Feminist Negotiations

Contesting Narratives of the Campaign against Acid Violence in Bangladesh

Acid attacks against women have been increasingly reported in Bangladesh since the early 1980s. Acid attacks involve the splashing of acid (car battery or sulfuric acid) on the face and/or body of victims. While initially such cases were reported sporadically, since the mid-1990s, partly because of improved media coverage, there has been a steady rise in the number of cases reported in newspapers. At present, NGOs and government reports put total cases at about 300 annually. It is a common misconception that acid attacks against women are peculiar to Bangladesh, and that attackers are Islamic fundamentalists who punish women for “immodest” behavior (Anwary 2003). Historical evidence demonstrates that acid attacks were common in England and the U.S. in the 1800s, but declined once the police and court systems were strengthened. Such attacks are also reported in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, China, and Ethiopia (Swanson 2002). In the national context of Bangladesh, the rise in acid attacks needs to be understood not only in relation to existing gender inequality but also within its complex and shifting socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes as they intersect with neoliberal development policies and globalization.

A decade ago, the majority of reported victims were young women, under the age of 18, who had refused men’s and boys’ proposals of marriage, sex, or romance and the perpetrators were rejected suitors and their male associates. A bottle of sulfuric acid can be easily and cheaply bought from auto repair and jewelry stores. In the past several
years the reasons for attack have been predominantly land dispute and family dispute. Concurrently, male victims of acid violence have increased dramatically; however, perpetrators remain overwhelmingly male and victims female. Most women are attacked in the face, whereas men’s injuries include other parts of the body. Women, symbolically the honor and possession of the patriarchal family and community, are hence marked as “spoiled goods.”

The intent behind attacking women on the face is to permanently scar and disfigure but not to kill. The assumption behind the attack is women’s most valuable asset is her appearance. This is an attempt by rejected male suitors to ruin the woman’s marriage prospects and thus financial security and social status. Because women are considered bearers of tradition and honor, it is on their bodies that contestations over gender, ownership, and power are played out. Perpetrators often attack their victims at home in the middle of the night. Because family members tend to sleep together, they are also burnt in many cases. Victims can be blinded, and suffer loss of hearing, making it difficult to return to school or find employment. The scars—both physical and emotional—are permanent. Social reintegration is difficult, and victims are often isolated, if not wholly rejected by their families and communities. Recent interventions by state, NGO, women’s movement activists, and international aid agencies have begun to mobilize a collective response to acid attacks against women and girls in Bangladesh.
This essay traces the trajectory of the campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh, which began in the mid-1990s with the efforts of local women activists and over time engaged diverse national and transnational actors that led to critical negotiations in the sphere of women’s development, gender violence, and state and international donor interventions. The campaign against acid violence developed across three broad phases, beginning with the initial national and international publicity that the Bangladeshi activists of Naripokkho—a Dhaka-based feminist advocacy organization—generated around issues of acid violence. The spread and growth of the campaign in the second phase marked significant victories and produced divergent and competing investments in the campaign. The third phase culminated in the campaign’s co-optation by international development aid–driven intervention. By addressing the tensions between competing visions of social transformation and women’s empowerment that local women activists articulated, on the one hand, and international donor agencies, on the other, this essay examines the consequences of international aid and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in re-articulating the relationship among women, gendered violence, and the state. This essay studies the growth and development of a contemporary campaign around gendered violence by historicizing the discourse of acid violence and interventions challenging it. In so doing, it sheds light on the multiple interests, agendas, and constraints governing the response to violence against women in the global South, and it provides an opportunity to analyze and explore these complicated transactions among victims, feminist organizers, the state, and international donor organizations.¹

Incidents of acid attacks against both men and women have a long history in Bangladesh, its surrounding region, as well as other parts of the world (Anwary 2003). Acid attacks against women as a form of gendered violence in recent decades, however, need to be understood in the larger context of socioeconomic, political, and cultural transitions in Bangladesh. Following the War of Independence in 1971, which left the country socially and economically devastated, Bangladesh has witnessed a decline in agriculture-based economy, growth of landlessness, increase in landless laborers, and unemployment. Naila Kabeer (2000) has pointed to the intrusion of market relations into the employment of labor as setting in
motion the gradual dissolution of older forms of family organization among landless peasants and the erosion of traditional systems of support. The intensified competition in the rural economy produced diversification of livelihoods as well as migration to urban areas. Combined effects of population growth and declining farm size set in motion a shift from older peasant to a more monetized economy. Not all social groups, however, were affected similarly. Wealthy farmers and the rural elite were able to invest in accordance with new opportunities, and the urban educated and the middle-class sections had access to secure employment. These changing socioeconomic dynamics have affected rural and urban poor and women in particular and have been met with governmental and nongovernmental aid interventions. At the same time, like many developing nations, Bangladesh too opened up to economic liberalization programs, with the support of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the early 1980s, leading to the promotion of export-oriented manufacturing. Together with the impetus that the United Nations Decade of Women and Development (1975–1985) generated, these new initiatives have aimed to integrate women in some of their projects.

Especially over the past two decades, increasing numbers of women from lower-middle-class backgrounds as well as poor women have participated in “income-generating” activities of the development sector and numerous garment factories in metropolitan areas (Kabeer 2000). These factories rely predominantly on female labor because it is cheaper and seemingly easier to control. A vast majority of the women in these factories come from rural areas; however, a significant proportion is from urban areas and among them many who were previously employed as domestic workers. While there was economic gain involved, the increased physical mobility these new activities have entailed also adversely affected women’s and their family’s honor and status. In other words, patriarchal bargains marked the liberatory aspects that the new socioeconomic developments made possible.

