Body Evidence

Intimate Violence against South Asian Women in America

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From Dhaka to Cincinnati

Tracing the Trajectory of a Transnational Violence against Women Campaign

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In September 2000, I received a phone call from Bina inviting me to an event honoring television journalist Connie Chung and her ABC 20/20 team for the Amnesty International Media Spotlight Award. Chung and her team were receiving this award for the report “Faces of Hope,” which had aired nationally in the United States in November 1999 and featured the experiences of two young Bangladeshi women, Bina Akhter and Jharna Akhter. The event was hosted by ABC producers and would take place at the Yale Club in New York. A number of Bina’s friends had been invited. “It would be my pleasure,” I told Bina, “to see my old friend, and to witness such a momentous occasion honoring her story.” Bina and Jharna (no relation to each other) would be flying in from Cincinnati, Ohio, where they lived with their American host family.

“Faces of Hope” had reported on a growing epidemic of acid attack on women in Bangladesh. It informed the American prime-time viewers that the incidence of acid throwing had become highly prevalent among lower socioeconomic groups in both urban and rural areas. The reporters also noted that the perpetrators were mostly young men and adolescent boys, whereas the targets were primarily females between twelve and twenty-five years of age. While this profile of targets and perpetrators was accurate in the late 1990s when ABC produced its report, in early 2000 there had been a dramatic change. By 2003, acid throwers had attacked women, children, and even men. Nonetheless, in the late 1990s as well as 2003, females were overwhelmingly the victims of acid throwing, attacked for reasons ranging from rejection of sexual advances, refusal of marriage proposals, family or land disputes, vengeance, and unmet dowry demands (UNICEF 2000).

“Faces of Hope” had an angle expected to give it immediacy for the American viewers. The 20/20 report focused, in particular, on the compelling story of a courageous young girl, Bina Akhter, whose strength and tenacity facing unimaginable trauma left the television audience stupefied. The story also peripherally focused on Jharna Akhter, another young girl who had acid thrown at her face. Connie Chung’s visit to Bangladesh preceded only by a few days Bina’s and Jharna’s coming to America, sponsored by a U.S.-based organization called Healing the Children. It had arranged for the Shriners’ Hospital in Cincinnati to donate surgery for the seventeen- and fourteen-year-old acid violence survivors. The narrative culminated in the momentous journey from Dhaka to Cincinnati, leaving its intended American viewers with the promise that the girls, extricated from the oppressive lives in Bangladesh, were being transported to good hands and on their way to recovery.

I arrived at the Yale Club promptly at 2 P.M. The plush interior and leather sofas were in stark contrast to the surroundings and circumstances in which we, Bina and I, had met last. Bina was a strong, vocal leader in the campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh. When I had last seen Bina in 1998—then fifteen—in Dhaka, she was helping to create a network of female survivors of acid attacks, women’s rights advocates, local journalists, doctors, lawyers, and even members of the Bangladeshi government. Two years later, following her medical treatment and residence in Cincinnati and the showing of the 20/20 report, Bina held center stage in New York in a gathering of Western philanthropists, international journalists, and human rights actors. Amid the Yale Club’s plushness, Bina alone represented, very skillfully, a cause that had always been hers, but now with a slightly different twist and for a different set of actors and audience. Indeed, she alone was presented to this room of New York influentials as the spokesperson of an issue that had a complicated genealogy involving the efforts of manifold collaborations and institutions that spanned the divides of time, geography, and history.

Several speeches were made during the course of the afternoon. In her speech, Bina profusely thanked, first, ABC Television for drawing the attention of the international audience to such a crime against humanity; second, Healing the Children for sponsoring her and Jharna in their road to a new life; third, Shriners’ Hospital for nursing them back toward a healthy existence; and, finally, the development workers and the journalists for their humanitarian work. She assured her listeners that the combination of efforts of everyone in the room had truly changed her life. Bina was the quintessential grateful recipient of her patrons’ benevolence.

I left the Yale Club that afternoon with mixed feelings. It is true that I was happy for Bina and Jharna, who had been sponsored by international agencies and voluntary organizations to undergo reconstructive surgery in a reputable burns hospital in the United States. Particularly in the context where medical and reconstructive treatment for victims of acid attacks in Bangladesh was still inadequate, despite increasing activism to develop such services. I was in awe of the strength demonstrated by two teenaged girls who had left their families and everything familiar in search of restoring some semblance of normalcy to their physical and emotional well-being. At the same time, however, I was disappointed in the tone of the events of that afternoon, which advanced a too simple, too self-congratulating progress narrative crafted by the sponsoring institutions.
For these institutions were supporting Bina’s and Jharna’s recoveries in a way that was yet another crucial element of the struggles to reconstruct their lives. That element was the anti-acid violence campaign mobilized in the mid-1990s primarily by Naripokkho, a women’s advocacy group in Bangladesh. It was the efforts of this group that had created both the conceptual and organizational groundwork for placing acid violence against women and girls in Bangladesh into the global landscape of gendered human rights violation and, concurrently, had mobilized attention of both national and international actors.

