VICTIM, SURVIVOR, AGENT:
UNRAVELING POPULAR REPRESENTATIONS OF
SURVIVORS OF ACID VIOLENCE

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Abstract: Acid throwing against women has been a growing phenomenon in Bangladesh since the mid 1980s. According to a UNICEF-Bangladesh publication, it is highly prevalent among lower socio-economic groups in both Bangladesh rural and urban areas. The perpetrators are mostly young men and adolescent boys, the targets primarily females between twelve and twenty-five years of age. This profile of targets and perpetrators has changed in the early 2000. Today, women, children and even men are being attacked by acid throwers of both genders. The overwhelmingly female victims were then in the 1980s and 1990s, and still today in 2004 attacked for reasons ranging from rejection of sexual advances from men, refusal of marriage proposals, family or land disputes, vengeance and unmet dowry demands. According to statistics compiled by the Acid Survivors Foundation in Bangladesh, in the last four years reported attacks have ranged 200 – 400 each year.

Introduction:
In this paper, I’d like to explore three popular renditions in the print and television media, in Bangladesh and the U.S., of Bangladeshi women who have endured acid attacks. By unpacking these representations, we can identify some of the underlying assumptions framing women as victims, survivors, and activists and how these assumptions influence and shape projects and policies geared towards empowering and/or rehabilitating women who have suffered gendered violence. Furthermore, deconstructing the popular representations that arguably influence public opinion and public policy would allow us to better understand whether these projects and policies further entrench women in dependent roles, reproduce and maintain the imperialist imagination of Third World
women as victims and grateful to be rescued, or challenge dominant developmentalist perceptions of women as abject victims. In other words, it is my contention that it is important to look at how certain forms of media represent women who endure acid attacks because those representations influence and shape projects and programs geared towards rehabilitating and/or empowering survivors of violence and which often internalize and reproduce simplistic progress narratives.

**Women: Victims or Martyrs?**

Women who've had acid thrown at them are commonly imagined within two meta-narratives: either they are perennial victims or they are heroic martyrs. Either their lives are over because their faces have been disfigured and they stand no chance to be part of society as active agents. Or, they become heroines and martyrs who are able to overcome their terrible lot and proceed to lead brave and courageous lives. In very few cases do official documents, newspapers or reports talk about how if at all the women resisted or indeed they were humans capable of complex emotions. Such representations only serve to infantilize women as well as foreclose the possibility - as will become through the analysis of the three media outlets below that describe acid survivors - of the women being imagined as complex subjects who act in complex ways.

The daily news reports of violence against women construct and maintain a public discourse of private violence. In her study of women’s suicide in Maharashtra, India, Anne B. Waters describes how newspapers that cover violence against women simultaneously “test the level of social tolerance of violence.” That is, news reports’ “coverage” of violence against women serves two purposes: one, they describe the event, and two they “veil” the root causes of these events by their inclusion in a public space – the newspaper. In these instances of coverage, details of an ever-increasing number of stories are revealed, but the reasons given are predictably familiar: rejection of romantic and sexual advances, dowry dispute, land dispute, domestic squabbles, etc. This dual “coverage” serves to construct abuse of women as *incidental* rather than systemic.

**Construction of Victim Image: Role of the Media**

The Naripokkho-led (a Dhaka based Bangladeshi women’s research and advocacy group) campaign against acid violence in the mid 1990s in Bangladesh increased public awareness and even organized training sessions for journalists on violence related reporting. Thus, the cover story by Amin and Ahmed, the first of the three media renditions that I will analyze, came at a particular historical moment when there was heightened awareness of reporting that moved away from exploiting the victims of violence further by exposing and sensationalizing their personal stories. It is thus within this premise of “awareness” as a result of the Naripokkho campaign that I carry out an assessment of “Mending Broken Lives” a cover story published in June 2001 in the *Star Weekend Magazine* (SWM) of the
leading national English language daily newspaper, The Daily Star in Bangladesh. Nationwide, this publication has a readership of approximately 25,000.