There were inevitable gender implications for the changes in economy and society (Kabeer 2000; Rozario 1998; Feldman 1998). Norms of female seclusion permeated the shift to a cash economy, making women’s participation in the labor market a site of contestation. The transition from subsistence to monetized economy accounts for a key change in gender relations: namely the shift in marriage payments favoring the bride and her
family to that of “demand dowry” that favored the groom and his family (Rozario 1998, 269). The rise of dowry contributed to the fragility of marriage relations with increases in divorce, frequent remarriage, abandonment, and separation. Within the context of asymmetrical gender relations, and the changing socioeconomic dynamics, the growing practice of dowry only intensified women’s economic devaluation where girls were viewed as liabilities and boys as assets. According to Kabeer (2000), these various changes indicated the deterioration of women’s status as women and the “patriarchal contract” (men’s obligations toward women).

Evidence suggests that diversification of livelihoods of women met with external constraints such as active mobilization of powerful interest groups—family, local communities and networks, religious functionaries, and the state machinery—in defense of their privileged position in the social order (Kabeer 2000). Nonetheless, market forces; the advent of export-oriented manufacturing, namely garments industry; and the emergence of the NGO movements, which at the grassroots level worked toward the empowerment of women, contributed to a visible and sizable female labor force leading to a significant shift from long-established norms of female seclusion in Bangladesh.

Known as the “silent revolution” in the changing social landscape of Bangladesh, it was not unusual to see rural women on bicycles going to work or large numbers of young and “unaccompanied” women on the streets of Dhaka on their way to and from work (Amin n.d.). While, on the one hand, women experienced greater integration into the economy, on the other, their participation and resulting autonomy disrupted existing social and political structures. Women’s increasing participation in the labor force in some cases compromised the terms of the so-called obligation of men toward women. It was commonly perceived that women were taking away from men jobs and the natural role of primary breadwinner, and religious groups in particular denounced the women by organizing public forums and even circulating audio recordings vilifying women who were transgressing social norms (Kabeer 2000, 83).

Feminist researchers have posited that hostile attitudes and reactions toward women’s emerging visibility and participation in new roles, particularly in the context of increasing male socioeconomic disempowerment, often manifest in male-initiated abuses against women, including physical violence, and degradation of women (Perez 2002; S.
Halim and A. Haq 2004; Shehabuddin 2002). Dina Siddiqi (1991) has noted that women’s so-called invasion into previously male-dominated public spheres may have broken the norms of female seclusion but at the same time has redefined these norms to take on new significance in the context of globalization and wage labor. Strict disciplinary measures and surveillance continue to govern female behavior both in and outside of workspaces. This emergent new order in Bangladesh has been accompanied by systematic violence against women as exemplified in the steady increase in numbers of fatwa, rape, acid attacks, murder, battery, and trafficking (Ain O Salish Kendro 2001). While reported incidents of acid attacks in the past five years only have ranged from 150 to 450 cases per year, other forms of reported violence, with the exception of fatwas, have been consistently higher in number (Ain O Salish Kendro 2001, statistics 1999–2003). In such a context, acid throwing against women and girls has to be seen within the larger trend of women’s oppression. Reportedly, acid victims are predominantly women and girls, and reasons for attacks are overwhelmingly cited as marital, family, and land disputes; refusal to pay dowry, or rejection of romantic advances and marriage proposals (Islam 2004). At the same time, the rise of the automechanic industry has facilitated the widespread and unregulated availability of car battery acid—a bottle of sulfuric acid is sold for Tk.15 (US$ 0.25)—and has made acid throwing an “expedient” form of violence. Afroza Anwary (2003) has further attributed men’s viewing of women as property and emphasis on women’s appearance and marriage as means to achieve so-called security and the failure of the government to prosecute acid attackers for this increasing phenomenon. It is important to note, however, that recent decades have seen an escalation of not only acid attacks but also gendered violence against women across the board (Ain O Salish Kendro 2001).

A study that Women for Women, a Dhaka-based feminist research group, conducted reveals that women acid victims are often characterized in their community as women who are “wayward and disobedient” (udhyoto meye) (H. Akhter and S. Nahar 2003). Another study on the rising feminization of labor in Bangladesh asserts that women workers are increasingly victims of three-dimensional violence: in the workspace, on the way to work, and in the domestic space (S. Halim and A. Haq 2004). In sum, the changing gendered social order, continuing devaluation of women as women, globalization, and structural adjustment policies of the
government have contributed to the precipitation of gender violence in the national context of Bangladesh.

In this essay, however, it is my purpose to trace the development of the focused efforts of Naripokkho during 1995–2003, which helps us to understand the particular trajectory of an issue-based campaign. It was during these years that Naripokkho activists carried out strategic negotiations with key institutions in order to create a public discourse on acid violence against women in Bangladesh with the purpose of developing a “socially recognized campaign” (N. Huq 2003).

Scholars of transnational organizing efforts have emphasized the importance and complex and contradictory relationships within networks that involve actors as divergent as local women’s groups, international donor agencies, and the state. While these networks—constituting an asymmetrical terrain of transnational solidarity and differences—may be held together by a perceived shared commitment, participants are often sharply at odds over fundamental issues of agenda and strategy (Nelson 2002; Riker 2002). And while international aid helps to institutionalize women’s political struggles, the flipside of this institutionalization is that feminists must frame their struggles in terms of a developmentalist aid framework—more often than not leading to a deradicalization of the movement agenda—in order to receive the funding, and consequently this generates schisms and unintended effects on the movement dynamics (Basu 2000; Lind and Share 2003; Ferguson 1994). The envelopment of the acid campaign by a donor-driven intervention eclipsed its radical vision of structural change and women’s empowerment into a neoliberal one of incremental change and individual transformation. The latter does not adequately recognize the distinction between policies and programs that address the practical needs of individual women survivors of violence and those that seek to transform women’s position within a structurally unequal set of social relations (Kabeer 1994).

