THE ENDURANT
Stories of Undefeatable Hearts
THE ENDURANT
Stories of Undefeatable Hearts
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDEX</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents arranged a child marriage, and then...</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle of violence</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curse of growing up</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The power of resolution</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fantasy of marriage</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming back</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The journey of change</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce for dowry</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in fear</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The deception in marriage</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage, dowry and the struggle for survival</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colophon</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Home is supposed to be the safest place for someone. What can be worse than feeling unsafe in “the safest” place? In the slums of Dhaka, many married women are passing their days enduring severe mental, physical and financial violence by the husband and his family. Some of the physical abuses are so acute that it can cause death. Still these undefeatable women keep surviving all these adversities in the “husband’s house,” for the sake of the society and the children. Weak and complex legal procedures and lack of awareness of their rights have deprived them of their fair rights as a human being. At the back of every violence, there lies the ingrained, primal seed of patriarchy which makes the husbands think that the wife is his property. It seems very normal to physically, mentally or sexually violate her with or without a reason. Lack of education, ignorance and poverty are making the whole scenario more complex and incurable.

Even a normal and natural process like menstruation can turn into a curse for some women because some of the husbands think that menstruation occurs only to polygamous women. Men are also very uninterested in using contraceptive methods which not only leads to unplanned birth but also causes sexually transmitted diseases. Still for everything that goes wrong, the woman gets the blame. In 21st century, the young wives are becoming victims to marital rape every night by the husband. And the society never recognizes it as a crime, just because they are “husband.” Only for the torn hymen from the first marriage, the parents go through ordeals to marry off their divorced daughters again. There are women who have spent their whole life in negligence, dishonor and debasement. Perhaps, their whole life will pass by being devoid of love from the husband. Perhaps, the small cravings of their hearts for conjugal love and respect, for shared moments of happiness will never come true. Such an attitude of men and the society towards women is not new. But is there an end to it?

The book The Endurant encapsulates stories of women who are deprived, tormented and wounded. But they are not weak. In the conversations, they talked more about their dreams than about their miserable situation. They were more eager to find a way to hope than to complain about the social and familial adversities they had faced. To reach these women and unveil their stories to the world is the biggest success of WE CAN Women’s Alliance. While reading this book, let’s remember that these are not mere stories; these are constant reality for some people out there.
In the Netherlands, it is taken for granted that people of all ages choose for themselves in matters such as sexual relations and having children. And it is taken for granted that everyone has access to the information and care needed for them to make their own choices. In many countries, this is unfortunately not always reality. The government of the Netherlands is clear in its focus on contributing to reducing maternal mortality rates, curbing violence against women, stopping child marriage and preventing unwanted pregnancies, especially among teenagers. This will not only benefit the people themselves, but also boost social and economic progress in the countries in question.

The government of the Netherlands is therefore proud to support women’s emancipation, skill development and empowerment in Bangladesh through its SHOKHI project. Implemented in 15 slums and working with 50,000 women, SHOKHI aims to improve women’s health rights, gender equality and access to legal and health services. So many women live without these facilities in the high density areas of Dhaka. Violence seems to prevail in their existence due to this general ‘lack’ in their lives. Through SHOKHI, hubs are built in these high density areas, change-makers, both women and men, are trained to influence social behaviour. To break this endless cycle. To empower women in need both socially and economically by offering vocational training, that leads to skills development, and ideally to income generating activities.

The book you have in your hands, The Endurant, is a striking representation of the incredible lives led by these women, and more than anything speaks about why the government of the Netherlands supports this work. The stories portray a harsh reality, speak of adversity and oppression. At the same time they demonstrate strength, optimism and resilience of the women in the high density urban areas. And of the change-makers that are supporting them. Their dedication to the communities of women is truly humbling, and we hope this book serves as an invitation to everyone to step forward, and work with us to help women stand up to the challenges of their lives.

We are proud and honored to be a part of such a powerful changing force, to be a part of SHOKHI. With a heartfelt thanks to Bangladesh Legal and Services Trust, WE CAN, Marie Stopes Bangladesh, Bangladesh Women’s Health Coalition and everyone else who has been involved with the SHOKHI, I hope you feel the power of the stories you hold in your hands. I do.

The Honorable Ambassador
Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.
MESSAGE

In Bangladesh, there are many initiatives with the aim of ensuring woman’s empowerment, their rights and a life of dignity in a violence free environment. Yet, women are not emancipated from subordination and oppression. Like the rest of the world, the subjugation of women is an unavoidable reality here. Effective strategies are needed to change this scenario.

There are some legal acts to support women. But existing social norms, the culture of discrimination and the lack of law enforcement hinder the actualization of her rights and dignity. With the aim to eradicate these barriers, in 2004 WE CAN campaign started its journey in South Asia including Bangladesh. Since the time of its inception, WE CAN Alliance Bangladesh has been working to create a firm stance against behaviors, beliefs and practices that ratify violence against women and domestic violence. WE CAN is working at every level – among individuals- organizations, girls-boys, women- men in both cities and villages. Over 10,000,00 change-makers of WE CAN are playing an important role in bringing a visible change in the situation through their individual contributions.

Subsequently, WE CAN is realizing the project ‘Shokhi’ with the help of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, for improving women’s health, rights and realizing their dreams. We have gone through diverse experiences while working for her better health, better services for sexual and reproductive health and rights, the protection of her rights and empowerment of the women. The enthusiasm and creativity of thousands of change-makers and their sufferings while living in discrimination, violence and deprivation were added to our experience. We have seen heart-breaking incidents of domestic violence and broken dreams in women’s lives and we think it is important to bring all these stories to light. We live together in the same society. But their lives are marginalized. We must know their experiences, their anxiety and insecurity, their pain of deprivation, their struggle for rights. When we work closely with them, questions arise in our mind – is poverty and ignorance responsible for violence against women? Or is the deep conviction enforced by the society turning both the men and women into violators?

Besides our efforts to find answers to these questions, Shokhi is trying to change the behavior of the people; trying to convince them to welcome other similar initiatives (Government– Non-government – individual). Shokhi also has discovered that the lack of information, determination and awareness about the rights have also made women vulnerable to constant violence.

Priyanka is only 12. As soon as her menstruation started, she was forced to marriage. The marriage led her to face social perversion and extremely
cruel sexual harassment. Jhorna nurtured the dream of a beautiful life. But she became a helpless victim of sexual abuse and violence for dowry after her marriage. Nur Jahan is struggling to stop the repetition of the violence she faced in her daughter's life. Not to find the cause-effect relation of these mishaps, the book The Endurant aims to unveil the obscure stories of these lives. Let the reader contemplate why violence has become such a constant reality in our society. We are only trying to capture the real lives into written words.

