



# A New Wave of Violence

## Acid Attacks on Women in Bangladesh

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The widespread and unregulated availability of car battery acid – a bottle of sulfuric acid that is sold for Taka 15 (US\$ 0.25) – has made acid throwing a cheap and “expedient” form of violence against women and girls in Bangladesh. Afroza Anwary (2003) attributes the increasing number of attacks using acid to men viewing women as property, the emphasis on women’s looks related to marriage as their means to achieve security, and the failure of the government to prosecute the attackers. In recent decades there has been an escalation not only of acid attacks but of all types of violence against women. (Ain O Salish Kendro 2001).

The efforts of Naripokkho, a Bangladeshi feminist advocacy group, helped create an intense public response to acid throwing violence against women in Bangladesh during the period 1995- 2003<sup>1</sup>.

### The Naripokkho Campaign

Naripokkho, literally meaning pro-women, is a membership-based women’s advocacy organization founded in 1983. Its founders and activists see Naripokkho as collectively working for the advancement of women’s rights and entitlements and building resistance against violence, discrimination and injustice. Its activities include advocacy campaigns,

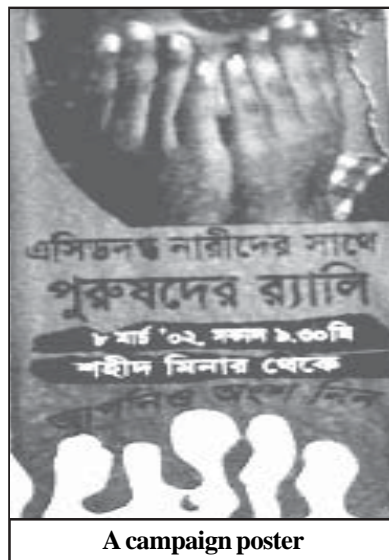
research, discussions, cultural events and lobbying on issues of gender justice. Most of Naripokkho’s members are women with professional occupations. The organization has extensive experience in conducting workshops, seminars, training and national level conferences. In 1995, when Naripokkho activists embarked on their work on acid violence, there were no systematic studies or records that documented incidents of acid throwing on women and girls in Bangladesh. They helped bring attention to this issue as a gender based human rights violation at the national and international level.

Bangladeshi feminists since then have asserted that the growth of this form of violence in recent decades needs to be understood in the context of patriarchal social order, a deteriorating law and order situation,

and the uneven impact of globalization and its attendant contestation of existing gender divisions in Bangladesh. Since the 1980s Bangladesh has witnessed unprecedented labour participation of women, in the garment industry for instance, providing a kind of visibility to young single women that made them easy targets of gendered violence, such as acid attacks, that attempt to put women in their place.

The reasons for the attacks are overwhelmingly cited as marital, family and land disputes, refusal to pay dowry or rejection of romantic advances and marriage proposals (Islam 2004). A study conducted by Women for Women, a Dhaka based feminist research group, reveals that acid victims are often characterized as women who are “wayward and disobedient” (*udhyoto meye*) by their community (Akhter and Nahar 2003).

Naripokkho’s involvement began when one of its members, Nasreen Haq, who eventually became the coordinator of the campaign, met two male relatives of Nurun Nahar, a teenage girl on whom Jashim Sikdar, a rejected suitor, and his accomplices, had thrown acid. The initial phase of the campaign consisted of research: collecting data from various newspapers, libraries, medical facilities, and police stations; creating and maintaining a “violence logbook”; meeting with and providing support to victims of acid attacks and their families; and developing a network of allies such as journalists, activists,



A campaign poster

philanthropists, medical and legal professionals, and international donors who could potentially assist in the creation of a public outcry against the use of acid in violence against women.

### **International Lobbying**

The emergent loose network produced a campaign, leading to the “internationalization” of a domestic issue, thereby reinforcing voices of local women activists and affecting national policy development priorities. Naripokkho map acid attacks as a distinctive form of a larger issue of violence against women by leveraging this issue onto the stage of the international women’s rights arena in order to affect policy changes on the national front. The internationalization of the campaign enabled Naripokkho activists to exert pressure on the national government to implement policy changes, as well as to promote widespread support of the campaign through targeted media exposure.

In April 1997 Naripokkho activists organized a three day workshop with a group of teenage girls who were survivors of acid violence. The purpose of this workshop was to present in a public forum the phenomenon of acid throwing as a form of gendered violence, to point out the gaps in services provided to them by institutions such as the medico-legal establishments, and to mobilize key local, national and international actors to take action, to promote solidarity and make visible the plight of survivors of violence whose physical and psychological health and social lives had been badly affected as a result of the acid attacks. Naripokkho’s approach was motivated by the belief that the experiences of the survivors should be central to the shaping of the campaign and its objectives. Several of the women survivors led the campaign.