Unveiling the Victim / Veiling the Victimizer

The story is introduced with a photo of seven smiling young women. Taken at a Press Conference, it featured those survivors who had returned from Spain where they had been sponsored by a Spanish charity to receive plastic surgery for their acid burns. The adjacent page ran a vignette that described a single case study of acid attack with an accompanying picture of a young girl lying on a hospital bed and her mother stroking her wounded face. Monsura, the “victim” fit the classic profile. Typically so, she is young (sixteen), innocent, school-going, “pretty,” lives in a rural area, comes from a poor family, was attacked in her own home because she dared to say “no” to a man who propositioned her for marriage - or in her case, it was her grandmother who rejected the “undeserving” proposal from Ekramul, Monsura’s first cousin. We are not told his age, occupation or social status. Instead, we are led to believe that Monsura had been “punished” by an individual named Ekramul, she and her family were suffering the consequences.

The article lists the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), established in 1999, as the “only organization that exclusively focuses on helping acid burn victims to get on with their lives.” A coordinating body, ASF works with the Bangladesh government, NGOs, and the international community to provide medical, legal and rehabilitative services. Amin and Ahmed state, “Immediate medical attention, hospitalization, possible surgery or a series of surgeries offered free of cost by the Foundation has saved the lives of many survivors and reduced their disfigurement to some extent.” ASF’s shelter home Thikana provides a “home like environment” for the patients with nutritious diet, counseling, skills training, and even entertainment. Upon their departure, ASF provides assistance to the clients to set up small income generating activities in their hometown or with jobs at assisting organizations such as the international aid agency DFID and national NGO, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Action Committee) and private sector companies. Those who have been too disfigured to work, or who have nowhere to go are sent to the shelter homes of various human rights organizations such as Bangladesh Mohila Parishad, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA).

Such descriptions of services would lead one to believe that there exists a ready network to facilitate the “rehabilitation” of acid burn victims. What this seemingly ready availability obscures however is the extent to which the campaign against acid violence undertaken in the mid to late 1990s contributed in the formation of the current service-providing network. This campaign, mobilized by Naripokkho - the Bangladeshi women’s advocacy group - paved the way for ASF, which is by and large a donor driven enterprise. Secondly, the article seems to promote the viewpoint that the needs of acid survivors are
being met because they are receiving immediate medical attention, counseling and "rehabilitative" jobs of the clerical (in offices), service (in factories) or domestic entrepreneurial (shop or trade in micro scale) variety. The article finds, "The Foundation’s most challenging task is to help these survivors who have been disfigured for life, to be reintegrated into society" (emphasis mine). The "disfigured" survivor with no other options must be "reintegrated" into the very society that has shunned her and in fact sanctioned the crime that “punishes” her.

According to the article, "Acid victims are treated like lepers in society. Married women are often abandoned by their husbands while unmarried women remain celibate for life. What is worse is that these young women also find it very difficult to find jobs as no one wants to employ them thus making survival almost impossible."

The article focuses on the victimization of young women. I don’t mean to suggest that such information is irrelevant or untrue, rather it reflects and perpetuates popular imaginations of “victims” that perhaps victimizes them further than allowing them humanity and agency. Moreover, public attention is once more focused on the abject status suffered by women in society rather than the processes rendering them such status. Being treated as “lepers” means that women cannot marry, nor remain married - apparently the most important function that she serves in society. Since the marriages fail or never take place, employment becomes necessary, not because women work regardless of their social conditions. Thus with no option for marriage, nor employment, their lives become unlivable. It is not the acid attack that makes the situation so abject, but it is the loss of marriage options and employment. Furthermore, if indeed “society” treats acid victims like lepers, why is the most crucial task performed by service organizations the victim’s “reintegration” into that very society? And why celebrate as success stories the reintegration of survivors into society by channeling them into service sector positions, which after all only reflect the limits of choice available for victimized women.