The people who have helped us most with this book are – the change makers of WE CAN and a group of dedicated workers of WE CAN Alliance Bangladesh of Shoki project, Bangladesh Legal and Services Trust, Merrie Stopes Bangladesh, and Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition. Their relentless work and determination has resulted in this collection of case stories. Thanks to Jinaat Ara Haq for making the idea of this publication into a reality and for taking the responsibility of editing the book. Thanks to RedOrange for interviewing each person, writing the case-stories, translating them in English, making the publication creative and attractive through graphics and illustrations, and taking care of all other details for printing. Also heartfelt thanks to the WE CAN Alliance committee for developing materials, who always play an important role to make every publication unique. I hope that this book will play an important role in stopping violence against women and improving women's health and rights and also contribute to the researches and dialogues about the deprived community.

With all the best wishes

Sultana Kamal
Chairperson, WE CAN Alliance Bangladesh
Name: Rupa  |  Age: 16 years
“It was not a love marriage. My parents forced me to marry when I was only in class five. My mother still says regretfully, ‘We thought it would be better for you.’ Now I am 16 and already have been abandoned by my husband six months ago. In our society women lose their ‘dignity’ when they live without their husbands. Once the virginity is gone, it’s gone forever. Will I be able to restore my past life? My parents ask to spend the rest of my life with them. How it is possible?”
The car glided through the narrow alleys of Mohammadpur Housing and stopped near a huge signboard hovering like a grim guardian. It was almost dark. The dim yellow lights in the grocery shops already looked weary. The driver asked many people for the direction to Muriwala Fokkur slum. Yet we could not find the way. So, I decided to wait in the car for Zerin apa from Shokhi’s Nobodoy Hub. When she arrived, I followed her to our destination to meet Rupa.

The moment Rupa saw us, she came running to greet. She was gleaming with happiness to see us. But I immediately felt a rush of sadness. I had already read Rupa’s case file. It was heartbreaking what this young girl had gone through.

Waving goodbye to Zerin, Rupa and I walked through a dark lane and entered her house which was just a room, though quite spacious. Only Rupa and her younger brother were home at that moment. The parents were still at work. Rupa warmly uttered, “Please don’t mind this shanty house of us. Take a seat please!” The bed without mattress felt hard as I sat on it. Rupa sat beside me, with her backbone straight. Her posture reflected a lot of personality. But her eloquent eyes gave away her eagerness to share her story.

Rupa grew up in Mymensing. When she was young, her parents came to Dhaka in search of work. Rupa and her siblings stayed back at their maternal grandmother’s house, while her parents started a small business at Nobodoy vegetables market.

In 2013, Rupa’s parents met a young man called Suman (23). He introduced himself as a student of a Degree College at Savar who was also working part-time at a Chinese company as Building Supervisor. To Rupa’s parents, he seemed to be an educated and well-mannered person. Suman became quite close to them. So, when Suman proposed to marry Rupa, they blithely agreed.

After one year, in the pretext of taking Rupa to his aunt’s house in Savar, Suman took her to a friend’s house instead and called Rupa’s mother on phone to notify that he wanted to marry Rupa immediately. Rupa’s mother approved. Suman knew that Rupa was her parents’ only daughter and they would do everything to ensure her happiness. So, after the marriage, he started forcing Rupa for money to buy a mobile phone, computer and other things. Rupa’s parents tried to keep Suman happy and often gave him 15,000-20,000 taka.

Dowry was not the only excuse for Suman to torment Rupa. As marriage ‘legitimates’ sex, Suman abused Rupa sexually and no one came to help her when she shouted and cried in pain. Rupa became pregnant in the first year but Suman insisted her to abort it. In the second year, Rupa was forced to abort again. Afraid of her husband, Rupa did not reveal anything to her parents.

In the beginning of 2016, unscrupulously Suman demanded 2,00,000 taka dowry and Rupa’s parents gave it to him. Soon Rupa’s father resented why Rupa was still living in his house though two years had passed after their wedding. He also claimed the marriage registration papers from Suman. A severe quarrel broke out between them. At one point, Suman hastily packed his bag and left.

Six months passed, and they did not hear a word
Rupa and her parents had neither photos nor the registration documents of the marriage. They also did not know the person who conducted the marriage. Rupa’s father wanted to file a case against Suman at Adabor thana. But according to the police, it would be nothing but a waste of money. Rupa and her family were totally devastated. Rupa heard from a friend of Suman that Suman married again in Bogura, taking 3,00,000 taka as dowry.

When there was no hope left for Rupa, she shared her woes with a neighbor named Rina who worked as a Change-maker for Shokhi. She introduced Rupa to Shokhi. For several days, the Shokhi officials talked to Rupa and helped her step out of her trauma. After recovering slightly, she wanted to go back to school. But her father was not positive about it. The Change-maker of Shokhi tried to convince him, emphasizing on the importance of education for Rupa’s future. Eventually, Rupa joined Shokhi’s income generating training and started dreaming of a new beginning.

Throughout the interview, two streams of tears were rolling down from Rupa’s sad, yet detached eyes. After telling everything, she sighed and said, “We all were happy. We did not have poverty. There was no conflict in the family. One single mistake of marrying the wrong person ruined everything!”

She continued, “I want Suman to be punished. He lied to us and married me when I was just a child. He took dowry. Then secretly married another girl without divorcing me. I want justice. I want him to be punished so that no one else dares ruin another girl’s life like this.”
Name: Rahima Aktar | Age: 44 years
“My marital life started with deception. But now I am trying to get a stable life in spite of a lot of hardship. I am working as a Change-maker of Shokhi and have saved many girls. I have fought for their rights. But unfortunately, my daughter is a victim of domestic violence. I am always worried about her. I live in the same room with my husband’s first wife. The sons are also very fond of their father. My husband and his other wife mentally torture me a lot.”
Forty years ago, Rahima came to Bhashantek slum. Her father was a cart-pusher and her mother a midwife. Since Rahima’s parents had seven daughters and two sons, they could not afford food for everyone. Their life became a bit better when Rahima’s mother left for Kuwait where she got a job as a medical supervisor. She worked there for 12 years and came to Bangladesh only during vacations. Pretending that Rahima’s father was having difficulty to raise the children alone, Rahima’s father remarried. Days went by unruffled until a terrible mishap befell Rahima.

When Rahima was 12, she became friends with a man from next door called Shafiq. One day, Rahima was hanging out with Shafiq and his friend. Shafiq took a photo of himself with Rahima. Then he told Rahima that he would show her a trick and that she had to write her name on a white paper for it. Later, Shafiq copied the signature on a marriage registration document and showed the photo to Rahima’s parents. He told her family that they were married. Rahima denied it but no one believed her. Rahima had no other option but to start living with Shafiq. Soon she heard that her husband had another wife. He let Rahima live in his house, but occasionally he did not come home at night and stayed with his first wife.

The first wife’s brothers were hooligans. They and their sister badly beat up Rahima couple of times so that she would leave. But she had nowhere to go. She stayed and tolerated everything. The most painful moment of Rahima’s life was when her mother died and she was not allowed to see the dead body. Her husband married her deceitfully. Yet she was the one to receive the punishment and was denied the chance see her mother for the last time.

