

Unit Eleven

Women's Role in Uprisings



Women receiving training to join the fight for Bangladesh's independence in 1971

Learning outcomes:

After we have studied this unit, we will be able to

- describe the significant roles women played in key freedom struggles, including the July Uprising of 2024
- reflect on how women's contributions, often overlooked, redefined possibilities for activism and resistance across eras
- analyse the broader impact of women's efforts on social and political change in Bangladesh.

From the valiant sacrifice of Pritilata Waddedar, who swallowed cyanide pills to avoid capture by British forces in 1932, to the spying and frontline battles of Khasi freedom fighter Kakon Bibi in 1971, women were at the forefront of our struggles for freedom against colonization and oppression.

In 2024, as the country rose against years of repression and autocratic rule, it was again the women who paved the way for a new Bangladesh. They were on the battlefield chanting slogans, stopping police vans, breaking blockades, and taking to the streets at night while men could not. The women were the beacon that penetrated the darkness.



A young woman raises her fist and chants slogans during a protest

Mothers came out with food and supplies tending to injured students defying bullets and tear gas. The student protesters were their children, after all. While men, due to their social position in the hierarchy, were predominantly silent or persecuted, it was the women who spoke up. From



A girl stops a police van carrying arrested students

domestic workers to grandmothers in mofussils and villages, their words brought down the dictator through daily conversations in both domestic and public spaces. The seeds of freedom were planted through the ordinary speech of our women, who did not shy away from revealing the oppression.

We witnessed initiatives like Mayer Daak, a group of women whose family members had faced enforced disappearances; they became one of the most enduring symbols of defiance and calls for justice during the autocratic rule. They staged demonstrations and faced possibilities of persecution but could not be stopped.



Mayer Daak members demand justice for disappeared family members

Living up to that ideal, female students during the anti-discrimination movement broke out of their dorms, defying the authorities, and shouted at the security forces, calling them murders—“Khuni! Khuni!”

It was Abu Sayeed’s mother who asked the question, “Amar betak marlu kene?”—a question that reverberated the essence of oppression and triggered resistance in the public imagination. It was the cries of these mothers that truly moved us, making us question the legitimacy of the autocracy that frequently misused women’s liberation narratives as an excuse or token to justify its terrorizing policies.



Illustration: Debashish Roy

It was the mothers and sisters who cut through those narratives. The students from girls' dormitories, the sisters on the streets fighting back, organizing, planning, and strategizing—they were not always in front of the camera and therefore, their struggles and labour are often invisibilized. They worked quietly and fiercely to offer us a new dawn.

A. Answer the following questions based on your reading of the passage:

1. How did women contribute to Bangladesh's freedom struggles in 1932, 1971, and 2024?
2. In what ways did women lead and inspire others during the 2024 uprising?
3. Describe the role of mothers during the 2024 movement and the significance of their actions.
4. What was the impact of initiatives like Mayer Daak, and why did they become enduring symbols of defiance?
5. How did women's voices and actions challenge the narratives used in different regimes?

B. Writing Practice

Write a paragraph analyzing the overlooked contributions of women in Bangladesh's freedom struggles, as illustrated in the passage. Discuss how women's acts of resistance—from Pritilata Waddedar's sacrifice to the defiant voices of mothers in 2024—have shaped these movements, yet often go unnoticed in traditional histories. Consider how “her story” rather than “history” might more accurately capture the vital roles women played.

C. Group Project: Visual Representation

Create a visual collage or poster series titled “Her Story of Freedom” to capture women's roles in Bangladesh's freedom struggles, focusing on figures like Pritilata Waddedar, Kakon Bibi, and the mothers and students of 2024. Use colours, images, and symbols to highlight their courage and leadership. Accompany your project with a short description, then present it to the class, explaining what you learned about the importance of women's contributions to these movements.