Even as I left the Yale Club that September afternoon, it did not seem accidental to me that this event was being held not at a Bangladeshi women’s center in Dhaka, but at the exclusive club of an elite U.S. university. The choice of location for the celebration of two young Bangladeshi women’s courage, the hosting of a powerful Western television corporation, the choosing of a Western-based human rights group, Amnesty, of a U.S. media corporation for an award seemed to reinscribe imperialist rescue narratives.

According to feminist legal scholar Mutua (2001), the Western human rights discourse, which shapes rights-based development programs, is “marked by a damning metaphor” pitting “savages” against their “saviors” and “victims.” She states:

The predominant image of the savage in the human rights discourse is that of a Third World, non-European state, cultural practice or person. The second dimension of the pres is the face and the fact of a victim as well as the essence and the idea of victimhood. That is, a human being whose dignity and worth have been violated by the savage is the victim. Many are women and children twice victimized because of their gender and age, and sometimes the victim of the savage culture is the female gender itself. The third dimension of the prism is the savior or the redeemer; the “good angel who protects, vindicates, civilizes, restrains, and safeguards.” (202-203)

The savior promises freedom from the tyrannies of the state, tradition, and culture. In the human rights story, the savior is the human rights corpus itself, with the United Nations, Western governments, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Western charities as the actual rescuers, redeemers of a benighted world. Mutua posits that in reality the institutions are merely fronts. The savior is ultimately “a set of culturally based norms and practices that inhabit liberal thought and philosophy” (Mutua 2001, 203). Together, the three dimensions of the triangularized metaphor maintain the human rights corpus.

This metaphor continues to infuse the doctrines of powerful first world based institutions that profess to do humanitarian work in third world nations. Hence, Mutua’s three-sided metaphoric narrative helps us understand the discourse of human rights as a space for the systematic creation of concepts, theories, and practices that reinsert inequalities even after the dismantling of formal domination with the end of colonial rule. That is, human rights discourse even as it

claims to protect the rights of the oppressed has simultaneously served to naturalize the control of the “savage” or the “underdeveloped” world by the West after the so-called demise of formal colonial rule.

Meghnaga Guhathakurta (1994) states that the issue of gender discrimination and exploitation in Bangladesh has been initiated through and featured more in the developmental discourse rather than in mainstream politics. In Bangladesh, where the development budget is largely dependent on foreign aid, it is natural to expect that much of the discourse on women and development will be donor oriented. That is, such discourses and projects will be couched in neoliberal economic policies, modernization, and integration of the underdeveloped (Lind and Share 2003). Some of the demands for social transformation, however, also stem from women themselves, whether through mass based national movements or parallel and autonomous women’s movements expressed through small local NGOs.

While ABC News, Healing the Children, Shriner’s Hospital, and UNICEF had contributed immensely to help Bina and Jharna receive medical treatment in the United States, there were cases of “other” whose names and efforts went unmentioned that afternoon at the Yale Club and who, in fact, had enabled the better known, better financed, better connected institutions to make critical interventions in supporting survivors of acid violence in Bangladesh. The compelling story of Bina had another side that involved actors who had built an international campaign against gendered violence in Bangladesh. Without that story, Bina’s would remain incomplete.

The story is of contesting narratives of the anti-acid violence campaign in Bangladesh from 1995 to 2003. Today, the achievements of the campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh are measured by the creation of an independent coordinating service providing body called the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), established in 1999 and financed by an international donor agency, UNICEF-Bangladesh. I contend that by ignoring the complex genealogy of the anti-acid violence campaign, the dominant narrative presented by ASF, UNICEF-Bangladesh, NGOs based in the United States, and the international media such as 20/20, erased the contributions of the Bangladeshi women activists, including Bina herself, whose groundbreaking work made the campaign possible and eventually successful. Thus, this chapter is a story that makes central and visible those women activists who launched the acid campaign in the mid-1990s, yet whose contributions by 2003 were forgotten by powerful institutions benefiting from the activists’ work.

Naripokkho Launches the Acid Campaign

Naripokkho (literally meaning pro-women), founded in 1983 in Dhaka, is a membership-based women’s activist organization in Bangladesh. Naripokkho’s work is clustered under four themes: violence against women and human rights, reproductive rights and women’s health, gender issues in environment and development, and representation of women in media and cultural politics.
Naripokkho embarked on its work on acid violence against women and girls in August 1995. Although no systematic study or records documenting incidents of acid throwing on women and girls in Bangladesh existed at the time, media recorded this violence since the early 1980s. Naripokkho’s investigator, Bristi Chowdhury, believed that as early as the 1980s, with the growth of the auto-mechanic industry, which used car battery acid, the weapon of choice became easily obtainable by the public. However, increase in gendered violence in recent decades must be understood in the context of socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes in Bangladesh.

