

UNSUNG WOMEN NATION BUILDERS 2020



**Momotaj Mohal Baby, A
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 for 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.

She 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 instalments.

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.



**Kamrunnahar Munni,
Using sports to prevent
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."



**Tepri Rani, A tireless fighter
fighting a never-ending war**

Tepri Rani 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 subjected 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, A Birangana
awaiting her due
recognition**

Biva Rani 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.

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

Her father, who was a small trader in Torke Bandar, tried to flee with his family to nearby Ramjanpur [Madaripur]. But they became separated.

Together with some other women, Biva took shelter in a sugarcane field. Unfortunately, local razakars 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.

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, Barishal division's first fisherwoman with a licence to catch hilsa, has been sailing on the Bishkhali river for the last 13 years.

She 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 Bishkhali.

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 500-1,000 per day.



**Laily Begum, Fisherwoman
going against the tide**