Memories from past haunt Rahima but she is determined not to surrender. She has been working as a midwife at Brac Delivery Centre for 12 years. She has taken loan from Brac and Shokti Foundation, added some money from her savings and opened a teashop. She has saved more through Proshika project, built a tin-shed room in Bhashantek slum and rented it. Now, her husband is the Member of Bhashantek area. Rahima and Shafiq have two sons and two daughters.

Unfortunately, the sad incidents of Rahima’s life reoccurred to her daughter, Runa. Runa was married at the age of 14. Rahima did not want to marry her daughter off at such young age. But a match-maker provided many false information to Rahima to make the proposal lucrative. He said that the bridegroom was working as a supervisor in a company and had a lot of land property in the village. After the wedding, she came to know the reality. But because of the social pressure, Runa stayed with her husband. Couple of years later, she came back to her mother’s house with her five-year-old son. They now live with Rahima. With utter dismay, Rahima saw that the violence in her life is repeated in her daughter’s life, like a vicious, never-ending cycle.

Rahima started her journey with Shokhi through a court-yard meeting in 2014. She is a very
dedicated Shokhi worker and involved in many awareness programs. As she and her daughter suffer a lot, she realized how important it is to stop violence against women. She has already played a central role in stopping child marriage and violence against women within her area. She became a Change-maker in 2015 and distributed Shokhi’s awareness books, posters and leaflets to every house in Bhashantek. She also built a group. Her husband tried to stop her first. Now he also gets invited to Shokhi’s programs as a political member of the community. He is also feeling the urge to change into a better person. Rahima said, “Shokhi is the only place where the helpless people of this area can find hope. I have heard of other NGOs from Shokhi and now I am expanding my network so that I can also contribute to the benefit of others.”
Name: Ruma  |  Age: 13 years
THE CURSE OF GROWING UP

“... I was only 12 then. I was a mischievous child. In my torn clothes, I used to play and roam around all day. One day I went to visit my aunt. On my way back I noticed that everyone was staring at me in a weird way. After coming home, I saw that my trousers were soaked with blood. Later I knew that it was menstruation. It happens to every girl when they grow up. So, mother told me that I had grown up. She married me off against my will to a man next door. After the wedding I refused to stay with him. So, my parents and siblings beat me up together and tied me with chains...”
I was waiting anxiously at Shokhi’s Hub office to meet a girl of 13. She was the youngest of all the people I had interviewed so far. I was feeling uncomfortable. How would I talk to her normally about all the excruciating sufferings she had been through? My stream of thought was shattered as Gaurango Das, the Information Facilitator of Shokhi came in with Ruma.

Her innocent face was a blend of softness and mischief, reflecting her inner exuberance. I could not but exclaim, “You are pretty!” She smiled indifferently in return, as if these words meant nothing much to her.

A physician came to Shokhi Hub to examine her. After he was gone, we started to talk.

“How are you feeling now? What did the doctor say?”

She replied reluctantly, “I am doing well. He prescribed some medicines.”

“Do you take medicines regularly?”

“I try. I get free medicines from here.”

“How were you living when you were a child?”

Unmindfully she started unfolding her story, “What? My childhood? I spent my childhood in Borkot’s slum, in Mohammadpur. But my home district is in Bhola…”

Ruma attended a school for deprived children in the slum area. She was a cheerful, sprightly girl who easily won the hearts of her classmates and teachers. After the classes were over, she used to teach drawing to her classmates and received some food from the school in return. Then, she spent the rest of the day in playing and roaming around. Her happy, carefree spirit was barely marred by the excruciating poverty at home.

Ruma’s father worked for molding bricks and mother as a household worker. Later, the father left his job at the brick factory and started raising a few cows. But that was not enough to feed a big family with three sons and three daughters. He had to borrow money frequently. Finding no other solution, he decided to sell the cows and send his eldest daughter abroad, hoping this might change the situation.

At that moment, the only earning members in the family were Ruma’s mother and her eldest sister-in-law. Little Ruma also worked as garments factory’s helper and domestic worker to support her family. Though none of the three sons were earning or financially contributing to breakfast.”

It was already 1 P.M. “You did not eat for such a long time! What will you have for lunch?”

She kept mum. Again.

I sighed and changed the topic, “Where were you living when you were a child?”

Ruma blankly replied, “Nothing. There was no breakfast.”

It was already 1 P.M. “You did not eat for such a long time! What will you have for lunch?”

She kept mum. Again.

I sighed and changed the topic, “Where were you living when you were a child?”

Unmindfully she started unfolding her story, “What? My childhood? I spent my childhood in Borkot’s slum, in Mohammadpur. But my home district is in Bhola…”

Ruma attended a school for deprived children in the slum area. She was a cheerful, sprightly girl who easily won the hearts of her classmates and teachers. After the classes were over, she used to teach drawing to her classmates and received some food from the school in return. Then, she spent the rest of the day in playing and roaming around. Her happy, carefree spirit was barely marred by the excruciating poverty at home.

Ruma’s father worked for molding bricks and mother as a household worker. Later, the father left his job at the brick factory and started raising a few cows. But that was not enough to feed a big family with three sons and three daughters. He had to borrow money frequently. Finding no other solution, he decided to sell the cows and send his eldest daughter abroad, hoping this might change the situation.

At that moment, the only earning members in the family were Ruma’s mother and her eldest sister-in-law. Little Ruma also worked as garments factory’s helper and domestic worker to support her family. Though none of the three sons were earning or financially contributing to
the family, Ruma’s parents always considered daughters as burdens. That is why, when Ruma had menarche at the age of 12, her mother wanted to get rid of her by marrying her off.

Her parents neither knew nor cared about the fact that a girl child did not become adult if she started to menstruate. They found a groom in the village. And the main convincing factor for them was that the groom had ‘good lineage.’ Ruma came to know about her marriage after they were already in the kazi office where the marriages were conducted. She cried and resisted, but in vain. She was forced to sign on the marriage papers. And a 12 years’ old Ruma was wedded to a 19 years’ old Mizan.

After the wedding, they started to live in Ruma’s father’s house. In the two storied shanty hut, her parents were living on the lower part and Ruma with his husband were given the upper part. Mizan sometimes worked as a chef and sometimes as a day laborer. Otherwise, he pulled rickshaw. On the first night of marriage, he drank alcohol and smoked marijuana before coming home. He attacked Ruma and raped her. He used to have violent sex biting and scratching her and pulling her by hair. Sometimes Ruma beat him with shoes or slapped him and ran away from the room to avoid his bestial torture. But at the end, she had to go back there at night and fell victim to this misery again. If she resisted, Mizan kicked her on her chest and belly.