Since independence, Bangladesh has witnessed economic devastation, rising unemployment, and political instability, transitioning from an agrarian to a monetized economy. These shifts have affected the rural and urban poor, particularly women, as they have had to diversify their livelihoods in search of work. Governmental, nongovernmental, and international aid agencies have intervened by promoting income-generating programs that have tried to integrate women. International financial institutions have implemented economic liberalization programs and export-oriented manufacturing—namely, the garments industry. The increasing feminization of labor has occurred because of these changing socioeconomic dynamics, albeit in the absence of structural change in the asymmetrical gender relations in Bangladesh (Feldman 1998; Kaheer 2000; Rozario 1998). In particular, young women transgressing social norms of female seclusion, disrupting the gendered social order, and occupying a more visible presence have been targets of male violence in the home and outside. Naripokkho’s work in the mid 1990s focused specifically on acid throwing as a gendered crime within the larger context of women’s oppression, whereby men attempting to put young women in their place punished those who dared to say “no.”

Looking back at Naripokkho’s strategic planning phase in 1996 and reassessing their work, Bristi Chowdhury explained in an interview, “Acid violence was not yet a buzzword. Nobody had drawn serious attention to it. It was overlooked in the national and international arena. It was not as huge as dowry killings or honor killings, which are commonly cited as ‘barbaric southern practices’ by foreign donors and the media. Acid violence was not attention grabbing, nor fund grabbing. The discourse had not been created yet to make it so.”

So, for Naripokkho members to turn any occurrences of violence against women into an issue required not just national media coverage but also outside donors’ recognition that would eventually generate funds for necessary programs. Thus, it was a strategic goal on the part of Naripokkho to help in the creation of a discourse on acid violence that would put the issue on the national and international map. In the mid 1990s, Bristi Chowdhury developed a logic of acid attacks by visiting various libraries, NGOs, hospitals, and police stations and recording information that appeared in newspapers. This gave Naripokkho activists an in-depth view of why, when, and how acid attacks were taking place. Simultaneously, with other Naripokkho staff, Bristi Chowdhury visited the burns unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) regularly and provided emotional support and friendship to the young girls being treated there who were victims of acid attacks. Bristi Chowdhury’s careful documentation allowed Naripokkho to demonstrate that acid throwing was not random; rather, it had a pattern and a set of causes. Showing this pattern and proposing the causes enabled the group to argue that acid throwing should be seen as a concern of public importance.

According to feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), UN conferences on women such as the one in Beijing in 1995 shifted earlier discourses of “sisterhood is global” to the “human rights” arena in the mid 1990s. This shift has marked the “mainstreaming of the feminist movement,” successfully foregrounding issues of violence against women on the world stage (Mohanty 2003; 249). Some feminist scholars have attributed the 1990s as the period in which the culmination of UN summits provided women’s movements and their representatives from the North and the South, an active transnational platform to craft and influence development policies attentive to gender discrimination (Alvarez 2000; Basu 2000; Molyneux and Razavi 2002). Naripokkho, a women’s advocacy group, framed their own organizational work on violence against women in Bangladesh within the mandate of an international platform and thus hoped to leverage this issue onto the stage of International women’s rights and affect policy changes in the home front.

Naripokkho activists’ work in transforming the occurrences of acid violence into an issue had several objectives. First, as part of the organization’s larger work on violence against women, they undertook a research study investigating newspaper reports as well as records from NGOs, government documents, hospitals, and police stations. The objectives of the study were to identify the service gaps in addressing survivors and victims of violence and their coping strategies. Naripokkho networked with 250 local women’s organizations and intended to collectively analyze and respond to cases of violence nationwide. Their research indicated that since 1983 eighty cases of acid violence on women had been reported (Violence Logbook 1996). Nasreen Huq, coordinator of the acid violence work at Naripokkho said, “The focus on acid burns is part of an overall campaign on violence against women, which draws on the government’s mandate to address specific forms of violence articulated in the 1995 UN Beijing Conference on Women and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994.”

Second, the specific work on acid violence was undertaken by a smaller group of Naripokkho staff members, who visited the survivors of acid violence, mainly young women and girls, regularly, provided them with emotional support, and assisted them in legal and medical matters. Third, the group tried to raise social awareness around violence against women by promoting an understanding of the root cause of such violence. The slow but gradual mobilization of journalists, members of the government, DMCH staff, and local police accomplished this.