Women’s Realities and Choices
Rina, a survivor of acid violence, whom I interviewed in 1998, said reflecting on her choices:

I don’t know what kind of work they [the Shelter for Oppressed Women run by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs] will set me up with. But I do know that finding a job is not enough. The skills training we received at the Women’s Shelter prepared us at best for jobs with salaries of Tk. 3000. That is barely enough given the financial needs of my current situation. My eyes are badly damaged. I’d like to know if the government has plans for my future? For other acid burnt women’s futures? Will I be accepted by this society? Can I be self-reliant?
Rina’s comments raise questions about the “reintegration” and “rehabilitation” schemes of service givers. It also makes one ponder about words such as “victim” and “survivor” used to describe those who live through acid violence. For instance, Amin and Ahmed cite the case of a young woman who “unlike other victims of acid throwing has successfully overcome her ordeal and emerged as a true survivor.” This is so because she has successfully passed her National Board exams and has stood 20th on the merit list. Should one assume that she has been rehabilitated (The dictionary definition of which is “made good or usable”) and has reintegrated into society? If she is a “true” survivor because she has beaten the “odds” and emerged victorious by performing well in her academics, are their “false” survivors – such as Rina, who cannot participate in rehabilitative schemes because of badly damaged eyes - who are not able to achieve such high standards? If so, do they then fail to “rehabilitate” and “reintegrate” and live as unproductive citizens who don’t engage in the relegated service work? In other words, would she still be a victim if she hadn’t passed her exams with flying colors? How does one become a survivor?

As the numbers of attacks are ever escalating, ASF is in need of more funds says the report before offering information for donation purposes. ASF, we are told, are also launching a prevention campaign through its network with other organizations to distribute posters and audiocassettes to raise awareness on acid violence. There were no details however on ASF’s involvement with other organizations as a coordinating body such as the Bangladesh Government. Such an omission is misleading because it encourages the readers to assume that ASF, a donor initiated coordinated body, had emerged as the lone service-provider to a social ill erasing the critical agency of Bangladeshi women whose groundwork had enabled its (ASF’s) creation. The article ends with an imperative that as a society “we have a collective responsibility to help these individuals to get proper medical care and opportunities to work and live with dignity.” This imperative, I believe, seriously undermines the responsibilities that indeed rest upon the society to take care of its citizens and ensure them safe and just living conditions. Those responsibilities do not end with “proper medical care” and “opportunities to work” for “these individuals.” Such a statement reduces the crime of acid throwing to individuals attacking individuals, and which can be mitigated by welfarist interventions in the form of provisions of health care and work opportunities. Such a rendition obscures the possibility that acid throwing is a socially sanctioned crime against women perpetrated by those with influence and power.

For instance, of the eight cases of acid violence profiled in this article only two included the name of the perpetrator, and one of those two his occupation. The remaining six are described as “culprits,” “local youth,” unnamed husband, “criminals,” unnamed husband and brother-in-law, and “thwarted suitor.” Three are in jail, their cases pending.
One survivor is described as “pursuing a case” against the “criminals.” For one particular survivor the police have not accepted her case. For another, no first information report (FIR) has been lodged because the victim and his family did not see the faces of the “hoodlums” although they are certain of their identities. The article on the other hand is replete with personal information as well as pictures of the women both pre and post acid attack. While the over exposure of those who have suffered attacks serves to further categorize them into a pool of useless victims waiting to be rehabilitated, it leaves the readers with the impression that the attacker was an unnamed “perverted” individual. In reality, the attacker is someone that the attacked has known and in some cases intimately so. The attacker knew exactly where and how to acquire the acid because it is sold cheaply and without surveillance despite laws that restrict buying and selling of corrosive substances. The attacker also knew that politicians would protect him with influence and power and in fact they use that power to further threaten and harass the attacked’s family to drop charges or not to file any at all. The attacker can choose their targets—usually “pretty” girls and women whose only asset is said to be her marriage prospects, thus destroying lives that are devalued otherwise. What is more, the attack occurs in what is supposed to be the “safest” space of all: the home or on the way to or from school.

