

Fate Worse than Death

Acid Attacks on Women as a Weapon of Revenge in Bangladesh

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Four-year-old Isha from Nowga district lies in her hospital bed at Dhaka Medical College Hospital's burns unit. Her chest and back have been badly burnt in an acid attack. She opens her eyes on hearing voices but then drifts off. Her family was involved in a property dispute with other relatives. Two of the three accused have been arrested but not the third, and it's going to be years before the trial is completed in the slow moving and apathetic courts. Isha will need at least four operations before she can resume life with at least the semblance of normalcy.

Promila's case is even more heart-rending. She was the victim of an acid attack by her own husband in Sylhet. Provoked by her objection to his affair with another woman, in a fit of anger he threw acid on her despite the fact that she was nine months pregnant. Now, as she sits dazed on her hospital bed in the burns unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the doctor points out that she has lost all the skin on her chest and forehead and her breasts have been injured. She will need at least two or three operations and even then she may be disfigured for life. What's worse is that she now has to fend not only for herself, but also her two-week-old baby girl, christened Durga by the hospital staff because she was born during the Durga Puja festival. Her husband, meanwhile, is absconding.

Fozilatim Nessa recalls the nightmare of the acid attack on her on April 6, 1999. Her offence was to reject the amorous advances of a young boy in her village of Dadghar in Comilla district. Now working at the referral services unit of the Acid Survivors Foundation, she recalls the two operations on her eyes and mouth at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Though she carries the indelible scars of the acid attack, plastic surgery, she says, is not her priority. Her main concern now is to finish her HSC exams, which were disrupted by the attack.

Bangladesh is rapidly earning the dubious distinction of having the largest number of acid attacks in the world. Though it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics as these attacks occur mostly in rural

communities that are relatively isolated, there is evidence to suggest that there is an increase in the number of acid attacks. The Acid Survivors Foundation provides assistance to the survivors of acid attacks in their treatment, rehabilitation and re-absorption into society and works to prevent further attacks. According to the foundation, in 1996 alone, 47 cases were reported, in 1997 there were 130 cases and in 1998 there were over 200 reported cases. In 2000 there were 229 cases of acid attacks, while up to September in the year 2001 there were already 235 such incidents reported.

"Acid attacks are living death," says human rights activist Sigma Huda, Secretary General and co-founder of the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR). "Women carry the scars for life. They only have to observe the terror in other people's eyes to know that they are different. There are people who don't look at them as persons and that horror can't be removed."

Just as acid burns holes in cloth, when thrown on a woman, it literally eats away at the skin and underlying tissues in a matter of seconds, and if not washed off immediately the woman's bones often get exposed. The weapon of



choice is sulphuric acid, which can be bought as cheaply as Taka 20 for a glass. NGO representatives think that if the government controls the retail sale of acid, the horrific phenomenon of acid attacks can be minimised. "Acid is cheap and widely available which has made it one of the easiest weapons of revenge. Primarily, if we can control the retail sale of acid, we may see the number of acid attacks go down drastically." Says Nasreen Haq, Senior Policy Adviser at Helen Keller International and a member of Naripokkho. Naripokkho, an NGO which began work in 1995, has succeeded in bringing national and international attention to the issue of acid attacks.

There are serious underlying social issues as well that will need to be addressed along with the prime issue. For instance, social conditioning plays a big role in the perpetration of such crimes. "The attitude towards women is one of condescension. If a woman is hurt she has few chances of getting married. Most families think there is a social stigma attached to having an unmarried woman in their house," says Sigma Huda. John Morrison, the executive director of the Acid Survivors Foundation, adds: "Acid throwing reflects the deterioration of the law and order situation where potential attackers are not afraid that they will be caught and punished."

In an attempt to curb acid throwing and other forms of violence against women, the Bangladesh government had enacted the Women and Child Repression Control Act, 1995, which legislated death penalty as the maximum punishment for perpetrators of acid attacks. This law, however, was ineffective in reducing the incidence of attacks. In the year 2000 therefore, the

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government passed the Suppression of Violence Against Women and Children Act, 2000. However, lawyers say that, this law too has many loopholes. For example, there is no provision in the Act against the sale of corrosive materials without a valid license. So far ten death sentences have been awarded but they are still awaiting confirmation from the High Court. The slow moving legal machinery and the general apathy toward the suffering of the victims make it worse. Few women seek help from the law because of their fear of the perpetrators and police corruption.

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started a hospital at Savar with 15 beds for reconstructive surgery (this hospital gets surgeons from abroad to train and work with local surgeons). There are other hospitals that try to treat burns victims. However, they lack specialised facilities necessary for treating serious burns.

"Unless all the district hospitals have independent burns units, it is difficult to cope with the situation," says Dr. S.L Sen, one of the pioneers of plastic surgery in Bangladesh, who will oversee a new 50 bed burns unit which will be operational by the end of June 2002. The unit will recruit plastic surgeons from UK, Italy, India and Japan who will train local surgeons. The long-term objective is to open burn units in different medical colleges all over Bangladesh.

NGOs have made consistent efforts to help the victims of acid attacks through counselling, rehabilitation, legal aid, and medical care. Among the NGOs working in the field are Naripokkho, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR), Ain-o-Sailish Kendra, Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha and the Acid Survivors Foundation. There are also NGOs such as BRAC and others involved in helping acid victims by facilitating the speedy reporting of acid attacks to the Acid Survivors Foundation and providing first aid. They also provide various means of rehabilitation, including income-generating activities like poultry farming, raising livestock, and help purchase rickshaw, vans and shops at subsidised rates. □

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