Eventually, in 1997, Naripokkho activists, armed with the information gathered in the previous two years, organized a three-day workshop that brought
together a group of teenaged survivors of acid violence to highlight the phenomenon and bring it to the attention of government, medical professionals, law enforcement agencies, donor community, activists, and journalists. The workshop generated much interest and support from national and international groups. Private donors offered support, and various international print and television media published feature stories on acid throwing in Bangladesh. Due to the increasing international awareness, medical teams from India, Spain, and Italy offered to donate free reconstructive surgery as well as participate in projects to train local medical staff in caring for acid burnt patients. Bina Akhter, an acid violence survivor, was hired by Naripokkho to continue the research and networking. Several years later, Bristi Chowdhury noted in an interview, “Bina was brilliant at this work.” Within a few months, Bina had contacted over forty survivors around the country, often visiting them in their hometowns. She contacted with journalists, heads of organizations, philanthropists, and even gave interviews in leading daily newspapers and TV programs. The campaign took on a life of its own.

The 1997 workshop achieved its goals. However, the success led to the diversification of participants in the campaign, and as a result Naripokkho’s involvement began to change. In 2003, Nasreen Haq stated, “We wanted to maintain the energy generated at the workshop and build on it. The network of survivors who had worked at the workshop had to be developed further so that there would not be a vacuum when Bina left. There had to be continuity because we knew that there would be others survivors of acid violence and potential leaders.” Haq continued on Bina’s performance as leader of the survivors’ network, “She was critically involved. Bina handled the press, she developed a wide network she did so much work. In her, we saw the whole spectrum unfold—from victim to survivor to activist. This was what we had dreamed of—the transformation.” The following summer, Bina Akhter won the UNICEF Young Leader Award to attend the Amnesty International Youth Forum in New York.

The April 1997 workshop was significant because for the first time Bangladeshi civil servants and several international organizations’ staff came face to face with, and listened to, young Bangladeshi girls and women who had survived acid throwing, and their families. The Naripokkho activists had broken through an existing wall of official denial and trivialization of the problem. This breakthrough initiated acid violence against women in Bangladesh as an issue that needed instant and systematic attention from the state, media, donors, and the medico-legal establishments. The campaign coordinators believed it was important for those girls and women who had experienced the violence to be at the forefront of shaping the movement. This philosophy motivated Naripokkho’s decision to hire Bina Akhter, Nurun Nahar, and Nazgir Begum to continue developing a nationwide network with other survivors by visiting them at UMCH and in their homes, as well as encouraging survivors to speak in public.

The workshop also allowed survivors to share experiences with one another, which enabled recognition of their experiences as political and transformative (de Lauretis 1986). Such visibility is particularly important in cases of acid violence because it challenges the motivation behind the crime, which is to force women into isolation and end their social lives (Del Franco 1999). Naripokkho was a catalyst in the process of building a critical consciousness among the survivors and encouraged many to become part of the campaign and even take on leadership roles.

The second stage of the acid campaign emerged upon the official entrance of various actors such as the medico-legal establishments, the state, and UNICEF Bangladesh. A combination of Naripokkho’s successful efforts in exposing and launching acid violence as a national and international issue, as well as the UN headquarters’ decision to act upon what by the late 1990s was perceived by an international audience as an assault on women’s human rights, set in motion the activities toward creating the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) by UNICEF-Bangladesh. Undoubtedly, Naripokkho strategically mobilized international actors to leverage the acid campaign onto the international discourse on gender violence, leading to the creation of ASF. However, the choices that the newly engaged actors made were often contradictory to those of the local women’s groups as well as ground realities. For example, unlike Naripokkho’s survivor-centered program, the UNICEF-funded ASF focused on "rehabilitating and re-integrating” victims of violence into society. Although the alliance with UNICEF broadened the scope of the campaign and opened up access to resources previously out of reach of the survivors, it led to the loss of Naripokkho’s critical role in shaping a survivor-centered campaign with a vision of structural change.

Bina Goes to America

One direct consequence of internationalizing the anti-acid violence campaign was “Faces of Hope.” Various Western publications such as Ms. (1999) and Marie-Claire (1998) and TV networks and programs such as CNN (1999), BBC (1999), and the Oprah Winfrey Show (1999) had already reported on acid violence in Bangladesh. Thus, “Faces of Hope” held the promise of generating further attention of an international community.

Connie Chung's trip preceded Bina and Jharna's departure for the United States 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, nor was it an Islamic tradition. The escalating phenomenon was described as one of revenge committed by spurned suitors and was common among the poor. Bina was 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. Said the voice of the savior, John Morrison, a British expatriate philanthropist who was appointed by UNICEF as director of the Acid Survivors Foundation at its inception, “This is one of the most
understand.

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 reported that Morrison "was the only 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 (Daily Star 2002). The article affirmed ASFI as having "a high domestic and international profile," where Bangladesh nationals work "cohesively under the direction of Dr. Morrison." True to this heroic representation, Morrison asserted in the "Faces of Hope" report the need for urgent action and was seen at work with top executives from fifteen national and international nonprofit organizations.