In order to fully illuminate the complex dynamics of the acid campaign, I organize the campaign in three stages: the first, during the years of 1995–1998, took place when members and staff of Naripokkho began systematically devising a social campaign to transform incidences of acid attacks into a public issue. The second, during the years of 1998–1999, occurred when the success of the Naripokkho actions led to a diversification and proliferation of actors who engaged with the campaign in multiple ways,
thereby expanding and changing its scope, albeit with unintended consequences. And the third, during the years of 1999–2003, transpired when the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), established in 1999 through the funding and support of Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF-Bangladesh, and backed by multilateral and bilateral donors as well as a strong civil society constituency, gradually took over the role of the consolidated service-providing agency to assist acid violence survivors. The third stage concurrently witnessed the gradual dissolution of Naripokkho’s involvement with the campaign as well as the articulation of a Women in Development–centered strategy in providing services to acid victims. In other words, the outcome meant a stressing of income generation and skills training as the means to empower socially marginalized women, thereby integrating women into the productive machinery of the state (Bhavnani, Foran, and Kurian 2003). Tracing these shifting strategies tells us that within the climate of neoliberal development aid intervention, women victims are integrated into productive schemes that ultimately do not interrupt wider hierarchical structures in either Bangladeshi society or international development regime.

Naripokkho members generated attention and funding to inquire into the severity of acid attacks as well as garnering recognition due to their growing proliferation by focusing on the issue as part and parcel of a broader campaign challenging violence against women, and they made the visibility of the survivors a key element of the campaign. The growing intervention of international donors, facilitated by the global shift from feminist collective organization to the growing discursive weight of human rights discourses during the 1990s, whose extensive transnational networks and access to funds allowed them to take charge of the anti-acid campaign also medicalized the issue of acid violence, and it established a model of providing short-term services rather than greater investment of time and energy that the Naripokkho activists had expanded while working with survivors of acid violence who were often trained in turn to become activists and organizers themselves. During the third stage of the anti-acid campaign, the ASF began to focus on the reintegration of survivors into society by returning them to a “condition as near as possible” (Acid Survivors Foundation 2002) to one prior to the attacks, thereby neglecting to question the social order sanctioning gendered violence, while advocat-
ing a neoclassical model of economic empowerment for these young women. Nonetheless, the ASF exerted pressure on the national government and lobbied for the development and implementation of effective medicolegal provisions for survivors of acid violence.

Naripokkho Launches Acid Violence as an Issue

Naripokkho, literally meaning pro-women, is a membership-based women’s advocacy organization founded in 1983 (Naripokkho 2002). 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. Their activities include advocacy campaigns, research, discussions, cultural events, and lobbying on issues of gender justice. The organization is supported by its membership, which includes women with a variety of skills and expertise in different disciplines, through their voluntary contributions of professional time and funds. Thus most of Naripokkho’s membership is women with professional occupations, but the organization has a number of paid staff to run its day-to-day operations. The use of members’ professional time and skills enables Naripokkho to take on earning activities such as research consultancies and gender analysis training, as well as grant-funded projects. Naripokkho has extensive experience in conducting workshops, seminars, training, and national level conferences.

In 1995, when Naripokkho activists embarked on their work on acid violence, no systematic study or records then existed to document incidents of acid throwing on women and girls in Bangladesh. Bristi Chowdhury, then an intern at Naripokkho, said, “Acid violence was not yet a buzzword [in the mid-1990s]” (B. Chowdhury 2003). Serious and systematic attention had not been drawn to it and no discourse created to put the issue on the map of the national and international landscape of gendered human rights violations.

Naripokkho’s involvement began when one of its members, Nasreen Haq, who eventually became the coordinator of the acid campaign, came across two male relatives of Nurun Nahar, a teenaged girl, who had had acid thrown at her by Jashim Sikdar, a rejected suitor, and his associates. The male relatives of Nahar at the time were trying to persuade reporters of a certain daily newspaper to write a story on the incident. Failing to do so,
they approached Ms. Huq, who happened to be present at the newspaper office with some business of her own and who they correctly assumed to be an activist who would be sympathetic. Thus began in 1995 the Naripokkho activists’ initiative to build the anti-acid campaign.

Bristi Chowdhury (2003) has described the initial phase of campaign building as consisting of researching and 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, philanthropists, medical and legal professionals, and international donors who could potentially assist the creation of a public discourse on acid violence. The emergent and loose network produced a campaign, the principal strategy of which was the internationalization of a domestic issue, thereby reinforcing voices of local women activists and affecting national policy development priorities.

Nasreen Huq, the coordinator of the acid campaign and member of Naripokkho, explained how she and her coworkers mapped acid attacks as a distinctive form of a larger feminist-conceptualized issue of violence against women globally (2003). Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has written how internationalization of the women’s movement has shifted earlier discourses of “sisterhood is global” to the “human rights” arena in the mid-1990s as a result of a series United Nations (UN) conferences on women, culminating in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. This shift has marked the change to a rights-based approach otherwise known as the mainstreaming of the feminist movement, which has placed issues of violence against women successfully on the world stage (Mohanty 2003, 249). Naripokkho framed their organizational work on violence against women in Bangladesh within the mandate of an international platform, thus hoping to leverage this issue into the area of international women’s rights and thereby affecting policy changes on the national front. Nasreen Huq 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 Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994” (1996).