The workshop was a collaborative effort in which both



**Women survivors at a theatre workshop**

international and local NGOs participated. It featured sessions where participants who were survivors developed strong relationships with one another through group activities with the Naripokkho workers. Separate sessions were held with family members, particularly the mothers of the young women, who were the primary care-givers in the long recovery process following the acid attacks. These sessions were emotionally charged, promoting solidarity among women, a critical feature of the emergent Naripokkho campaign.

### **Breaking Isolation**

During the workshop, acid survivors and their families were encouraged to map out their own future plans, their vision of social justice, and recommendations of services needed for victims of violence. The sessions encouraged the young survivors to develop confidence to confront the isolation and ostracism following acid attacks, and to feel comfortable in public spaces. Bristi Chowdhury described one particular event.

Survivors, mothers and Naripokkho staff went to the lawns around Shongshad Bhaban, the Parliament

Building which is a place for married couples to go openly and for unmarried couples to go covertly. Many people told us that we must either be mad or inhumanely insensitive to take a group of girls whose outside appearance was, to say the least, shocking, to this place and that too on a Friday when the place is literally swarming.

Nonetheless, Naripokkho activists believed in reclaiming the public space and social lives of the young girls that gendered abuse so methodically denied. Chowdhury continued:

We got out of the minibuses slightly apprehensive, but Nasreen (the campaign coordinator) covered her own apprehension by taking control of the situation and telling us to hold hands so that we were in one long line. Then we sang. Even those like me, who are tone deaf, sang. We started with “We shall overcome/*Amra korbo joy*” and went on to many more. We took over Shongshod that day! We were all standing on the steps singing and of course a large crowd of male ogles had gathered to watch the freak show (or at least that’s what we thought), when one young man pushed his way to the front and

asked if we would let him sing us a song. We were all very apprehensive about this, but he proved us to be a bunch of paranoid cynics. He sang beautifully. All he wanted to do was have fun with us, not at us; maybe he even wanted to show his solidarity with us. We had been worried that everyone would treat the girls as freaks and for a while the ogles did treat them as freaks. But after a while they stopped having fun at our expense and began to have fun with us.

Nasreen Haq emphasized that the Naripokkho workshop brought together a group of girls who, as a result of the acid attacks, had been deprived of living their adolescence. Thus, the session near the Parliament House was intended to reclaim not only the public spaces and social lives of young women but also their lost youth (Nasreen Haq Interview, April 2003).

The campaign challenged the survivors enforced isolation. As a result, the “visibilization” of the survivors became a key strategy in the efforts to make public the anti-acid violence campaign and prepared them to collectively make a statement to state representatives, journalists, doctors, lawyers, and police officers in a public forum called “Face to Face with Acid Survivors.” The girls spoke at length about the long process of recovery and the inadequate services in the country’s one burns unit in the Dhaka Medical College Hospital; the financial strain on their families who were pursuing medical and legal redress; their own inability to continue with their education or meaningful employment; and the trauma and isolation that ensued. Moreover, the girls talked about the corrupt and ineffective judicial system which in spite of offering services in rhetoric systematically discriminated against the victims.

The April 1997 workshop was significant and a turning point for the campaign because for the first time Bangladeshi civil servants and several international organizations’ staff came face to face with young Bangladeshi women who had endured acid attacks. The conference also attracted the attention of the international media.

At the same time, strengthened by the supportive feminist space of Naripokkho and the growing network of survivors, the young survivors began to participate more fully in the campaign and pursue other activities. Naripokkho’s strategy firmly insisted that the primary agents of change be those who experienced the violence because they have the insight, authority and vision to shape the social movement against acid violence. The workshop also allowed survivors to share experiences with one another as a collective.

Such a visibilization is important because it challenges the motivation behind the crime, which is to force women into isolation and to end their social lives. Naripokkho’s

intervention set in motion the entrance of key actors in the continuing development and diversification of the organization’s participation in the larger movement against women’s oppression.

### **The UNICEF Intervention**

The second stage, during the years of 1997-1999, marked the diversification and gradual internationalization of the acid campaign. The 1997 acid survivors’ workshop, stirred the interest of international donor agencies, especially UNICEF-Bangladesh. Although several Naripokkho activists believed that setting up an Acid Foundation under the auspices of Naripokkho would be ideal, others in the organization felt such a task would be too overwhelming. As a research and advocacy organization, majority of its members felt that it did not have the scope or capacity to set up an umbrella organization such as the one the donors could offer. At this time, the British High Commission set up an “Inquiry” headed by a British expatriate writer who was later to become the first Executive Director





of the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), founded and financed by UNICEF and CIDA, with the purpose of coordinating medical, legal and rehabilitative services for acid violence survivors.