In the report, Chung continued to trace the events of Bina Akhter's life and arrival at the moment of providence, or the beginning of Bina's journey to Cincinnati, where laid the promise of American surgeons repairing her ravaged face. Healing the Children, an international NGO, organized for Bina Akhter and Jhabo Akhter to be treated at Shriners Hospital and to reside with a foster family in Cincinnati, Ohio. 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 unfolded, "Thanks to the generosity of so many Americans, Bina is about to taste a life she never imagined," said Jack Ford, Chung's co-anchor. An announcer's voice stated, "A journey to America brings new hope" (Whitecraft 1999).

From the one-room hut in Hazaribag, Dhaka, shared by seven family members, Bina arrived at her new home, likened to a palace by Chung, that raised her hopes "higher than they've ever been" (Whitecraft 1999). Viewers watched Bina accompany 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" (Whitecraft 1999).

Bina even faced the news of her irrevocably damaged eye with grace and heroism. She was 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 said. "If I were still in Bangladesh, I might have been kidnapped or killed by now." Chung's voiceover said, "For the first time in a long time, she wasn't afraid." We watched "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" (Whitecraft 1999).

"Faces of Hope" imagined Bina as a grateful recipient of aid and as a good victim. It indicated an inability to understand the lived realities of her situation or to understand her as a complex subject who participated in the negotiations that brought her to Cincinnati. The program gave wide exposure to a critical campaign and reproduced colonial images of victimized third world women being rescued by benevolent first world institutions, reinscribing the historically asymmetrical relations of ruling that frame such representations. What the story failed to reflect and resonate with were the lived realities of the so-called beneficiary of first world benevolence. Bina's own role in shaping her future was obscured, as was the role of the advocacy work done by Naripokko members.

We knew that Bina Akhter had declined an offer of going to Spain because she had not felt ready. The decision to accept Shriners' Hospital's invitation was, thus, well thought out and 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 host and were not altogether rosy, as Chung would have the audience believe. The story Bina Akhter, who spoke out against women's oppression, demanded justice from the government and delivered impassioned speeches at women's rallies, was reduced to a childlike figure bedazzled by America.

Bina Spins Her Own Narratives

In 2000, Bina Akhter applied for political asylum status in the United States, defying the terms of her contract with Healing the Children, the sponsoring aid organization. Consequently, she was no longer able to maintain her previous working relationships with Healing the Children and Naripokko. Bina and Jhabo moved in with a Bangladeshi expatriate family in Cincinnati. Although Healing the Children abandoned the sponsorship of the two girls and tried to return them to Bangladesh, truncating their medical treatment, the doctors at Shriners' Hospital continued to care for them pro bono. It was understood that by staying in the United States, she would jeopardize chances of any other acid survivor to come to America for medical treatment; be responsible for Naripokko's loss of face in the national and international advocacy communities; and betray the trust of the international community, which had come forth with assistance. Furthermore, in Bina's absence, a trial could not be held to prosecute her attacker, Dano, in Bangladesh, which Naripokko believed to be a serious setback in the acid campaign. Because Bina's story had received media coverage nationally and internationally, this trial would have been particularly significant for the larger campaign. On her eighteenth birthday, Bina Akhter moved into her own apartment as she attended high school diploma coursework by night and a nursing assistant program by day. This new location was important for her because she no longer felt obligated to attend Bible study and other religious education courses in which her host family demanded her participation in exchange for room and board.

It was a lonely life in Cincinnati, yet Bina Akhter believed that she could contribute to the campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh from the United States. She had begun touring the country, giving presentations on violence against women in Bangladesh, her own experiences, and girls' education programs in Bangladesh. Bina Akhter had a star quality about her—the ability to draw crowds, to
Sith emotions, and to question people about their own assumptions and beliefs. The same characteristics that made her the leader of the acid survivors’ network in Naripokkho now brought her international fame. Hasreen Huq had said as much during an interview. “Bina gave the acid campaign its stature, she was the star. In turn, her time in Naripokkho contributed to her growth as a feminist.”

Incidentally, the establishment of Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) as a consolidated body in 1999 coincided with the dissolution of Naripokkho’s direct involvement with the acid campaign. Simultaneously, several key activists who had led the anti-acid violence campaign left Naripokkho to pursue other interests. Weaving together these seemingly disparate events, the establishment of ASF, the departure of key campaign activists from Naripokkho, and Bina’s decision to reside in the United States, helps us better understand the current trajectory of the anti-acid violence campaign in Bangladesh.

The ASF was set up in 1999 with joint funding from UNICEF and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). This was when Bina and Sharna, among the first of a list of twenty acid survivors, made their way to Cincinnati for medical treatment. With Bina’s departure, Naripokkho had lost a full-time intern to continue the nationwide networking of acid survivors. Nurun Nahar, another survivor, had taken on that position: but as a full-time student, she was not able to keep up with the volume of work. Hasreen Huq, who until the establishment of ASF had been coordinating Naripokkho’s acid campaign, took on the role of board member at the newly founded ASF.