As a result of the efforts of Naripokkho activists in the mid-1990s, there
emerged a network of young girls and women who had endured acid violence. In April 1997, amid the escalating phenomenon of acid throwing in Bangladesh, Naripokkho activists organized a three-day workshop with a group of teenaged 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 the service-providing institutions, such as the medicolegal establishments; to mobilize key local, national, and international actors to take action; and to promote solidarity and visibility of survivors of violence whose economic and social lives had been 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—that the women who were the survivors would also be the leaders of the campaign.

The three-day workshop was a collaborative effort as the activists of Naripokkho tapped into various resources including their social and professional connections. It is critical here to note that the successful expansion of the acid campaign hinged on Naripokkho’s extensive network and grounding within a national women’s movement. Save the Children, UK, offered the use of their conference room free of cost for the workshop sessions. Women’s Voluntary Association donated their guesthouse to host the girls and their families at a nominal cost. Many of the girls arrived in Dhaka days ahead of the workshop, and Naripokkho staff put them up in their own homes. UNICEF provided transportation over the three days. The UN Women’s Association hosted a presentation and donated funds for the workshop. Naripokkho members contacted the Law and Home Ministries and set up meetings. Another member of Naripokkho, a gender advisor at the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) who at the time was collaborating with the Bangladeshi government on a project called the Multi-sectoral Project on Violence against Women, emphasized the importance of the integration of the campaign into this larger project. Negotiations with the director of Gonoshastho Kendro (GK), an influential national NGO providing affordable healthcare to the poor, led to a further fruitful alliance envisioning the development of a burns center. The only existing center at the time was located at the state-sponsored Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) with a mere eight-bed capacity.⁴
The workshop featured sessions where participants developed strong relationships with one another and their families through group activities with the Naripokkho activists. Separate sessions were held with family members, particularly the mothers of the young women, who were the primary caregivers in the long recovery process following the acid attacks. These were emotionally charged sessions enabling the formation of solidarity among women, a critical feature of the emergent Naripokkho campaign. Bristi Chowdhury wrote in a report of the workshop:

[W]hen all the harrowing stories were being told, no amount of logical thought could stop the tears. When I cried Rina [a survivor] held my hand tightly the way I had held hers when she had cried in DMCH [where the survivors recuperated in the burns unit and Naripokkho staff regularly visited them] and Bina [another survivor] cradled my head like I had cradled hers. Even now I don’t know if I was right to cry, maybe I should have remained strong so that they could feel that they could lean on me. . . . [T]his was an important, if emotionally draining session. (1997, 15)

During the workshop, acid survivors and their family members were encouraged to map out their future plans, their vision of social justice, and recommendations of adequate services for victims of violence. The sessions reflected an attempt on the organization’s part to create an imaginative space for the girls—for instance through painting and storytelling—to express their feelings and develop friendships. Naripokkho activists provided a supportive space for the young survivors to develop confidence to confront the consequent isolation and ostracism following acid attacks and to feel comfortable in public spaces. Bristi Chowdhury described one particular event designed to do just that:

[S]urvivors, mothers and Naripokkho staff and volunteers from the “Theater Center” (a theater group who often help us out in Naripokkho functions) went to Shongshod Bhaban, the Parliament Building. Shongshod Bhaban is a place for boys to ogle girls and girls to more subtly ogle boys, it is a place for married couples to go openly and for unmarried couples to go covertly, but essentially it is a place for couples. 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 what is more on a Friday when the
place is literally swarming. (1997, 16)

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

We got out of the microbuses 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 oglers 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 dubious about this thinking that perhaps he would make fun of them or something of the sort, 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 oglers did treat them as freaks but after a while they stopped having fun at our expense and began to have fun with us. (1997, 16, original emphasis)

Nasreen Huq 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 at the Parliament House was intended to reclaim not only the public spaces and social lives of young women but also their lost youth (N. Haq 2003). Bristi Chowdhury’s report showcased such youthful activities:

For example, at one point we were playing a game where you have to chase a person around in a circle and if you catch them before they get back to their place in the circle they are out, the audience were cheering us as in “ey taratari, dhorlo dhorlo,” (hey quick quick she’s going to catch you) and so on. It was fantastic; these guys [the public] were with us. (1997, 16)

In separate interviews Bina Akhter and Nargise Akhtar, survivors and workshop participants, described their simultaneous feelings of trepida-
tion and joy in confronting with allies a public space (B. Akhter 1997; N. Akhtar 1997). The activists of Naripokkho together with the survivors challenged what they had come to recognize as the enforced isolation. As a result, the visibility of the survivors became a key strategy in the efforts to make public the anti–acid violence campaign (Del Franco 1999). The sessions designed to encourage the survivors to talk about their futures gave them a sense of community 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 beset on their families pursuing medical and legal redress, and their inability to continue with their education or meaningful employment often due to lack of finances but also due to loss of physical ability to see and to hear as a result of the acid attack, along with the trauma and isolation that ensued. Moreover, the girls talked about the corrupt and ineffective judicial system, which, in spite of rhetorically offering services, systematically discriminated against the victims.