Feminist scholar Deborah Stienstra (2000) has discussed women's transnational organizing in relation to the five UN conferences between 1992 and 1996.<sup>2</sup> She has argued that women's movements have taken their strength from the organizing done locally and nationally and translated it into transnational networks in order to leverage their position in the global discourse of women's rights affirmed by the UN conferences. She explains the tensions in international as well as intra-national women's organizing and the complexities and compromises that shape the women's movement agendas. In this instance it is also an effective metaphor to explain Naripokkho's ongoing negotiations with UNICEF staff to ascertain the donor agency's investment in the campaign against acid violence.

In 1993, the UN General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women. UNICEF was committed to implementation of the Platform for Action, the comprehensive action plan for advancement of women to the year 2000 and beyond emanating from the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (UNICEF, *UNICEF and the Fourth World Conference on Women*, 1997). As a result of

Naripokkho's efforts and external pressures, UNICEF joined the struggle against acid throwing. However, a considerable disconnect developed with the women's advocacy groups in setting priorities and agendas.

For instance, one of the first programmes UNICEF supported brought in a team of experts from the U.S. specializing in Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR)<sup>3</sup>. While therapy appears to be an obvious necessity for victims of trauma, in the Bangladeshi context counselling is practiced in rather different settings. The activities of the acid workshop particularly, are exemplary of a more informal counselling practiced on an on-going basis since in Bangladesh "culture of therapy" has not yet found widespread social acceptance.

Survivors of violence often go to NGOs like Ain O Salish Kendro (a women's legal aid organization) and Naripokkho for counselling. In such a context, psychologists are involved differently. Instead of putting local professionals through costly training in EMDR, a better course of action, according to Azim, would be to bring in trained counsellors to teach at Dhaka University and thereby train and build capacity locally.

UNICEF's strategy involved other areas of campaign building as well. For instance, mid-way through the consultancy, the consulting team was instructed to set aside research on existing and missing but needed services and focus on interviewing five hundred survivors of acid violence around the country to develop a database of information on their needs. Those interviews were then supposed to lay the groundwork for programme development. However, the practicalities of developing a network of 500 far-flung survivors within a month was an impossibility given the time and resource bound parameters of the consultancy.



Honor Ford Smith (1997) has talked about the tendency of aid agencies working in developing countries to fund short-term projects that produce quick and measurable results. Finding "500 acid burnt girls" and providing them with rehabilitative care would satisfy the funder's criteria of offering measurable solutions. It, however, contradicted the earlier survivor centered strategy developed by Naripokkho, which focused on the empowerment of the survivors to be leaders in their own struggle. Perhaps a combination of the two strategies would have been optimal whereby survivors could access medicolegal services and concurrently thoughtful planning could ensue in transforming discriminatory social structures which disallow women meaningful participation as citizens.

During the acid workshop in 1997, Naripokkho activists asked the young women to talk about their wishes. These are a few of the responses:

- To look like I did before
- To be able to see again
- To study, to go back to school
- To bring up my son well
- To swim in the river
- To find and meet up with all the other acid survivors in this country and hold a huge rally on International Women's Day
- To be able to go back to work (Chowdhury 1997).

These responses indicate that survivors desired a life that offered more than what conventional development aid promised—that



**The burnt hand of a victim**

is, meaningful participation which encompasses the right to a range of options including economic, social, and emotional well being.

The second stage of the campaign emerged upon the entrance of UNICEF. A combination of Naripokkho's successful efforts in conceptualizing acid violence as a national and international issue, along with the UN Headquarter's decision to act upon what by the late 1990s had begun to be perceived by an international audience to be a violation of women's human rights, had set in motion activities that led to the creation of the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) in Bangladesh.

By looking at the complex process that led to ASF, it becomes apparent how Naripokkho strategically mobilized international actors to leverage the campaign against acid attacks onto the scene of the international discourse on gendered violence. However, the choices that the new and often more influential actors made were at times contradictory to those of the local women's groups as well as to the reality on the ground. The proliferation of actors also resulted in Naripokkho's own diminished role in shaping the dominant narrative of the campaign. The alliance with UNICEF was thus at once enabling yet producing unintended

consequences. It broadened the scope of the campaign and opened up access to resources previously unavailable but at the same time it led to the loss of Naripokkho's critical vision for moving the campaign forward.