A member of Naripokkho, Khan (a pseudonym) had organized a pipeline of twenty survivors to receive medical treatment at the Shriner’s Hospital in Ohio. He had been instrumental in mobilizing Bangladeshi medical professionals in the United States, who had in turn set up a sponsorship program with Healing the Children. Bina Akhter’s decision to seek asylum, which jeopardized the pipeline of survivors set to come to the United States, upset her relationship with Naripokkho.

Naripokkho’s virtual withdrawal from the work that it initiated is unprecedented in regards to intraorganizational dynamics in women’s advocacy groups. For instance, Honor Ford-Smith (1997), a member of the Sistren Collective, an organization in Jamaica that worked with women both culturally and politically, describes the crossroads that members of well-intentioned women’s groups often encounter. Despite goals to work in the interest of social justice, women’s groups can reassert historically determined power relations in new forms. Colonial narratives unwittingly regulate the production of the development worker in the image of the missionary.

Although ostensibly advancing gender justice and seemingly adapting democratic practices, Naripokkho had its own hierarchical and class structure regulating the organization. Smith argues, “A language is needed that will help to analyze and address the contradiction between the emancipatory goals of groups and their internal practice, between their interest in transforming social relations toward liberatory power relations and the tense, conflicted organizational culture of many women’s groups.” (216). There is need for language that can address the complexity of the lived crises and often unspoken causes behind conflicts that shape complicity and resistance in feminist spaces.

Furthermore, Ford-Smith (1997) discusses the contradictions of funding that often dictate the development of women’s organizations and how those can consequently affect the group’s democratic practices. The insistence on delivering products, which are measured in technical terms, and the perennial search for the grassroots women by funding agencies, contribute to a cycle of eternal dependency. For instance, to be able to expand and to function efficiently within a globalized environment, organizations need to attract members with a certain level of skill and consciousness and provide its grassroots members with the resources to acquire such formal training. However, acquiring those skills would automatically mean that they were no longer eligible for grassroots funding. Such is the catch-22 situation for many women’s groups. Thus, a hierarchy inevitably surfaces between those group members with the desirable skills (e.g., connections, efficiency in English, Western-educated, etc.) and those without.

This scenario is recognizable in the dissolution of Naripokkho’s involvement in acid work, which I contend occurred not simply because of the emergence of ASF, but rather because of a combination of interconnected events. Bina Akhter, the so-called grassroots beneficiary and activist, had provided currency to the organization and helped bring unprecedented national and international support. When she had ceased to be grassroots, she also lost the nurturing relationships with her sponsors, Healing the Children (and association ASF, CIDA, and UNICEF), who had found the measurable product of their work in Bina, and her mentors in Naripokkho, who had found in her the poster child of their campaign. Bina’s detection only served to quicken the disintegration of Naripokkho’s involvement, as internal conflicts were already under way. The acid campaign had been designed by a small group of activists who had gradually gained the support of many key institutions, just as the Naripokkho campaign gained its legitimacy because of a few, influential actors, the organization’s role also disintegrated because of the withdrawal of the same few. Those are the risks of campaigns that are not mass-based but rather instigated by few committed members of society.

This problem is not singular to Naripokkho. Honor Ford-Smith (1997) asserts that women’s groups often act on ad hoc strategies due to external pressures. She argues that the dictates of international funding agencies exacerbate internal contradictions around structures of race and class, specifically on issues having to do with power and authority. Consequently, the organization can become constrained in terms of what it offers the community, its capacity to develop clear and effective organizational support, and its ability to satisfy members’ needs.

While the acid campaign can be defined as successful because of the emergence of ASF’s coordinated efforts, it lost one of its critical characteristics: the involvement of Naripokkho. This, perhaps, was inevitable once the proliferation of discourses and diversification of actors were under way. The benefits of the proliferation in
discourse had led people like Khan to successfully organize a pipeline of survivors to receive medical treatment in a Western country, but it had limited the same opportunities, which backfired—a transnationalism reversed (Friedman 1999). Significant in this equation is who had the privilege to abdicate. When asked why the organization had discontinued its work against acid violence, Khan stated, “The campaign just got too big. Naripokkho works on a volunteer basis, they don’t have the time or the resources for work of that scale. Naripokkho can raise awareness; it can work on an activist organization. It couldn’t provide all the services that the survivors needed. We are more equipped to do the research work. Besides, ASF is doing it now. We didn’t want that level of involvement.” According to Brsti Chowdhury,

I think the way we first launched the campaign could have been better orchestrated. We got ahead of ourselves. We should have done more research. Second, and this is connected to the first, we could have avoided an ASF. Instead, we should have gotten involved with other women’s organizations. We tried, but it politics both within our own organization and amongst various women’s organizations kept us from it. Third, Naripokkho’s Executive Committee could have been in the know from the beginning. We didn’t have clear goals and we kept changing our plans and strategies. Most of the time, Nurunnahar and I made the decisions according to the needs of the moment. So, much of the blame also fell on us when things went wrong.