The April 1997 workshop was significant and a turning point for the acid campaign because for the first time Bangladeshi civil servants and the international donor community came face-to-face with young Bangladeshi women who had endured acid attacks. Naripokkho activists’ efforts had broken through an existing wall of official denial and trivialization of this phenomenon. Achieving this breakthrough launched acid violence against women in Bangladesh as an issue that needed instant and systematic attention from the state, the media, donors, and the medicolegal establishments. The conference also attracted the attention of the international media. Bristi Chowdhury recalled, “Money started to come in. A member of the royal family of Jordan sent a large sum upon reading an article in Marie Claire. We wanted the international awareness. A plastic surgeon from India was invited to Gonoshastho by its director to develop a national project to train local medical staff in caring for burns patients. Simultaneously there were offers from medical professionals in Spain and Italy. The work took on a life of its own” (B. Chowdhury 2003). At the same time, strengthened by the supportive feminist space of Naripokkho and the growing network, the young survivors began to participate more fully in the campaign and pursue other interests. Bina Akhter began an internship
in Naripokkho. Nurun Nahar, another survivor, enrolled in a technical college in Dhaka and moved into a women’s hostel in the city. Bristi Chowdhury explained, “The workshop generated much interest and support from national and international groups. Bina Akhter, the most vocal and articulate in the group of survivors from the workshop, was an obvious choice to carry on the research and the networking. She proved to be brilliant at this work. Within a few months she had contacted over forty survivors around the country. She wrote to every single person we heard about through the newspapers or the hospitals. She connected with journalists, heads of organizations, philanthropists, even gave interviews in papers and on TV” (B. Chowdhury 2003).

Naripokkho’s campaign strategy involved organizing the survivors of acid violence to be its leaders. This motivated Naripokkho’s decision to hire Bina Akhter and Nurun Nahar to continue developing a nationwide network with other survivors by visiting them at DMCH and in their homes as well as encouraging them to speak in public to organize information drives on the issue. Nasreen Huq said in an interview, “We wanted to maintain the energy generated at the workshop and build on it. There had to be continuity because we knew there would be others. Bina Akhter was critically involved in handling the press, in developing a network, etc. She was the star of the campaign” (N. Huq 2003). Bina Akhter, in fact, went on to become one of the most prominent leaders of the acid campaign. UNICEF nominated her to participate in the 1998 Amnesty International Young Leaders Forum in New York City, New York. Nasreen Huq commented, “We were so proud of her, we felt that we had a part in her success! Actually, all of the girls who participated in that workshop got something out of it. We [Naripokkho activists] may not have succeeded in building the larger institutional support for this work, but on [the] individual level we were successful” (N. Huq 2003).

The workshop also allowed survivors to share experiences with one another as a collective, thus enabling recognition of their experiences as political and transformative (de Lauretis 1986, 9). Such a visibility is particularly important in the case of acid violence because it challenges the motivation behind the crime, which is to force women into isolation and to end their social lives (Del Franco 1999). Naripokkho was a catalyzing force in the process of building a critical consciousness among the survivors, which then encouraged many of them to become part of the campaign and
even take on leadership roles. Naripokkho’s intervention set in motion the subsequent entrance of key actors in the continuing development and diversification of the campaign. It was continuous with the organization’s participation in a larger movement against gender inequality.

The UNICEF Intervention

The second stage of the acid campaign, during the years of 1997–1999, was distinctive from the first because it marked the diversification and gradual internationalization of the campaign. During this time I was part of a consulting team that UNICEF hired to conduct background research on existing services for survivors of acid violence in Bangladesh as part of the broader objective of setting up the ASF. The 1997 acid workshop in addition to mobilizing NGOs, the government, the media, and the medical and legal professionals also stirred the interest of international donor agencies, namely UNICEF-Bangladesh. Over a series of strategic meetings Naripokkho activists pressured UNICEF staff to recognize the relevance of the campaign to their own institutional agenda. Following a host of international reports by CNN, the BBC, Marie Claire and MS magazines, and Oprah Winfrey, offers of assistance streamed in steadily to Naripokkho. The executive director of UNICEF personally traveled to the Dhaka office from the headquarters in New York City and met with acid survivors and asked the Dhaka office to take on the issue. Furthermore, the British High Commission set up an inquiry and put at its head a British expatriate writer who was residing in Bangladesh at the time, along with his wife, who was a staff member of the Department for International Development (DFID). This British writer set up an inquiry desk at the CIDA premises in Dhaka and was later to become the first executive director of the ASF.

Deborah Stienstra (2000) has discussed women’s transnational organizing in relation to the UN conferences between 1992 and 1996. 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 that these UN conferences have affirmed. Using a metaphor of dance, Stienstra effectively points out how as dancers respond to changes in sound and music, women’s movements respond to changes in the global political economy, the state, international financial institutions,
and other forces at work in the world order. “The dance continues as the music changes, and the dancers contribute to how the music changes” (Stienstra 2000, 211). The dance metaphor serves to explicate the tensions in international as well as intranational women’s organizing and the complexities of and compromises that shape women’s movements 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.

Through a series of conferences and working groups, the UN has addressed the advancement of the status of women worldwide. In 1979 the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Convention for Women, Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women, which came into force as a treaty in 1981, and after the 1995 Beijing conference the UN mandated the Commission on the Status of Women to integrate a follow-up process, charging UN bodies with establishing policy and taking action toward assuring equality and equity for women globally (Falvo 1997, 1). UNICEF thus was committed to implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the comprehensive strategy outlining critical areas of concern for advancement of women to the year 2000 and beyond. The UN convention and platform of action served as the conceptual framework in designing and implementing programs that focused on UNICEF’s priority areas, namely education of girls; health of girls, adolescents, and women; and children’s and women’s rights (UNICEF 1997). UNICEF as a result of Naripokkho’s efforts and external pressures came on board the acid campaign, even though there ensued considerable disconnect with the women’s advocacy group in setting priorities and agenda.