Her parents also forced her to tolerate this torture. They thought they were teaching her ‘how to start a family.’ When Ruma resisted, her whole family beat her up till she became almost inert in pain and then allowed Mizan to abuse Ruma sexually. Finding no other way to escape, Ruma tried to commit suicide a few times by cutting her vein and hanging herself. But she could not die. To make sure that she could not take these attempts again, Ruma’s parents and her husband tied her with chains in a medieval manner.

One day, one of Ruma’s classmates heard Ruma screaming while passing by her house. He went inside and found her in chains. He immediately informed all his teachers, a Change-maker of Shokhi called Nur Jahan and his classmates. Then the police rescued Ruma. Later her teachers tried to convince Ruma’s mother that she was not ready for marital life. She should not have lived with her husband till she was 18. Still the situation did not change.

Seven months after her marriage, her parents finally realized that they could not make two people stay together in this way. Ruma’s father took Ruma to the Kazi office to sign on the divorce papers. Ruma did not have much idea about what was going on. She was just relieved that she would not have to go to Mizan again, though the scars on her arm were still there as a witness of those days of insufferable tortures.

Now Shokhi has become like a shelter to Ruma. It has ushered her to a life with dignity. She has found assurance in the friendship of Gourango dada and Shifa apa from Shokhi. She is also recovering from her intense trauma with the help of the counselors at Shokhi. Now, she attends all of Shokhi’s programs and aims to be a Change-maker to stand by the side of others in distress.
Name: Sultana  |  Age: 35 years
“When I was one and half years old, my mother died and my father remarried. At twelve, my father married me off to a 40 years old married man. Ten years ago, along with my four children, I moved to Dhaka in search of a job. Since then, I have been living with my children. The neighbors question about my character on my back. I was compelled to change places for ten to fifteen times for this. Yet I have to tolerate nasty comments, suggestive chuckles. I pass my days in anguish but I endure all these - thanks to my resolution.”
Sultana was only one and half when she lost her mother. She had a miserable, heartrending childhood without motherly affection. Her father was a poor farmer. He remarried soon after her mother’s death and the second wife gave birth to five children. They were so poor that they had to starve almost every day. Sultana started working as a domestic worker when she was only five. At her twelve, her father and grandmother married her off to 40 years old Majid. He has been married before but his wife left him. Sultana accepted the marriage, hoping this would help her escape the poverty at her father’s house.

Unfortunately, Majid was a lazy man who preferred idling around, playing cards and gambling with his friends. Sultana and Majid had no idea of birth control methods and they soon had four children. Poverty and starvation were continuous phenomenon, so was Majid’s torture for dowry. Sultana had to bring money from her father so that they could eat.

After fourteen years of hunger and miseries, Sultana finally could see a glimpse of hope when her sister-in-law came to Bhola from Dhaka. The sister-in-law advised her to move to Dhaka with the whole family. In Dhaka, Sultana started working as a domestic worker and her husband worked as a rickshaw puller. After four months, Majid wanted to return to the village because he did not like Dhaka life. But Sultana did not want to go back to her old distress. This disagreement broke into a heated conversation, after which Majid left and the lone struggle of Sultana began.

Sultana was the only earning member of the family and her income was not adequate to support a family of five. Finding no other way, Sultana started looking for jobs for her children. Her two sons (12 and 10) got jobs at a furniture shop where they would get two meals a day. Her other daughter (8) was away to work as a domestic worker. Sultana lived only with her youngest daughter. Life was still difficult but at least they were not starving. Meanwhile, a neighbor found Sultana a job of assisting a chef at a community center.

On the other side, Sultana’s husband was admonishing her daily over phone, demanding her to return to the village. By that time, one son and one daughter already were working at a garment factory. Sultana was resolute not to fall into the same abyss of misery and stayed in Dhaka. Majid joined her again, apologized and started working as a rickshaw puller. With the earnings of the children, her husband and herself, they finally could taste the sweetness of comfort. But it did not last long.

After one and half year, Majid told Sultana that he wanted to buy some land. He took her hard earned 38000 taka, left Dhaka and never returned. Later she heard that he wasted all the money on gambling and drinking. Seeing their father’s recklessness, the children also did not want him back. They rather felt sympathy for all the adversities their mother was going through. They stayed by her side while she kept up her struggle for a better life.

She took part in a three days’ training in 2014 organized by Shokhi and learned about
women’s legal rights. Now Sultana is a Change-maker of Shokhi project. She believes that her involvement with Shokhi is making her more confident. She has to go to different districts with other people for her work as an assistant chef. But she does not feel scared. Now she has the strength to speak out if something is not right.

Her children are her only redemption. Her daughters are growing up which makes her more anxious. She does not want them to suffer from the same misfortunes as her. She does not want to marry her daughters off before 18. She inspires them to develop skills, get a job and become self-dependent.
Name: Brishti  |  Age: 17 years
THE ENDURANT
Stories of Undefeatable Hearts

THE FANTASY OF MARRIAGE

“I used to believe that if you could be with your beloved forever, you would be the happiest person on earth. But after my wedding, I realized that reality was not the same as one’s belief. I can still remember the day when he first hit me. Everyone says, ‘He abuses you! Why don’t you just leave him?’ But, giving up is not a solution. People change. I am waiting for the day when he will change.”
Is there happiness in the lifeless buildings of this city? Through the iron framed corridors, you can stretch your hand and touch the rain. But you cannot get drenched in the downpour. Brishti’s childhood days of dancing in the rain are now just a happy memory.

It was also raining when her life took a new turn. Brishti took leave from the house where she was working as a domestic worker to visit her father at Beribadh slum. Her parents were not home. As she was waiting for them, she heard the sound of thunder. Anticipating rain, she felt an inexplicable joy as she always did. Had her parents known this already and therefore named her Brishti (rain)?

When it started to rain, she ran out to a field nearby to feel the gleeful raindrops. She noticed a man was staring at her and smiling. As soon as she looked at him, he winked. Brishti was so amused that she laughed out loud. Then she ran back to the house.

Two days later, Brishti again met the man, Tushar, in the slum. Tushar told that he along with his friend would visit his sister in Old Dhaka and whether she wanted to join. She did. They searched through the narrow alleys of Old Dhaka but could not find the house. It was almost evening. Tushar told Brishti to stay over with his friend’s wife while he and his friend stayed somewhere else. Tushar promised to take Brishti home the next morning.

When Brishti reached home, she found her parents loudly crying and people gathering round them. Brishti’s mother came running to her and asked where she had been. Brishti told her the truth. She was not scared because she had not done anything wrong. But her frank statement was interpreted in a very negative way. Some influential people in the community told Brishti’s father that if people knew that she had spent a night with a man, no one would marry her. They forced Brishti’s father to arrange her marriage with Tushar. Her parents did not want to marry off their daughter at an early age. They also did not know anything about Tushar and his family. But the people at the slum persisted. At the same time, Brishti was in love with Tushar and did not oppose the marriage. So, the parents arranged marriage between Brishti (15) and Tushar (23) and bore all the expenses for the wedding. Full of happiness and anticipation, Brishti stepped into the new phase of her life.