Her reflections had turned to Bina as a vital part of the equation: “I believe it was a mistake to choose Bina as the Naripokkho intern. We should have groomed someone else. We knew from the outset that she was a star. But, she was also a child. Nonetheless, Bina also did a lot of good work for Naripokkho. She brought a lot of glory to the organization. And, it’s better that she tells her story than John Morrison [ASF’s first director who was a British national], who goes around representing barbaric brown practices. If Bina had stayed on track, if she had come back to Bangladesh, she could have become the director of ASF one day.”

But, why couldn’t Bina speak from her own perspective? We hardly ever questioned the authenticity of the knowledge of middle-class feminists who wrote about the plight of their downtrodden sisters. Why was Bina held to a double standard? Brsti Chowdhury berated the donor community for hijacking the acid campaign and undermining the work of the local women’s advocacy group. She believed that Naripokkho’s work reflected a truly organic approach where Bangladeshi women worked with Bangladeshi women and the survivors of acid violence worked to help themselves. Simultaneously, she believed that Bina, the star of the home-grown campaign, needed to be guided and groomed by her better educated and survivalist sisters. Bina was being shunned because she had acted as the ungrateful and wayward child of the campaign that had brought her into the limelight. From Naripokkho’s point of view, Bina had betrayed the campaign because she had chosen to put her own needs over those of not only fellow survivors of violence but also the aspirations of the women’s advocacy group.

It might be important to understand the international cultural difference here (Sharpe 2003). The international civil society crosses borders in the name of women and develops policy on development and human rights, which they profess are for the lowest strata in the developing world. The reality on the ground, however, is quite different. The international collaboration resting upon the UN mandate on helping victims of violence enabled Naripokkho members to organize a pipeline of twenty acid survivors to go for medical treatment to America. When the pipeline fell through, the euphoria and enthusiasm of the activists dissipated along with their interest to support the lowest strata—in this case, the survivors because of a failure to understand their lived realities. It is not my intention here to pass judgment on Bina’s or other Naripokkho members’ actions and decisions. However, at the end of the day, it is she and the eighteen survivors who were not able to go to America for treatment who bore the most abject consequences of the international and intranational negotiations.

Concluding Remarks

Bina continues to advocate for what she had always desired: justice. Bina wanted Dano to be punished. And, she wanted to continue her engagement with the women’s movement in Bangladesh, positioned as she might be, in the United States. My central purpose has been to tell a more complex story of the anti-acid violence campaign by the interweaving of multiple narratives over time. A corollary to that purpose has been to make central and visible the ongoing efforts of the women activists of Naripokkho in shaping this campaign. An organization mainly sustained by volunteers’ contributions of time and funds, Naripokkho’s involvement with the acid campaign was small in scale but expansive in vision. Initiated by promoting women’s rights, the organizational support gained momentum with more and more staff and members offering the young girls assistance: finding places to stay for family members while survivors underwent long and arduous medical treatment in Dhaka, providing emotional support to the survivors in the hospital, assisting in bringing charges against the perpetrators, and building a network with the survivors as main actors. Naripokkho’s strategy was to centralize the survivors’ voices, highlight their experiences, encourage them to take over the leadership, and determine the direction of the campaign as part of the larger movement against women’s oppression. Bina, for instance, during her internship at Naripokkho was moved by the organization’s struggle to protect the rights of sex workers against government led rehabilitation programs. This critical feminist consciousness led her to be involved in other program areas and assume the leadership in organizing Naripokkho’s International Women’s Day Rally in 1998.

However, the organizational development of the acid campaign took on a different trajectory. An undoubtedly important and urgent service provider, the consolidation of ASF has had unintended consequences for the campaign. Nicoletta del Franco (1999) characterized ASF as espousing a welfarist approach, targeting
the rehabilitation and reintegration of the survivors into society. To that end, ASF
responded mainly to survivors' immediate need of medical and financial assistance. Over
the years, however, ASF has adopted, if only in rhetoric, the vision of
Naripokkho activists where the survivors themselves are at the center of the gradual
process of social change. In reality, however, their programs still relegate the
survivors to secondary roles and spaces that adhere to rehabilitation schemes or
as workers in the service industry, thereby furthering a framework where proposed
solutions for women's victimization lies at the individual intervention and
survival rather than in structural changes (Grewal and Caplan 1994).

It would be remiss not to mention that Naripokkho was in a better position
than a foreign aid driven organization to put forward policies and strategies
consistent with gender analyses of acid violence within the framework of women's
oppression. As Nazimeen Haq pointed out, it was her intention to develop an ASF
within Naripokkho, but she had been obstructed by intramovement struggles
among campaign leaders, members, and clients. The focus of such an ASF within
Naripokkho would have been the empowerment of the survivors, so that
they could become active agents in the process of transformation and social change.
The lives of the survivors would not be "cases" of acid attacks, but "stories," which
would be told and listened to in order to move forward, an alternative discourse to
self-validating progress narratives.