For instance, one of the first programs UNICEF supported was bringing in a team of experts from the United States specializing on Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR), which at the time was an experimental therapy designed to treat victims of natural disasters, conflict, and war. While I am not qualified to comment on the effectiveness of such treatments for survivors of acid violence, I would like to point out that the decision to involve EMDR specialists was made without discussion with partners in Naripokkho or the survivors themselves. While therapy appears to be an obvious necessity for victims of trauma, in the Bangladeshi context counseling is practiced in rather different settings. The activities of the acid workshop are particularly exemplary of a more informal counsel-
ing on an ongoing basis. Safia Azim, a professor of psychology at Dhaka University and member of Naripokkho, has suggested that alternate forms of “therapy” in Bangladesh would be more appropriate given that there is not a “culture of therapy” per se. Survivors of violence often go to NGOs such as Ain O Salish Kendro (a legal aid clinic) and Naripokkho for counseling. 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 counselors to teach at Dhaka University and thereby train and build capacity locally (Azim 1998).

Several survivors, including Bina Akhter and Nurun Nahar, were subjects of EMDR in 1998, but they and the Naripokkho staff have questioned to what extent it helped them. During and prior to the treatment both girls had been working in Naripokkho in a supportive environment, attending school, and in Nahar’s case, living independently in a women’s hostel in the city. Although it is possible to feel short-term elation immediately following EMDR treatment, said Azim, it is not sustained. Both Nurun and Bina admitted to recurring nightmares and depression in the weeks following EMDR (B. Akhter 1998; N. Nahar 1998). Professor Azim commented, “I am suspicious of this notion of a ‘miracle vaccine.’ I think that’s a myth” (Azim 1998).

UNICEF’s “quick fix” strategy was not only limited to the endorsement of EMDR; it spilled onto other areas of campaign building as well. For instance, midway through the consultancy, the consulting team was instructed to set aside research on existing services and lack thereof and instead focus on interviewing five hundred survivors of acid violence around the country to develop a database of information on their needs. These interviews would then lay the groundwork for program development. No doubt it was a worthy proposal. However, the practicalities of developing a network of five hundred far-flung survivors within one month were unrealistic given the time and resource parameters of the consultancy. Moreover, such groundwork—albeit on a smaller scale—already existed due to the early research that Naripokkho activists had conducted.

Honor Ford-Smith (1997) has talked about the tendency of aid agencies in developing countries to fund short-term projects that would produce quick and measurable results. She asks, “Measurable by whom?” And, “By
whose standards?” Ford-Smith goes on, “Essentially, agencies wanted to know that their funding criteria had been met. The people who were presumably being served had little input in evaluating the achievements of the project; they had even less say in establishing the criteria for evaluation” (1997, 232). 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 that Naripokkho had developed, which focused on the individual and collective empowerment of the survivors to be leaders in their own struggle and in the acid campaign. Naripokkho activists envisioned a society—and development programs that strived to make it a reality—where women would have access to services and resources, the ability to make informed decisions, and the power to self-determine their economic and social choices.

The second stage of the acid campaign thus emerged on the entrance of UNICEF among the diversifying set of actors. 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 on what by the late 1990s an international audience had begun to perceive to be a violation of women’s human rights had set in motion the activities toward creating the ASF in Bangladesh. By looking at the complex process that led to the ASF, it becomes apparent how Naripokkho strategically mobilized international actors to leverage the acid campaign 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; for instance, the decision to invest in EMDR for survivors was not one that had been made collectively with local partners or with a farsighted strategy. At the same time, the proliferation of actors resulted in Naripokkho’s diminished role in shaping the dominant narrative of the campaign, which until then had made central the experiences of the survivors of violence. The alliance with UNICEF thus was 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.
The Consolidation of the ASF

On 8 March 2003, International Women’s Day, the ASF organized a rally at the Dhaka Press Club that brought together two hundred survivors from around the country and representatives of the state, civil society, and donor community. It was a remarkable gathering, which Bangladesh Television and the print media covered. What was also noteworthy was that the organizers of this event constituted a new landscape in the anti–acid violence campaign. By the spring of 2003 the anti–acid violence campaign had shifted squarely to the ASF—by a process that I will describe as the third phase of the campaign.

The transitioning of the campaign activities to the ASF, however, had not been seamless. Scholars of social movements have theorized that campaigns are often catalyzed once sufficient financial means to organize and propagandize have been secured. In the institutionalization of the anti–acid violence campaign into the ASF, these resources came primarily from Western donors such as UNICEF and CIDA, but not without strings attached or without ramifications for the shape of the campaign. In her study of women organizing in contemporary Russia, Valerie Sperling (1999) has noted that although foreign-based aid can provide crucial support for social movement organizing in developing countries, at the same time it can exacerbate divisiveness within and between national and local groups as well as influence the priorities and agenda of these groups (220).

In 1999, at the time of its creation and marking the success of the campaign, the ASF ostensibly became the coordinating organization to provide services for acid survivors. UNICEF’s establishment of an umbrella organization such as the ASF has to be commended, along with the board of trustees comprising prominent Bangladeshi nationals and NGO representatives. Over the years it has made important headway in the campaign. One of its most noteworthy achievements was to lobby with the government to pass new and more stringent laws, namely the Acid Crime Prevention Law 2002 and Acid Control Law 2002 to prosecute perpetrators of acid violence and more effectively criminalize the sale of corrosive substances without license. At the same time, the ASF has strategically co-opted Naripokkho’s strategy—albeit in rhetoric—of placing survivors and
their experiences at the center of their programs. However, considerable contradictions exist in the ASF’s rhetoric and its actual practices.