On the first month after wedding, Tushar and Brishti lived separately. Yet Brishti gave Tushar the two thousand taka that she was earning as a domestic worker. She also noticed that Tushar smoked cigarette and marijuana and occasionally drank alcohol. Brishti knew nothing about his bad habits since she did not know him much before marriage. Still the first month went well.

Next month Tushar rented a new house in Beribadh slum and moved in with his wife, 13 years old sister and his mother who was quite affectionate to Brishti. The mother-in-law worked as house help. Tushar got a job as a waiter at Nobodoy hotel. Stability and happiness seemed not far away. Yet it was.

Tushar became more and more inattentive to his work. He worked two days, but stayed at home or just hang around the rest of the week. Tushar also insisted her to have sex even though they lived in the same room with his mother and sister. Brishti felt ashamed. If she protested,
Tushar would beat her up. Tushar also watched pornography and raped Brishti after taking sex-drugs. Occasionally, he forced anal sex on her.

Brishti suffered all these silently. She could neither bear nor share it with anyone. Moreover, to avoid unwanted pregnancy, she had to take contraceptive methods. Tushar’s mother tried to abstain her son from being so heinous but he never listened.

Tushar also started tormenting Brishti for dowry. Once Brishti was going to visit her parents. Tushar told her to bring ten thousand taka from her father. Otherwise, he would not let her in. Despite their poverty, Brishti’s parents used to give five hundred or a thousand taka every time she visited them, hoping that this would reduce the torture on her. Still, Brishti was abused daily for dowry and sex. And the moment Tushar got the money, he would spend it on alcohol or gifts for his girlfriends.

The only valuables Brishti possessed were a pair of gold earrings and a nose-pin that she received from her mother and sister-in-law. Tushar tried to sell those, too. Brishti wished Tushar had bought her a saree of her favorite color. He never did it. He also never went out with Brishti because he felt ashamed of her. The humble yet sweet dreams she cherished, seemed too far-fetched. Seeing no transformation in her life, Brishti’s parents also became hopeless and stopped giving her money.

A year after the wedding, Brishti became pregnant. Tushar kicked in her belly. So, she miscarried. Another year later, Brishti became pregnant again. No one in the family wanted the child. Brishti also did not take any care of herself. But her mother-in-law urged her to go to the health clinic, take iron tablets and follow other regulations. Brishti gave birth to a daughter.

On the day of the interview, Brishti’s daughter was twenty-two days. Brishti was embracing her daughter with utmost care.

She was surprisingly in love with Tushar though he wronged her beyond words. Tushar abused Brishti even when she was pregnant. She came to Shokhi office with her parents to report it. Tushar was summoned at Shokhi office and was told not to abuse her anymore. The Shokhi officials continuously sit with him and discuss how badly domestic violence effects the family. They also forbade him to take sex-drugs and force sex on Brishti while she was pregnant. They explained the negative effects of these acts to him.

Now Shokhi’s officials are trying to involve Tushar in their events. Tushar has participated in Couple Fair, SRHR workshop etc. and learned about domestic violence and available legal supports against it. Tusher’s mother also wants him to change and have a happy life with Brishti. These efforts have already sparked a little change in him. Brishti does not know how long it will last but she refuses to be hopeless.
COMING BACK

“Alcohol, gambling... I did everything... But the life of addiction is not a life. One cannot escape his frustrations this way. I had to face the same old restlessness and poverty, when I was home. I was just buying misery with money. Once I beat up my wife with an iron pipe. Part of her body is still swollen like a tumor. It still hurts. When it does, she cannot work. Then I massage her to alleviate the pain and ask for her forgiveness.”
I was waiting in a car in front of Shokhi office. About 15 minutes later, Mohsin bhai from Shokhi arrived with a middle-aged, skinny man with a small beard. He was wearing a white t-shirt and lungi. He looked very tired. The man nodded at me with a warm smile and I knew that he was Habibur. He had been a perpetrator, but then he changed. So, the conversation with him was unlike other interviews I took.

Habibur was born in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. He had seven siblings. When Habibur was in class eight, his father died. His mother carried the burden of the poverty-stricken family. So, Habibur had no other way but to leave school and work relentlessly to support the family. At the same time, he got in bad company, started drinking alcohol, gambling and visiting prostitutes.

Habibur’s mother arranged a marriage for him with a neighbor’s daughter, Jannatun, hoping that this would improve his lifestyle. But, after the wedding it became worse since Habibur and his wife had completely different personalities. They quarreled almost every day. Habibur became a suspicious husband who let Jannatun neither work outside nor talk to other men. Being tired of this anguish and poverty, once Jannatun wanted to go back to her father’s house. Then, Habibur beat her up with a thick iron pipe.

Habibur started to transform when their two daughters were born. The family expense increased. Habibur was still borrowing money, wasting it on alcohol and gambling but gradually he realized that life could not continue like this. He stopped working as a rickshaw puller and found a job as a product delivery man. He left bad company and became more attentive to his family. Jannatun learned to sew and opened her own tailor shop. Their situation improved. They admitted the daughters to school. Recently, Habibur hired a rickshaw for six thousand taka so that he could earn some extra money in the evenings. Jannatun also worked hard and earned 15,000-20,000 taka a month as a seamstress.

Habibur joined Shokhi in 2015. He willingly participates in all Shokhi’s meetings, distributes awareness-raising posters and introduces Shokhi to others who needed guidance. He also helps settling family feuds. Habibur believes that the urge to change should come from inside. Other can only facilitate the change.

I asked him, “There are husbands who marry for dowry and torment their wives for money. Do you think there is any meaningful bond in those marriages?”

“Marrying for money is business, not marriage. How can there be love or respect in that kind of marriage? It is nonsense to abuse your wife for money and ruin peace at home. Awareness is very important in this case. Had I known about Shokhi earlier, I could have had a better life. Some men in our country think superior to others. They feel powerful by beating up their
wives. But in reality, the violators are never at peace. They are very weak inside.”

“In your opinion, what can be an effective way to stir a positive change in our society?”

“Legal awareness is the best medicine in this case. Shokhi’s meetings are often held in my house. We try to solve cases by talking. Otherwise, we take legal steps. If the law is enforced properly, people will be more disciplined, more caring to their families. Change is not easy. We cannot change everyone at the same time. But if people change one by one, a bigger change will transpire.”

At the end of the interview, Habibur told me that he would go home, have lunch and then play Ludo with his wife. He invited me again and again to visit his happy family someday.
Name: Shefali Begum  |  Age: 25 years
“If I tell him to use condom, he asks- ‘How do you know about condoms? You have sex with other men for sure.’ If I pray, he says that I pray because I have committed many sins and I am trying to alleviate them. If I have white discharge, he says that it happens to dirty women. I wish someone could tell him that menstruation and white discharge are not symptoms of licentiousness. It happens to every woman. I cannot bear this anymore. Sometimes I feel like committing suicide. I tolerate this only for my children. When they will grow up, I hope to move out with them and find a job in garment factory. But the way my husband beats me up, I do not know if I will survive that long. I hope no other woman goes through what I do.”
Shefali was only 11 years old. She was studying in class four. She went to Dhaka to visit her aunt on a long vacation with her mother. A few days later, her parents arranged her marriage with her 12-year-old cousin, Jahid. At first the Kazi (marriage register) refused to conduct marriage between two children. Then the families went to a religious leader (hujur) to get the job done. Shefali had no clue what was happening. After the wedding, she went back to the village.