Societal responsibility thus does not stop with medical and vocational opportunities. Just as the crimes are not of “debauched, perverted, individuals.” They are premeditated, calculated, planned acts of violence that are the culmination of a set of processes already underway. More often than not a group of men participate in the assault. By failing to turn our critical and collective scrutiny on the attackers and the societal institutions, which sanction their behavior, we are participating in maintaining a violent society.

The failure lies in the state’s ability to protect women from systematic discrimination. In the words of Rina during an interview in 1998: My husband’s family [Rina was attacked because her family could not meet dowry demands] openly threatens us. Finding me a job is not enough; can you do anything to stop the practice of dowry itself? The lawyer that the state assigned to my case was no good. He wanted lots of money. In contrast, the men who throw acid quite often are able to afford expensive lawyers who get them out on bail and win their cases.” Nurunnahar, another survivor said about her own experience in an interview in 2003:

When I pressed charges against my attackers they came to threaten us in our home. An influential politician in our area was protecting them. That politician is now the chairman in our district. The biggest problem, I believe, is political instability in our country.
Citing another case where a powerful Member of Parliament protected the attacker, Dano, Nurunnahar continued:

Dano, who threw acid on Bina Akhter was an Awami League thug and was being sheltered by an Awami League MP. These are common stories. Political leaders influence local youth with money to do their dirty work. Many of the young men come from needy families and are lured into the business with cash and promise of power. As a result, the youth think that they are invincible, that they can get away with anything. The perpetrators could never commit such crimes if they didn’t know that they would have the political protection. They commit crimes knowing that the politicians will shelter them. Eventually they become the leaders. It’s a cycle. This is the political context in Bangladesh. The public places their trust in the politicians; they look up to them to fulfill their promises. But in reality politicians and the law are governed by money.

The objective of available service schemes should not be to “reintegrate” those who have suffered the consequences of a violent society back into that very society. Rather, it should be to interrogate and unravel the very foundations of such a society that systematically devalues women and subsequently sanctions violence against them. And, to hold accountable institutions and policies that are presumably serving women who have endured violence.

The second story on women with acid burns I would like to discuss is a U.S. network television report entitled, “Faces of Hope” that aired in November 1999. Connie Chung, star reporter of 20/20, Teri Whitcraft producer of 20/20 and their team traveled to Bangladesh for research on a thirty minute report on acid violence that was broadcast on national television. Various foreign publications and TV networks had done stories on acid violence including Ms., Marie-Claire, CNN and BBC. Thus not the first but influential nonetheless, this program held the promise of capturing the attention of an international community to respond and mobilize against issues of gendered violence globally-a movement already underway as a result of transnational women’s networks and alliances.

Rescuing the Third World Victim
The “20/20” Report announcing Bina Akhter’s - one particular acid survivor’s - “Coming to America” was closely followed by a host of news reports with a very similar angle. For instance, the Cincinnati Enquirer credited Healing the Children - one of the sponsors of Bina’s medical treatment in America - as “an international charity that seeks high-tech care for children from developing nations.” The Honolulu Star Bulletin described it “hard to look at Bina the “subject of a fascinating story” who had acid thrown at her while “asleep one night in their Bangladesh hut.” The Cincinnati Post quotes Bina from the ABC News
program as saying “From the moment I arrived in Cincinnati, I felt like I had stepped into a dream world” and notes that the “women are already gaining a sense of hope from just being in the United States.” The article goes on, “In Bangladesh women generally survive through the support of husbands, and these women are typically doomed to a life of extreme poverty.” Stories of “acid victims” have continued to appear in the American press with titles such as “Victims of acid attacks find new life in the West,” and “Fort Myers surgeon lends skills to repair Third World Horrors.”