When the ASF was first founded it primarily provided medical and rehabilitative services. It had a thirty-five-bed nursing center and shelter home, Thikana House, as well as a surgical center, Jibon Tara, named after a woman who had died of acid attack. Over the years it has developed legal, research, and most recently prevention units, as well. The five units work together in assisting survivors along the recovery process. John Morrison, the first executive director of the ASF, said at its founding that efforts must be made to make acid survivors into “productive and effective citizens of the country” (1999).

The ASF’s primary objective is “[t]o 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.” The mission of the ASF is “[t]o aid the recovery of acid violence survivors to a condition as near as possible to that of their premature situation by providing treatment, rehabilitation, counseling 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).

To facilitate the reintegration of survivors into society by returning them to a “condition as near as possible to that of their premature situation” seems a gross injustice in representing the process a survivor experiences post–acid attack. For rarely is a “return” possible, even in the most insignificant of ways. This idea of reintegration of a survivor into the society that sanctions acid violence is potentially damaging. Through the ASF’s rehabilitation unit survivors are routinely “reintegrated” into clerical and service positions or set up with microbusiness ventures. This model of rehabilitation relies on social and neoclassical economic development programs that neoliberal policies drive, which assume “women need to be helped to develop their potential so that they can solve their problems themselves” (Schild 2002, 185). It is not clear, however, whether women’s insertion in the productive machinery of the state, namely as active economic agents, translates into the meaningful participation that gender-sensitive programs envision. Veronica Schild (2002), using a term used by Marguerite Berger, chief of the Women and Development Unit at the Inter-American Bank, calls the women who are the subjects of such development...
ventures “reluctant entrepreneurs” or women who participate in the income-generating and skills-training economic development programs out of a lack of other alternatives. The development industry, though, reconfigures these reluctant entrepreneurs as “empowered clients” who as individuals are viewed as capable of enhancing their lives through judicious, responsible choices. Schild characterizes this shift as exemplary of new ways of governing subordinate populations. Similarly, in the case of social programs for acid survivors one needs to ask whether the survivors’ reintegration into society renders fulfilling participation and whether they are choosing to enter such positions given a range of possibilities. Bristi Chowdhury’s research has noted that most survivors wanted to continue their education or find meaningful employment, both of which were often impossible because of the social stigma against and public rejection of women victims (B. Chowdhury 1997). In the absence of programs that envision structural change, the survivors, too, at best can be viewed as reluctant entrepreneurs as they are placed in service sector jobs, or in many cases forced to remain at home without education or work prospects.

Nicoletta Del Franco (1999) has observed that the main activities of the ASF were giving financial and medical help to some survivors through a network that involved UNICEF, NGOs, and hospitals. She has characterized the role of the ASF in 1999 as a “savior giving new hope and life” to survivors whose needs are interpreted mainly in terms of welfare (Del Franco 1999, 27). This approach continues to stigmatize acid survivors as “victims deprived forever of their main roles as mothers and wives” (Del Franco 1999, 27). Thus the ASF provided services to integrate survivors into development programs without disrupting gender inequities or confronting systemic and institutional gender discriminatory practices and values contributing to gendered abuse. Critical explorations of the implications of a gender justice agenda as propagated by such models of social provisioning clearly show the narrow range of possibilities for translating women’s needs and demands into social action. As Schild has said, “Indeed, in the present context, this rights-based agenda, as implemented in practice, seems to be more a tool for a hierarchical and exclusionary project of social integration which is functional to the ‘modernization’ restructuring project more generally, than it is a means for enabling the meaningful citizenship of the majority of poor women” (2002, 198). For “meaningful citizenship” would emerge from development programs that
ensured survivors economic and social access to services and resources and power to self-determine their choices, and simultaneously to question the hierarchical structures and institutions that allow gendered abuse.

In 2003 the ASF underwent some changes in their approach, which now involves survivors in shaping programs geared to serve them. This change in part can be attributed to the recruitment of several key staff of Nari-pokkho who had been involved in the Naripokkho-led anti–acid violence campaign in the mid-1990s. The ASF’s referral, legal, and medical unit coordinators are former Naripokkho staff well aware of gendered social hierarchies. According to Nasreen Huq, who served as a board member at the ASF, this presence of Naripokkho members in the ASF has provided continuity and made a difference in shaping and influencing its agenda.

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 and thus isolates and depoliticizes the issue at hand. In this way, acid survivors are pathologized as victims in need of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The welfare discourse, says Del Franco (1999), lacks a long-term vision because it does not recognize the need for change of the social system. Admittedly, the recent changes in the ASF’s staffing and practices have shown the beginnings of a more rigorous and systemic approach as exemplified in its lobbying with the government for appropriate legal redress. Nonetheless, many of its practices remain welfarist, targeting young women into “productive” citizenship programs.

Subverting the Welfare Discourse

One cannot underestimate the services that an umbrella organization such as the Acid Survivors Foundation can provide. The creation of such a coordinated body of services reflects the achievement of the evolving campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh. Naripokkho activists, on the one hand, acted as part of a larger women’s movement in Bangladesh and thus enabled the conceptualization and organization of the acid campaign within a movement ideology. The ASF, on the other hand, did not emerge directly from a larger movement; but, rather, it was facilitated
by it. 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 has characterized international development agencies 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 that those identified as requiring the intervention initiate. Nonetheless, the establishment of the ASF has to be commended for the real and potential “instrument effects” that are presently being generated. External donors are seldom well positioned to be movement instigators, and thus the position and activities of the ASF were, in its initial stages, incompatible with those of movement activists. Their efforts, however, generated multiple discourses and narratives with unintended consequences. The ASF’s birth was catalyzed by the groundwork laid by the activists of Naripokkho, many of whom are currently in leadership positions within the ASF and thus making not insignificant contributions to the organization’s evolving strategies and success stories.