Jahid’s mother died when he was young. His father remarried. Jahid’s relation with the stepmother was very hostile. So, Jahid stayed most of the time outside. Soon he got into bad company and started having physical relations with many women. Eleven months after the wedding, when Shefali had her menarche, her in-laws immediately sent for her to sleep with Jahid. He tried to have intercourse on the first night which made her very scared since she was completely ignorant of what sex was. She was also surprised that Jahid knew about it at such a young age.

Shefali lived most of the time with her parents in Bhola. Her mother and aunts explained the relationship of husband and wife to her. This made adolescent Shefali eager for her husband. In her own words, “We were poor and always hungry. The hunger of my body and mind was added to the hunger of my stomach.”

Four years after the wedding, their first child was born in Bhola. Jahid was unhappy that the boy did not resemble him but he brought both the child and the mother to Dhaka. Since he was not in good terms with his stepmother, they lived in a separate house. Shefali started to notice the true nature Jahid. He used to come home very late at night, was addicted to gambling, smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. One night, he almost vomited on his sleeping son. Shefali quickly took the son in her lap before Jahid vomited all over the bed.

Jahid also never took responsibility for birth control. So, Shefali had to take oral pills. Three years after the first child, when Shefali became pregnant again, Jahid left home every afternoon, came back at 4-5 am in the morning and told Shefali to prepare water for his bath. If she asked him where he had been, he never replied, though it was clear that Jahid was sleeping with other women.

When she was four months’ pregnant, Shefali and Jahid had a big dispute. At one point, Jahid started punching and kicking her and striking her brutally with a chain that was used for locking the door. Shefali pretended to faint to save the child in her womb. Jahid still kicked violently twice on her back and left. Shefali’s arm was broken. Her sister took her to the hospital and asked the doctor to write in the documents that Shefali had fallen down while fetching water.

The kept going on. Once Jahid hit her head so badly that she was almost dying. The neighbors took her to the doctor. After that incident, Shefali’s sister and sister-in-law took her to Mohammadpur thana. Still wearing her bandage on her head, Shefali filed a General Diary against Jahid. Then, the police came to their house based on the complaint and asked
Shefali to bring cold water and refreshments for them. After eating and drinking, the police said to her, “The guy will eventually die for taking drugs. Why do you complain about? He gives you money for groceries. Be happy with that.” They took 250 taka for transportation cost and left. After the incident, Jahid became even more reckless and hit her head twice. Shefali had 17 stitches in her head which still often aches intensely.

In spite of the deplorable condition of her health, Shefali had to work as a domestic worker as Jahid didn’t bring in any money for the family. He even withdrew twenty thousand taka from the cooperative fund and wasted it in gambling. Shefali is still paying the due by installments.

In 2015, Shefali’s sister-in-law told her about Shokhi. Shefali was not convinced, “Allah did not favor me. Police did not help me. Will it be any help if I go there?” Yet, her sister-in-law insisted and agreed to attend a workshop of Shokhi. Shefali met many female victims of violence there, learned about sexual and reproductive rights and legal services for violence against women. She also shared her sad stories with Shokhi officials who later sent a notice to Jahid. They warned him about the diseases he might get from physical relationships with multiple women and the bad effects of drugs.

After the session, Jahid talked to Shefali about these issues. He attended couple of Shokhi’s meetings and events. He gave up alcohol and other addictions. Shefali believes Jahid has not been going to other women for one year. Shefali hopes her husband will change into a better person someday.
Name: Ayesha Aktar | Age: 19 years
“My parents married me off to my husband because he was a pious man. But who would have known that a pious man like him could beat up his wife? My husband along with my parents-in-law, brother-in-law and sister-in-law used to beat me up for dowry. Then one day he divorced me. I have a little son. I cannot imagine how I will live alone with the child. But, how long will my parents look after me? I feel helpless when I think about the future.”

*Marrying your ex-husband through a process in which the woman has to marry someone else and have sex with that person to consummate the marriage. Then that person will divorce her so that she can marry her ex-husband again.*
Ayesha’s home district is in Comilla. But her family has been living in Bhashantek, Dhaka for last fifty years. Ayesha was a good student. She also worked as a cleaning staff at her school. When she was 16, her mother arranged a marriage for her. Her father was reluctant to marry off their only daughter at such a young age. But Ayesha’s mother kept insisting on the ground that the bridegroom was very pious and came of a good family. Another reason was that he had a stable job at a tailor shop.

So, the matrimony took place. Ayesha’s parents gave gold jewelry, furniture and 30,000 taka to the bridegroom’s family. After the wedding, Ayesha had to stop going to school. She had to rather devote her whole day to cooking, cleaning and other chores for her husband’s family consisting of six members.

Her husband’s family expected Ayesha’s father to keep sending money for his only daughter. But Ayesha’s father was too poor to meet that expectation. As a result, the in-laws started to abuse Ayesha verbally for dowry which became a regular phenomenon in her life.

It seemed normal to the in-laws that Ayesha would be rebuked and bullied every single day. For Ayesha it was not. She protested for the first time after five months of her wedding and her husband slapped her for that. Gradually the nature of the abuse became more vehement. And they also kept inventing new excuses to torture her.

Ayesha’s husband never used birth-control method. So, Ayesha kept track of the safe days in her menstrual cycle and thus avoided pregnancy. She got pregnant two years after the wedding. She hoped this would make things better for her. But no one except her husband was happy about it. Her brother-in-law and mother-in-law insisted her to get an abortion.

When Ayesha did not listen to them, her mother-in-law deceitfully made her take some harmful drugs. Ayesha became very ill. Her husband took her to the health center where they were assured that the baby was fine. Ayesha realized that it all happened because of the drug. Her husband was furious when she told it to him. He started beating her up heedlessly because it was a statement against his mother.

The situation worsened every day. They kept finding more excuses to harass her mentally and physically. One night, Ayesha’s husband and parents-in-law told her to get out of the house at 1 am. Petrified and helpless, Ayesha silently waited and left the house after her father came to fetch her in the morning.

Since then Ayesha never went back to her husband’s house. Her child was born in her father’s house. When Ayesha gave the news to her husband over phone, he did not believe it, demanded proof and shouted at her unreasonably. Losing her hope of retribution, she hanged up the phone.

