudely with the workers, and to consult Chobi when their performance lags. She also makes it a point to hire elderly and younger people in need of work, but who wouldn't be hired elsewhere because of their age and lack of experience.

"I love this work because something that I made, that was made in Bangladesh, travels the world over," she shares, explaining that the project would not have been possible without her husband taking up household chores and her mother-in-law taking on the responsibility of her son. "My only wish is for the garments industry to learn to treat its workers with more compassion," she says.

**Rupa Dutta**

A passion for travel took Rupa Dutta to the Champajhiri Para in Gajaliya union of Lama, Bandarban. She decided to get involved with the school because the people of the village deserved the education and the awareness that would equip them to stand up for their own rights. In June 2013, Rupa started sharing her monthly salary with the village school and got her friends and the rest of the village community involved in its running.

While guardians are officially meant to pay a school fee of Tk 5,000, only about 40 percent of them are able to pay. The finances and equipment have been supported, over the years, by different organisations including Colouring Little Smile, YAP Foundation and other travellers' groups of Chattogram.

In addition to academic training, Rupa made sure that the school focuses on environmental education and the region's cultural heritage. The Mro native language had to be taught. No child would be converted from one religion into another at the school, and no political agenda, even by the donors, would be tolerated, they decided. The students are also encouraged to take leadership positions amongst themselves, such as for cleanliness, for food, etc.

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