Some of the noteworthy developments within the ASF include collaborating with national NGOs such as the Bangladesh Rural Action Committee 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 new laws against acid throwing and selling, and setting up a National Acid Council and Special Tribunal to oversee speedy investigation of cases and swift trial processing; and providing improved medical care and reconstructive surgery to survivors. One of the most creative programs that the ASF’s prevention unit is developing includes community-based focus groups to raise awareness at the grassroots level across the nation. Two particularly innovative strategies have involved training survivors to enact dramatic performances of their own stories. These traveling theater productions have challenged societal perceptions of acid victims and encouraged women’s articulation of their own stories. Following such a performance, a group of youth in the community had spontaneously painted a mural expressing resistance to acid throwing. Such grassroots efforts have the potential to mobilize participation across diverse social groups. Although commendable, as head of the ASF prevention unit, Mahbuba Huq, reports, such innovative
organizing efforts remain sporadic and marginal to the foundation’s mainstream activities due to a lack of sustained funding and focus (Huq 2003).

Although the ASF in principle presents its strategy as survivor centered, there is no indication of their actual participation in decision-making processes. They remain rooted in a welfarist approach where survivors are recipients of services and in need of rehabilitation and reintegration into society in order to become “productive citizens” (ASF 2003, 30).

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” (ASF 2003, 33), their actual policies—spanning predominantly the medical and legal arenas but not enough the social—seem not to reflect such a vision. Admittedly, the newly developed prevention unit promises to do so, but it is constrained because of the project-based short-term funding options. For instance, relegating young women to service positions in the name of rehabilitation and reintegration does not amount to changing societal values and attitudes toward women as victims. This is a means to channel the socially marginalized and the “deviant,” in this case poor young women who are perceived as damaged and disfigured, into the productive machinery of the state. Mohanty urges the making visible of gender and power in such processes of global restructuring that name the particular raced and classed communities of women as they are framed, as in, in this case, “productive citizens,” and thereby routinely channeled into service industries (2003, 246–48).

Kriemild Saunders (2002) has characterized this process, whereby the victimized woman figure in the South becomes incorporated into a progress narrative, as one that rationalizes the international development apparatus’s planned management and liberation of women in the South.

Having major donors such as UNICEF and CIDA certainly made the ASF resource secure, but the guiding vision, and long-term strategies, that drove the Naripokkho-led campaign was compromised in the process. The ASF pitched itself as a service provider, and it remained limited to such work. Survivors received centralized medical, legal, and rehabilitative services like never before. However, when it comes to strategies to empower women or to systematically challenge the socially sanctioned crime of acid throwing, the organization lacked vision.

This analysis has implications for understanding local women’s groups’
relation 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 the case of Bangladesh, a complicated national and transnational web involving a diverse set of actors influenced and redefined acid violence against women. Although transnational funding was crucial to the campaign’s organizational growth, welfarist rehabilitation programs imposed imported and experimental therapy programs for survivors. In her discussion of the campaign, Bristi Chowdhury has pointed out that the dependency on international aid agencies—given the abdication of the state in providing adequate social services—is a failure of the campaign (B. Chowdhury 1997). 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. Nonetheless, Naripokkho was able to use the international and national organizations to write a new chapter in transnational feminist organizing.

Finally, the self-validating progress narrative of the ASF does not allow for women to be seen as complex subjects in agency and in struggle. Under the rhetoric of service for victimized women, the ASF’s programs 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 programs with the lived experiences of women receiving them. Rather than promoting empowerment, they entrap recipients within discourses of victimization. While one cannot disparage the assistance that survivor Promila Shabdakor acquired from the ASF in getting her life together after the acid attack, simple narratives such as “I did not want to live. ASF inspired me to look at my child and family. Please all of you pray for me to sustain” (Acid Survivors Foundation 2003) do not show the array of roles and activities that constitute Promila Shabdakor. Similar case studies are plentiful on the ASF’s Web site. When phrased in these terms, acid survivors are constructed as super beings that are inherently capable of overcoming the entire weight of their “rehabilitation” pending their ASF disbursement. It places much of the responsibility on the individual level rather than the structural level. It reinscribes her as a poor and socially marginalized woman in need of help from an organization such as the ASF, who in turn, is validated for its benevolence. This narrative creates a divide between “false overstated
images of victimized and empowered womanhood, which negate each other” (Mohanty 2003, 248). In the discourse of the ASF, acid survivors remain in a secondary space. 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 to transform women’s meaningful participation as full citizens in social, political, and economic aspects of society.

NOTES
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2. In Islamic legal context fatwa means clarification of an ambiguous point or opinion of a jurist. In recent decades impoverished women in Bangladesh have been the targets of fatwas—edicts punishing women for transgressing patriarchal code of behavior—by elite men of their communities. In addition, NGO offices and schools offering development and literacy programs for rural women have been targets. Cases include stoning and whipping of women and setting fire to NGO offices and schools. See Shehabuddin (2002).
3. Uma Narayan (1997) has demonstrated the “dowry murder” phenomenon in India as an “expedient” and not “exotic” form of violence against women wherein the fire that kills the victim also effectively destroys all evidence. Moreover, most middle-class households have handy kerosene stoves and extra cans of fuel.
4. During these years I studied the campaign activities first as a journalist, second as a consultant with UNICEF-Bangladesh, and third as an independent researcher.
5. Although a burns center at GK did not eventually materialize, following Naripokkho’s workshop on acid violence the government of Bangladesh undertook a project to build a fifty-bed burns center on the premises of the state-sponsored Dhaka Medical College Hospital.
6. See works cited for full references.
7. 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.
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