In February 2016, Ayesha and her father went
to Shokhi for help. Her husband and parent-in-laws got a notice for a conciliation meeting. The next day Ayesha received a divorce letter from her husband. She did not let go of the issue so easily. She immediately talked to the lawyer to file a case. Later she won the case and retrieved some money from her husband.

Now Ayesha is a Change-maker of Shokhi. She is still going to the court every day and fighting for her rights. She is running another case against her husband to claim sustenance for the child for 7 years. But that is not the end. After that, there will rise another complication regarding whom the child will live with. But, Ayesha will not also let go of that ordeal without another fight.

Ayesha is now strong enough to deal with the issue of violence against women by her own. She also helps others in her community as a Change maker.
Name: Liza | Age: 17 years
“My husband has extramarital affairs. When I complain about it, my mother-in-law says a man can do whatever he wants as long as he provides food and comes back home at night. I have asked my husband to give me a divorce. But then, he has threatened that I would have to leave my kids with him. My father-in-law is a lustful man and there are five adult brothers-in-law in the house slithering around. I do not feel secured. My father is dead and I have nowhere to go. I feel lost.”
I was sitting at Shokhi Nobodoy Hub office at Dhaka Udyan. Liza rushed into the office, sat down on a chair panting and explained eagerly, “I was hanging the wet clothes on the clothesline. I started running the moment I heard you were here.” Liza had a baby boy of 15 days old, named Rifat. She let him sleep at home so that she could unimpededly talk to me. Through a stream of questions and answers, Liza unfolded the exceptionally appalling story of her life.

When Liza was fifteen, she came to visit her sister in Dhaka from Bhola. At that time, her mother and sister arranged a marriage for her with a man named Farook next door. Liza opposed fiercely but no one listened. Liza’s father also did not want to marry her off. He knew that Farook, had been married before and had a son. His first wife left being a victim of domestic violence. Yet everyone persisted and finally Liza’s father gave in.

After the wedding, Liza started living with her husband’s family which was consisted of twelve members. She had to cook, wash clothes and take care of all other chores by herself. Involved in local politics, Farooq had to carry out some illegal activities. Two months after the wedding, even before the wedding henna on Liza’s faded, Farook had been arrested for bombing.

Days without Farook were intolerable for Liza. She cried every day. She was treated like a burden by her father-in-law and brothers-in-law who continuously oppressed and tortured her for dowry. Their logic was, since her husband was absent, she had to bring money to support herself. Liza’s mother tried to send some money, but it was too little to save Liza from their merciless abuses.

Liza fell victim to another obnoxious mishap. Liza was sleeping when she felt someone was touching her. She opened her eyes and appallingly discovered Farooq’s cousin standing close to her bed. He immediately leaped on her and started touching her body. Hearing her terrified screams, everybody came to her room. They accused Liza as a loose woman and held her responsible for the incident. Liza’s mother-in-law was the only person to defend her. She told the man to leave.

Nine months later Farooq was released from the jail. Liza thought her sorrowful days were over but she was wrong. Farook went back to the old trend of life, spending his days hanging out with friends and drinking alcohol. Liza found a job of recycling iron for him and requested him to pay more attention to his family. Instead of listening to her, Farook started having affairs with other women.

Without support of her husband, Liza spent more vulnerable days at home. One day, she felt a pain in her belly. Liza’s father-in-law who was a herbal doctor, examined her and gave her some medicines. A few days later, Liza was sleeping in her room in the afternoon in an almost empty house. Liza’s father-in-law came to her room and asked her to show where the pain was. Her father-in-law was almost his father’s age, so she unsuspectedly showed him the place. He told Liza to roll down on the side so that he could examine her. Then the father-in-law grabbed her breasts from behind and
started pressing them. Liza started screaming and tried to run out of the room. He stopped her quickly, gave her 100 taka and forbade her to tell this to anyone. When Farooq came home, she told him everything showing the 100 taka. To her surprise, Farooq accused Liza and told her to apologize to his father. Liza defied. But everyone in the house forced her to do that.

Liza told me mournfully, “No one could harm me before my marriage. People say women are safe at the husband’s house. But, here I am the most vulnerable. I feel disgusted when I see my father-in-law. Yet I have to live with this ghastly man under the same roof.”

In April, 2016 Shokhi’s Change-makers heard about Liza’s peril through a neighbor. They contacted Liza and assured her that no harm would touch her again. Liza lost her parents so she always felt as if there were no one to stand by her side. But after joining Shokhi she believed if something bad happened to her, Shokhi would fight for her.
Name: Aklima Begum | Age: 35 years
"I have raised my husband like my younger brother. I gave him money to build a house in the village. He set up a tube well and bought a pond with my money. One fine morning he went out saying he was going to Karwan Bazar to buy pants and never returned. Since then, my whole world became empty and barren. Later I heard from my sister-in-law that he married another woman who was older than he, though she is not prettier than I. Men only go after young women, beauty and money. When the fun is over, they are gone. My ex-husband did the same. I went to the police at Tejgaon thana. They said they would not be able to find him because I did not have his address. If I knew his address, why would I go to the police? I could have found him myself! This is what our police are like. Husbands leave their wives and disappear. But the police and the law can do nothing about it."
Aklima has been living for four years at a slum close to Tejgaon rail line. When I saw her first, I became a bit astonished. Aklima’s lips were colored with bright pink and her eyes were rimmed with black liner.

I asked her laughing, “Do you like make-over?”

Aklima smiled shyly, “No, I just went to visit my sister.”

There was a small warehouse beside her house. We sat there and talked. The whistle of the train often interrupted our conversation. We had to shout to make ourselves hearable.

Aklima spent her childhood in Mymensing where she was raised by her affectionate parents and paternal uncles. She came from a well-off family. She studied till class eight.

Then Aklima came to Dhaka with her aunt to work in a garment factory. On her way to work, Aklima met a police officer of Tejgaon Thana. The police officer, Mamun liked Aklima and proposed her to marry him. She was fourteen and she fell in love with Mamun. Therefore, she agreed.

They informed Aklima’s aunt about their decision. Since Mamun had a good job, the aunt consented and arranged the wedding. After the wedding, Aklima left her job and moved to Amtola slum with Mamun. The first couple of years went happily but then Aklima noticed changes in Mamun’s behavior. He started coming home late, quarreled with Aklima at every chance he got. Since he lost his interest in her, Aklima guessed that Mamun was having an affair. This caused a lot of chaos and conflict between them. Then, one day Mamun left the house.

A few days later, Aklima received a call from him. He told that he had married his uncle’s daughter because his father wanted him to. Aklima heard later from his relatives that Mamun married the woman because she had a lot of land property in the village.

During the four years of marital life, Aklima gave birth to two daughters. Aklima requested Mamun divorce her and send some money to support the daughters. Mamun replied: “Why should I divorce you? You did not do anything wrong.” He knew that he would have to pay Aklima if he divorced her. And if he came to visit her, he would have to give her money, because the influential people in the community would force him to. So, he never contacted Aklima again.