### **Funds Bring Strings**

On March 8, 2003, International Women's Day, the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) organized a rally at the Dhaka Press Club that brought together 200 survivors from around the country and representatives of the state, civil society, and the donor community. It was a remarkable gathering covered by Bangladesh Television and print media, representatives of international donor agencies, and the government. What was also noteworthy was that the organizers of this event developed into an important constituency in the anti-acid violence campaign. By the spring of 2003, the anti acid violence campaign had shifted squarely to ASF.

The transition of the campaign activities to ASF in the third phase, however, was not seamless. Campaigns are often catalyzed when sufficient financial means to organize and propagandize have been secured. In the institutionalization of the anti acid violence campaign into the ASF, those resources came primarily from Western donors such as UNICEF and CIDA – but not without strings attached nor without ramifications for the shape of the campaign.

In 1999, ASF became the coordinating organization to provide services for acid survivors. UNICEF's establishment of an umbrella organization such as ASF is to be commended. Over the years, ASF has made significant headway in the campaign. One of its most noteworthy achievements was to lobby with the government to pass new and more stringent laws against use of acid in violence against

women, namely the Acid Crime Prevention Law 2002, and Acid Control Law 2002, that enables law enforcers to prosecute perpetrators of acid violence and more effectively criminalize the sale of corrosive substances without license. At the same time, ASF has strategically co-opted Naripokkho's strategy – at least in their rhetoric – by claiming to place survivors and their experiences at the centre of their programmes.

### **Rhetoric vs Practice**

However, considerable contradictions exist between ASF's rhetoric and its actual practices. When ASF was first founded it primarily provided medical and rehabilitative services. It had a 35-bed Nursing Center and shelter home called, *Thikana House*, as well as a surgical center, *Jibon Tara*. Over the years it has developed legal, research, and most recently prevention units as well. The five units work together in assisting survivors along in their recovery process. John Morrison, the first Executive Director of ASF, said at its founding in 1999 that efforts must be undertaken to make acid survivors into "productive and effective citizens of the country." (*Daily Star* July 23, 1999).

ASF's primary objective is "To provide on-going assistance in the treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration into society of survivors of acid violence by identifying and improving existing services and to also work to prevent further acid throwing attacks." Its mission is "To aid the recovery of acid violence survivors to a condition as near as possible to that of their premature situation by providing treatment, rehabilitation, counselling and other support during their reintegration into society and afterwards. Simultaneously the Foundation will work to prevent further acid violence in Bangladesh." (Acid Survivors Foundation 2002)

This seems an impossible objective to select for a programme that intends to aid a survivor after an acid attack. For rarely is a “return” possible even in less significant ways. This idea of reintegration of a survivor into the very society that sanctions acid violence is clearly more damaging than supportive. ASF’s rehabilitation unit survivors are routinely “reintegrated” into clerical and service positions or set up with micro business ventures. This does not promote social transformation through structural change.

It is not clear whether such an approach translates into the type of meaningful participation gender-sensitive programmes envision. Schild, calls the women who are the subjects of such development ventures “reluctant entrepreneurs” or women who participate in the income generating and skills training social and economic development programmes out of a lack of other alternatives. These reluctant entrepreneurs however are reconfigured by the development industry as “empowered clients” who as individuals are viewed as capable of enhancing their lives through judicious, responsible choices. Similarly, in the case of social programmes for acid survivors, one needs to ask whether the survivors’ reintegration into society through such programmes translates into meaningful participation and whether they would themselves choose to enter such positions given a range of other possibilities. In the absence of programmes that envision structural change, the survivors at best can be viewed as reluctant entrepreneurs of state, donor and NGO machinery.

Nicoletta Del Franco (1999) has observed that the main activities of ASF were giving financial and medical help to some survivors through a network that involved UNICEF, NGOs, and hospitals. She

characterized the role of ASF in 1999 as a “saviour giving new hope and life” to survivors whose needs are interpreted mainly in terms of welfare. This approach continues to stigmatize acid survivors as “victims deprived forever of their main roles as mother and wives.”

### **Limited Vision?**

ASF attempts to integrate survivors into social development programmes without disrupting gender inequities or confronting systemic and institutional gender discriminatory practices and values. Critical explorations of the implications of a gender justice agenda as propagated by such models of social provisioning clearly shows the very narrow range of possibilities for translating women’s needs and demands into social action.

In 2003, ASF underwent changes in their approach. It now involves survivors in shaping programmes geared to serve them. This change in part can be attributed to the recruitment of several key staff of Naripokkho.