Incidentally Connie Chung’s trip preceded Bina and Jharna’s departure for the U.S. for medical treatment ultimately influencing the angle of her report to be spun as a “story of arrival.” Chung’s opening remarks were conscientious in reminding the viewers that the report in no way implied that acid throwing was a “cultural practice” of Bangladesh, introduced at the very outset as “one of the world’s poorest nations”, nor an Islamic tradition. The escalating crime is described as one of revenge committed by spurned suitors and common among the poor. Bina, one such “victim” and around whom the story revolves is introduced as a “brave” young woman living a “desperate” life in “one of the world’s poorest nations” who awaited the help of “American surgeons to reclaim her shattered life.” Nonetheless, she is also shown as a selfless benevolent caretaker of others who had suffered similar fate and is described as an “angel of mercy” walking from bed to bed in the Dhaka Medical College Hospital Burn Unit clad in a white flowing shalwar kameez speaking soft words of encouragement to helpless wounded patients with acid burn.

Despite the disclaimer in the beginning, acid throwing is framed as a crime of the poor in a patriarchal Muslim nation. As the narrator describes desperate poverty, city scenes reflect men performing izzu (ablutions prior to prayer), praying in mosques, and women (the victims) staring at the camera behind wire fences, and walking on the streets clad in dark burqas. The chosen voice of the “savior” is of John Morrison’s a British expatriate philanthropist who directed the Acid Survivors Foundation for its first two years. He validates the crime by saying, “This is one of the most barbaric acts there can possibly be. What it does is not only disfigure a woman for life, but it also ruins her life.”

It is interesting to note that in 2002, the “Foreign Relations” desk of the Daily Star ran a press release on behalf of the British High Commission on John Morrison’s appointment as “Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by Queen Elizabeth II on the occasion of the “Birthday Honors” in her Golden Jubilee year. The Press Release reports that Morrison “was the motive power that brought together various Bangladeshi organizations to provide help and assistance for those injured and disfigured by acid violence” and that it was because of “his efforts, the Acid Survivors Foundation was established.” The article affirms ASF as having “a high domestic and international profile”
where Bangladesh nationals work “ceaselessly under the direction of Dr. Morrison.” True to this heroic representation, Morrison (the savior) asserts, in the “Faces of Hope” report, the need for “urgent action” and is seen at work with top executives from 15 national and international non-profit organizations. Connie Chung introduces Nasreen Haq, the activist who was actually instrumental in developing the anti-acid violence campaign in Bangladesh, after Morrison’s call for “urgent action.” Haq, portrayed as the “women’s activist” explains the motive behind the suitors’ act of revenge: “Most men actually look at women as property. And you’re not supposed to have an opinion about whether you want to be with him or not. If he wants you, you are damn well going to be his.” Chung goes on to narrate the details of Bina’s story, which culminate with her reaching towards the younger girl’s face and touching the toughened skin on her forehead and thus physically bestowing the benevolence of America upon the categorically represented Third World woman.

Bina is the protagonist of the report guiding Chung through the twists and turns of the story, she is alternately referred to as “brave,” as “terribly marred,” as a once “stunning vibrant teen-ager,” and as the owner of a “beautiful soul.” Bina’s heroism is commended as Mukti, her cousin, tearfully recounts the night Bina saved her life by throwing herself in between the acid throwers who had targeted Mukti and her cousin. Her courage in defying the norms of society which demanded that she live a life of isolation is exemplified as she strides unveiled through the streets of Dhaka as a Naripokkho staff member developing a national network of acid survivors.

For those of us who have met and known Bina however these descriptions don’t quite add up. Bina is all those things and more. Chung describes Bina’s one room home in a Dhaka slum with piteous awe as the viewers watch seven members of her family huddled on one bed. The viewer is clearly supposed to feel a certain level of horror, Bina’s happy home diminished to a Third World hovel. Chung describes Bina as “poorest of the poor” by whose standards however we are not sure.