Aklima’s life became a perpetual struggle. Her aunt took care of the daughters while she moved to a small room in Begunbari and started working at a garment factory. She was sending money to her aunt to ensure a better future for her children. The aunt admitted the daughters to a school.

The garment factory supervisor tried to harass her sexually. That’s why she left that job and found another at Tajur Hotel. There she met a co-worker of 22 years named Sohel and close relationship developed between them. Sohel was ten years junior to Aklima. But that did not stop their relation from growing deeper and
closer. She needed someone who would love her and be a father to her children.

After the wedding, both Aklima and Sohel left their jobs and moved to Tejgaon slum at the rail line. Sohel started working as a wall-painter. In two years they got two sons and everything was going well until Sohel got addicted to gambling. He started borrowing money from his neighbors to waste it on his newly acquired bad habit. He also stopped working regularly.

Consequently, Aklima had to take care of all the costs for the four children, Sohel’s gambling and overall daily needs. The burden exhausted her. They started quarrelling regularly and at one point, Sohel started to beat up Aklima. Their neighbors also had a bad influence on him which intensified the negative change. Aklima was not in good terms with one of her neighbors and they said defaming things about Aklima’s character to Sohel. They also kept telling him that he was still young and could find a better wife. As a result, one day Sohel also left.

Aklima is mentally broken since both her partners cheated her but she is determined to bring up her four children and ensure a better future for them. The eldest daughter has got admitted to a college. The second son is 6 years old, the other son and daughter are 3 years old. Aklima alone is bearing all the expenses for the children. They can afford only one meal a day. She is desperately looking for a household or an office job.

During the whole interview, Aklima was very cheerful. When she was revealing the most painful parts of her life, she was laughing loudly. In the dark warehouse, her loud, lunatic laughter gave me creeps. She might be on the verge of losing her sanity because of people’s dishonesty and hardships of life.

Wanting to hear something positive, I asked her, “You have been with Shokhi for one year. What did you learn?”

“Child marriage is not good. I will let my daughter study and become independent and then marry her off. My husband beat me up and left me. I did not know this was violence. I thought it was normal. Now people teach us in the meetings. They say a lot of things to aware us about our rights.”
Name: Tania Aktar | Age: 28 years
“I do not know what marital bond is like. I could never speak out my heart to my husband. He never made love to me; he only used my body. He wanted to have sex even at the time of my menstruation. He never listened if I forbade. There was no peace, no happiness... I spent 16 years of my married life getting beaten up all over my body by my husband and his family. He wouldn’t divorce me because then he would have to pay the allowance for the children. They tortured me brutally every day because they wanted me to divorce him. But where could I go with two children?... I feel disgusted when I see men. I wish no woman had a husband such as mine.”
“What is your name?”

“Tania.”

“What a nice name! Who gave you the name? Your mother or father?”

“No, my husband.”

“He called you that lovingly?”

“No. My husband had a love relationship with a girl called Tania before our marriage. That is why he calls me Tania.”

“Oh... and you accepted it?”

“I was married as a child, at 12. So, I accepted whatever my husband told. I was not grown enough to think what I wanted or preferred.”

“What is your real name?”

“My real name is Shahinoor, given by parents. Now, the name is almost forgotten.”

Tania spent her childhood in Kuakata, a village of Borguna district. She was the eldest with two younger sisters. Her father worked as a contractor and mother worked as a domestic worker. The father remarried and then separated from Tania’s mother, leaving Tania deprived of paternal love.

In 2000, Tania’s father arranged a marriage between Tania (12) and Jamal (25). The dowry was 1,00,000 taka, furniture, a gold chain and a ring, cooking utensils, mattresses and blankets. Tania’s father promised that he would fulfill all the demands within a few months of the wedding. Tania, who was just a child, had no idea what was going on. It seemed nothing but some sort of festivity to her. Actually, it was the beginning of her nightmare.

A couple of days after the wedding, Jamal and his family started to press Tania’s father for dowry. Tania was continuously mentally and physically harassed for the same reason. So, to save herself, she also requested her father to send money. Her father tried to meet their demands for some time. But Tania’s stepmother did not like it. She forbade him to send them money any more. Finally, tired of all these stress, Tania’s father abandoned them completely and started living in Mirpur with the stepmother.

Tania lost her last refuge, sole hope. Jamal and his family started torturing her more. Tania’s sisters were also married off by that time and all three of them were enduring violence for dowry.

Years passed. To Jamal’s family, Tania was a burden they could not yet get rid of, not even by torturing her. Their brutality amplified. They hoped that eventually Tania would leave and they would be free of legal obligations of divorce and payment. Since Tania still did not leave, the in-laws made a fatal plan to get rid of her permanently.

That was five years ago. Tania was pregnant with her second child. Like every other day, she
served her father-in-law some snacks in the evening. But she forgot to serve him water. This was an excuse enough for her husband to start slapping and kicking her. Tania kept pleading that she was pregnant. Jamal showed no mercy, rather the rest of the family joined to beat her. Her father-in-law hit her back with his knee fifty times. Then Tania placed her hand on her husband’s chest and begged, “I have no one but you. Please save me. They will kill me.” Jamal pushed her away and punched her on her chest. As Tania fell on the ground, he barked, “If you are gone, I will get a new wife. But if my parents are gone, I will not have them anymore. This is the lesson you deserve for defying my father.”

They kept on beating her blindly. At one point, Tania lost her consciousness. The family locked her in the house and left. One day later, the neighbors rescued her. After Tania faintly recovered, she went to a non-government legal assistance center to file a complaint against Jamal and his family. She told how her husband’s family had been torturing her mentally and physically year after year, how her children’s fundamental rights were ignored and how her husband often left her for months. Jamal and his family were sent a notice based on the complaint. The family went there, cried and asked for forgiveness from Tania. Then they took her back home promising that they would not torture her again.

In 2016, Jamal left the house telling he was going out for work and never returned. Tania took care of the house rent, food, school expenses for the children by working in a garments factory and as a domestic worker. Recently, she got a job at a clinic.

In 2015, Tania came to know about Shokhi through a woman from next door, joined there and became a Change-maker. She also built her own Change-maker group. She attended Shokhi meetings regularly and created awareness to people around her. Most importantly, she is holding onto hope. She has started taking driving lessons at Shokhi. She needs a good job urgently to take care of her children and herself. She keeps trying.

Tania is now determined to go on alone. She wanted a husband and a family, but received nothing but deception and harassment. Now she will keep up her lone fight for a better life as a Change maker.
COLOPHON

Cases collected by
Kuddus Miah
Gourango Ghosh
Md. Faruk
Zerin Afroze
Nasima Khanam
Mabia Khatun
Selina Ara

Features
The portrait drawings in the book are inspired by the real characters of the stories.

Disclaimer
Pseudonyms are used due to privacy. Real names are used for the stories of Rupa Akter, Habibur Rahman and Tania Akhter with their consent.
THE ENDURANT
Stories of Undefeatable Hearts