Meghna Guha Thakurta (1994) characterizes the development discourse on women in Bangladesh to be primarily concerned with

economic growth or welfare schemes and enacting “peaceful” change. This discourse excludes conflict, struggle and resistance. Rather, it targets in a piecemeal manner a specific group of women, isolating and depoliticizing the issues at hand. In this way, acid survivors are pathologized as victims in need of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The welfare discourse lacks a long-term vision because it does not recognize the need for change of the social system. Admittedly, the recent changes in ASF’s staffing and practices have shown the beginnings of a more rigorous and systemic approach as exemplified by its lobbying with the government for appropriate legal redress. Nonetheless, many of its practices remain merely welfarist, mainly targeting young women into “productive” citizenship programmes.

### **Subverting Welfare Discourse**

James Ferguson (1994) has said that mainstream development discourse falsely presumes international agencies and/or the state as the author of benevolent and empowering interventions to be delivered to the oppressed classes. Alternatively, he characterized international development agencies



**A survivor recovering in a hospital ward**

and the state as “guardians of local and global hegemony” respectively. Their interventions, he posits, often facilitate the suppression of radical and grassroots forms of action initiated by those identified as requiring the intervention. Nonetheless, the establishment of ASF has to be commended for the real and potential “instrumental effects” that are presently being generated. External donors are seldom well positioned to be movement instigators, and thus the position and activities of ASF were, in its initial stages, incompatible with those of movement activists.

Their efforts, however, generated multiple discourses and narratives with unintended consequences. ASF’s birth was catalyzed by the groundwork laid by the activists of Naripokkho, many of whom are currently in leadership positions within ASF making significant contributions to the organization’s evolving strategies and success stories. Some of the noteworthy developments within ASF are: collaborating with national NGOs such as BRAC to disseminate educational materials on gendered violence, and to monitor progress of survivors nationwide; conducting research in various districts on existing legal aid services; lobbying with the government leading to drafting and passing of new laws against acid throwing and selling; setting up a National Acid Council Special Tribunal overseeing speedy investigation of cases and speedy trial processing; and providing improved medical care and reconstructive surgery to survivors. One of the most creative programmes being developed by ASF’s Prevention Unit includes community based focus groups to raise awareness at the grassroots level across the nation.



### Theatre Therapy

Another particularly innovative strategy has involved training survivors to enact dramatic performances of their own stories. These travelling theatre productions have challenged societal perceptions of “acid victims” and encouraged women’s articulation of their own stories. Following one such performance, a group of youth in the community spontaneously painted a mural expressing resistance to acid throwing. Such grassroots efforts have the potential to mobilize participation across diverse social groups.

ASF represents its strategy as survivor centered. However, there is no indication of the survivors’ actual participation in decision-making processes. The organization remains rooted in a welfarist approach: survivors are recipients of services who are primarily viewed as in need of rehabilitation and reintegration into unreconstructed society in order to be made “productive citizens.” Although the Foundation states as one of their objectives, “[To] bring about long term change in attitudes and values that sanction and contribute to violent activities, particularly against women”, their actual policies seem not to reflect such a vision. Admittedly, the newly developed Prevention Unit promises to engage in such activities, but is constrained because of the project-based short-term funding options.

Lastly, the self-validating progress narrative of ASF does not allow for women to be seen as complex agents in struggling for survival rather than primarily as subjects of welfare measures. Under the rhetoric of service for victimized women, ASF’s programmes promise that rehabilitation will promote reintegration for acid survivors; clerical jobs will be conducive to their becoming “productive citizens” and thus these women will enhance the society as a whole. However, this welfarist rhetoric fails to consider the incongruities of such programmes with the lived experiences of the women receiving them. Rather than promoting empowerment, they entrap recipients within discourses of victimization. Perhaps the future of the campaign lies in the rejuvenation of its initial broader movement-based agenda, which would require building and strengthening careful alliances with diverse social groups, not the least of which are local grassroots communities with a vision that seeks to transform society to enable women’s meaningful participation as full citizens in all aspects of its social, political and economic life.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It was during these years that I studied the campaign activities first as a journalist, second as a consultant with UNICEF-Bangladesh, and third as an independent researcher.

<sup>2</sup> The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, also known as the Rio Earth Summit); the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights; the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo; the 1995 World Social Summit in Copenhagen; the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing; and the 1996 Conference on Human Settlement (Habitat II) in Istanbul.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.emdr.com](http://www.emdr.com) for a description of EMDR, the history of EMDR, populations treated with EMDR, and a list of references. □