Chung continues to trace the events of Bina’s life and arrives at the moment of “providence” or the beginning of Bina’s journey to Cincinnati where lies the promise of American surgeons “repairing her ravaged face.” Chung’s crew accompanied the two teenagers through tearful goodbyes at Dhaka International Airports on their way to “a new home, a new family, and perhaps a new face.” So the story of arrival unfolds, “Thanks to the generosity of so many Americans, Bina’s about to taste a life she never imagined”, says Jack Ford Chung’s co-anchor. An announcer’s voice over states, “A journey to America brings new hope.” A translator spins Bina’s own words, “I keep wondering, ‘Is this a dream or am I really here?’” So begins Bina’s “journey of hope.”
From the one room “hut” in Hazaribag shared by seven family members, Bina arrives at her new home in Cincinnati - likened to a “palace” by Chung - that raises “her hopes higher than they’ve ever been.” Bina’s foster family - an elderly couple - meets her at the airport and warmly embraces her. Bina exclaims with joy as she walks into her tidy bedroom with twin beds and stuffed toys. She acts every bit the grateful survivor who can’t believe her incredible good fortune. As she accompanies her host family to the sights of Cincinnati and the quintessential American experience of a Cincinnati Reds game, Bina apparently “was happier than she’d ever been.”

She is ready to face anything “free” as she was finally from the repression of her past. “As long as I’m here for the treatment, I’ll be safe” she says. “If I were still in Bangladesh, I might have been kidnapped or killed by now.” Bina wipes away her tears as her “new mom and dad” comfort her. Chung’s voiceover says, “For the first time in a long time, she wasn’t afraid.” We watch “Windy”, Bina’s nickname among friends in Bangladesh for her athletic talents, running in slow motion on screen and her voice of hope saying, “America is a big country. If we all work together and stand as one, we can conquer the world.”

*Faces of Hope* imagines Bina as a courageous victim, but a victim nonetheless pointing to a void in the ability to understand her as a complex subject. While it maybe true that coming to America offers Bina certain opportunities and means, it is also true as I learned over the years through on-going conversations with Bina, that such an “arrival” is riddled with contradictions of loss as well as gain. Lost in this portrayal of the grateful Bina are her day-to-day negotiations of adjusting to a new life that one the one hand promised a recovery, but on the other expected obedience. For instance, having to attend church service every Sunday and enroll in mandatory Christian education classes. The sponsoring NGO, Healing the Children espoused Christian values and placed the survivors in the homes of a family who expected boarders to abide by the same.

Thus, the overstated images of victimhood and courage negate one another leaving intact only the legacy of American generosity. While the first article disallows women with acid burns subject status by relegating them to the status of the disfigured and the ostracized, *Faces of Hope* allows them limited agency in speaking out about their experience to an international audience through the lens of a rescue narrative. Ultimately though, they remain the objects to save from a “barbaric” practice by American patronage. Her own role in shaping her future is obscured, as is the role of the advocacy work done by Naripokkho members in organizing Bina’s trip to America for medical treatment. We know from this very interview that Bina had declined the offer for going to Spain because she didn’t feel ready. The decision to accept Shriner’s Hospital’s invitation to Cincinnati, thus, was calculated, not a sudden stroke of sheer luck. The terms of Bina’s “arrival”, stay,
and treatment were also carefully dictated by the sponsors and the hosts and were not altogether "rosy" as Chung would have the audience believe.

The final article that I would like to bring attention to is entitled, "When Survival is Victory" and was published in June 2002 in Slate, an English language monthly magazine in Bangladesh. It came out a full year following "Mending Broken Lives." The author is Bristi Chowdhury, an activist who had worked with Naripokkho during the initial stages of campaign building in the mid 1990s. The writer offers an optimistic account of the survivors' strength, hopes, and survival. In fact, the writer openly expresses her anger towards the media - both local and foreign -, which have continually objectified and further exploited acid violence survivors by firmly placing them in a place of abject victimhood. Refusing to accept the story of the generic "acid attack victim," Chowdhury describes how each woman has a personal story, which expands much beyond the simplistic and ultimately belittling notion of a "victim" but rather encompasses a much more complex range of emotions and activities.

The story opens with a cheerful and unusual picture: a group of six young women peeling with laughter. One is not accustomed to seeing women with acid burn in such carefree and youthful a setting. Moreover, the women are not in a hospital, nor in a drab office surrounded by pitying "experts." Rather they are sitting in a balcony as though whiling away the afternoon chatting with one another. The scars on their faces are barely in focus. In fact, several young women show no outward stamp of disfigurement. They look alive and active. They personify the author's description: "The girls I have met are sassy and full of life; none of them are ready to lie down and die; not yet, anyway."

