

UNSUNG WOMEN NATION BUILDERS 2019



Hazera Begum, A mother of underprivileged children

Hazera Begum's childhood was marred by three things – misery, neglect, and struggle. But she turned all those into driving forces and became the "amma" of 40 underprivileged children.

Most of these children biologically belong to sex workers but Hazera, who herself was a sex worker until the age of 23, is nurturing them like a mother at a childcare centre in the capital.

Hazera left home at the age of eight to escape from the torture unleashed by her step-mother. Initially, she lived on the streets but later got forced into prostitution. But the motherly soul deep inside her made her say goodbye to the profession and start afresh.

Hazera runs "Shishuder Jonno Amra", a childcare centre at Dhaka's Adabor neighbourhood. The 40 children living there attend nearby schools, eat, and play – all in a safe, homely environment.

Hazera had opened the centre with her savings. She had worked for a development organisation for some time after giving up sex work. Individual donors help her run the centre.

Hazera said she came up with the idea of establishing such a centre out of concern for sex workers' children who have "no identity, rights or future." She feels no less than a mother when she takes care of the children most of whom have been abandoned by their families.

"These kids are my family. I am embracing motherhood with these children," she said.



Khurshid Jahan, The Tigress of Sundarbans

Khurshid Jahan lived an ordinary life in Khulna before she died on February 19. But she is an image of strength and independence to her grandchildren, who grew up listening to tales of how she fought for the freedom of Bangladesh.

Khurshid was a college student and mother of a five-month-old baby when she joined the Liberation War of 1971.

"I was recruited to scrutinise new comers and arrange training for them, especially women," she said in an interview with The Daily Star.

The then 21-year-old mother wanted to be in the frontline, but her commander persuaded her to oversee the nursing of injured freedom fighters and training of new fighters.

She would hop on boats to any of the 14 camps in the forest to treat injured fighters, give logistical support, and even spy on them to see if any of them was a traitor.

Khurshid lived a very active life as a banker and then with her family after retirement. She died of oral cancer at the age of 69. She would take her grandchildren – Ruffin Saswan Zaman and Wridho Jyotirmoy Zaman to the village, to swim and spend time with them. She liked to live with all her family members together, which is why her family still lives in a joint family, says her son Asaduzzaman Taj.



Hiroko Kobayashi, From Japan with love

Japanese national Hiroko Kobayashi is a teacher of Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement, and a photographer. But these are not the skills she is well known for in Bangladesh. Rather, it is for the generosity she demonstrated towards advancing women's education.

From her own initiatives, she has financially supported over 100 Bangladeshi girls to complete their school and college degrees in Jhenidah and Panchagarh.

It all began in 2003, when Hiroko first came to Bangladesh to work for Japanese NGO Hunger Free World and heard that a female student in Kaliganj of Jhenidah had died by suicide allegedly for not having enough money to appear in her Higher School Certificate exam.

Hiroko, who herself faced financial challenges growing up, decided to stand beside the poor female students. The only condition she places on the scholarship recipients is that they promise not to marry until they are well-established. She also hopes that they will, in turn, help other poor students in future.



Rupa Datta, Championing a school rebuild

Rupa Datta got an opportunity to visit the remote parts of Bandarban while working for an international organisation in Chattogram in 2013. There, she discovered a school at Champajhiri Para in Gajaliya union of Lama.

It made her sad to see that the school had only one teacher, whose monthly salary was Tk 1,500. While the salary was paid by a missionary, the teacher had to work on a farm to make ends meet and could not concentrate on teaching the 11 students at the school.

Rupa decided then and there to contribute to the teacher's salary and expand the school. "I approached my friends Miti, Rajib, Rana, and Sanjay to join me in serving the indigenous communities."

They agreed and the venture for the Mro children started.

They named the school Pawmang (flower garden) and eventually helped its renovation. They also set up a hostel in 2015 with contributions from friends. The village chief Long Tui donated five acres as well.

Different organisations including Colouring Little's Mind, Vertical Dreamers, and Crack Platoon contributed to the school that now has 103 students from pre-primary to Class-V. Rupa said there is a committee comprised of locals, guardians, and teachers to manage the school. "We are advisers and want the committee to take the leadership role."

A total of 21 students who graduated from the school are now in high schools.

Sanjay Kumar Nath said they rented a hostel in Bandarban town for the high school students.

"We have started gardening, tree plantation, and fish farming to make the school self-reliant," he said.

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