In this chapter, I have aimed to broaden the understanding of the logic of
local versus transnational women's activism. Over the last decade, in particular,
transnational feminist organizing has resulted in the realization of important and
far-reaching accomplishments, particularly for women's groups representing the
economic South. Local activists have used transnational contacts as a way to construct
reconstruct, and legitimize politically marginalized issues within the
nation-state and to establish strategic bonds of solidarity with others who share in
the process of such marginalization. Also, activists have organized across borders
in an effort to affect public policy to enhance their local political leverage by the
boomerang pattern of influence (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The boomerang pattern
means transnational coalitions of nongovernmental, governmental, and intergov-
ernmental actors exerting pressures on one another as well as other influential
political bodies to invoke desired policy change. Yet, the same transnational coalitions
have often co-opted and eclipsed local women's issues and have rested upon
unwitting alliances such as the one explained between Naripokkho, UNICEF, ASF,
Helping the Children, and survivors of violence. Furthermore, local women's
issues have been represented as a monolith hiding the intramovement dynamics,
which are at once ambiguous and contradictory. For instance, the internal
disagreements and class-based divisions within Naripokkho unwittingly hindered
the campaign from moving forward.

In this particular story of acid violence, the campaign had consistently strug-
gled with issues of class, power, and imperialism. The campaign had been birthed
by a group of middle-class, urban, socially committed women who had been moved
by the injustices meted out to younger, poorer women. The implicit strategy of the
campaign had entailed the transformation of the young survivors, nurturing them
into becoming activists for women's empowerment. This construction of the
victim-survivor-change-agent, however, did not represent the lived realities of the
women in question. Although very keen on helping the survivors, the activists lead-
ing the campaign had been acutely aware of their own role as guardians and educators
of the young girls. When that role was tested, for example, by Bina, who had
decided to defy the terms of the agreement put in place to help her, the system of
support crumbled. We must also remember that global inequalities lead to such
impossible situations where victims are bound by contracts between nation-states
with asymmetrical relations of power. Bina's defiance of the contract resulted in the
abject loss for other victims. Yet, Bina's decision and its consequences must be
understood in the context of larger global inequalities.

Bina's role as the self-serving survivor had defied sociocultural imaginations
of a good victim that are routinely perpetuated by the media. Powerful assump-
tions of womanhood and directives of appropriate female behavior governed the
movement actors' understandings and expectations of how a victim should act.
Naripokkho campaign leaders' shunning of Bina was also reflective of their dis-
approval of her disobedience as well as jeopardizing other survivors' medical

treatment.

The struggles to define the acid violence campaign were not limited within
Naripokkho but spanned the terrain of acid violence-related work. ASF and
Naripokkho had their own clashes. The selection of John Morrison, a white British
philanthropist, as the executive director of ASF reflected colonial legacies. Even
after his departure in 2001, the colonial legacies lingered. Having major donors
like UNICEF and CIDA certainly made ASF resource-secure, but the guiding vision
and long-term strategies, which drove the Naripokkho-led campaign, was
compromised. ASF pitched itself as a service provider and remained limited to such
work. Survivors received centralized medical, legal, and rehabilitative services like
never before. However, when it came to systematically challenging the socially
sanctioned crime of acid throwing, the organization lacked radical vision.

This analysis has implications for understanding local women's groups' rela-
tion to transnational feminist politics. Indubitably, there is a need to expand our
theoretical understanding of local women's organizing and the context in which
they operate. In her discussion of the campaign, Brata Chowdhury pointed out the
dependency on international aid agencies as a failure of the campaign. After all,
Western funding is impermanent and a domestic funding base will ultimately be
necessary if the local women's organizing efforts are to attain sustainability.
Donors and NGOs have began to supplant a weak and inefficient state in providing
social services and thereby gain direct access to the public and private lives of ordi-
nary citizens. This has been noted as an intrusive form of foreign aid and new
means to govern subordinate populations (Stiles 2002). Regardless of the outcome, Naripokho was able to use the international and national organizations to write a new chapter in transnational feminist organizing.

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NOTES

1. Research for this essay was conducted over a number of staged dialogic encounters during Bina Akhter’s visit to New York from Cincinnati, November 19–21, 2002. Interviews with her and Naripokho activists were in English and/or Bangla. The author personally conducted and translated all interviews.

2. Dano, the perpetrator, had been held in prison for two years after Bina’s departure for the United States. He was subsequently released because Bina’s uncle repeatedly failed to appear in court to make a statement. Naripokho activists believed that he had been bought off by Dano’s family, while Bina believed he had been threatened by Dano’s supporters.

REFERENCES