Pertinent here is a conversation I had with Bristi Chowdhury in 2003 regarding the "transformation" that was key to the self-image of acid survivors. She explained:

I think becoming a survivor is a process. You travel a long road. A person goes through stages of denial, depression, of not knowing if they want to live or die. One doesn't immediately become a 'survivor' the day of the event. The second time I saw Bina at DMCH she was sitting up on the bed and smiling. The bones on her forehead were visible, but she was smiling. This is a survivor. Becoming a survivor involves a complicated emotional process. She was no longer a victim. She didn't kill herself, or lie down and die. Of course, she required help as most of the girls do. It is possible for them to slip into depression but they get over it. There was a day when I visited Bina at DMCH when she threw herself on the bed and wept, she wanted to die. But she didn't. The fact that you decide to get up everyday and get on with it means that you are a survivor. That you choose to believe that there is still meaning to your life whether or not you have a perfect face. A victim on the other hand lies down and says, 'My life is
over. I will never live. There is no point to my being. Something terrible happened to the girls. What the guys did to them is vile but the girls refuse to be victims. We have to acknowledge that refusal. Look at Nurun Nahar. It is not in her nature to be a victim. If you ask her, she’ll say ‘I went to school, got a job, got a counseling diploma – so what makes me a victim?’

In the same vein, Chowdhury’s stance is decidedly different than the previous articles. A feminist, who is intimately involved with advocacy groups working with women with acid burns, she summarily discards the perspective, which renders them voiceless generic victims. Rather, she is interested in the processes, which define women as useless in our society thereby taking away their humanity. Moreover, she wants to see the women as agents who determine their own future as they negotiate the conditions of their lives brought on by crimes such as acid throwing but also systematic and institutional gender discrimination.

She tells the remarkable story of Bina. How she built up a network of survivors and journalists, doctors and philanthropists from all around the world. Of Nurun who completed her SSC, trained in counseling, and works with COOPI, an Italian NGO as well as the Acid Survivors Foundation. Of Rina, who since her attack has married and lives happily with her loving husband. Of Peyara who continues to live with her supportive husband following the acid attack despite spiteful remarks from her in laws and neighbors. Of Beauty who has completed her MSc and is now searching for a job. Defying comments such as “Oh you poor girl you’ll never get married now,” Beauty contends, “Marriage isn’t everything, and anyway if all a man wants is a beautiful woman then he is not a man worth marrying.”

Chowdhury unwittingly exposes the paradox in the commonly purported notion of “reintegrating acid victims into society” explicitly put forth in the previous pieces. Instead of focusing on strategies for rehabilitation devised and prescribed for the young women, Chowdhury discusses the processes, which make them “unworthy” in our society. She states, “In our society women are told that their only value in this world is as a good wife and by extension a good mother. The only way anyone will marry you is either if you are pretty or have a large dowry (preferably both).” Those who can live through the crime and its aftermath are anything but victims according to Chowdhury, indeed they are survivors. To apparently “reintegrate” into and even challenge the norms of that very society which ostracizes them and sanctions their marginalization is not only heroic but also more importantly critically agentic.

Chowdhury’s article introduces an important and desperately needed angle to a public imagination of women who are acid burnt. Instead of drawing attention only to the survivors’ despair by exposing their mental and physical trauma for the consumption of the
wider audience she sheds light on their lived realities such as pursuing work, study, friendships, even marriage; in lieu of offering compromised pictures of disfigured women she offers those that are simultaneously vibrant, lively and full of promise. It is the women’s strength of character that one remembers as well, not just their irreversible loss. As readers we are able to imagine survivors as subjects capable of manifold actions and a range of emotions. Indeed a contribution of feminist advocacy groups, this perspective is empowering to women with acid burns because it acknowledges them as agents in their own lives. This particular view remains sorely missing from current and popular imaginations of acid survivors to the detriment of the services being designed and offered them.

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