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Body of the other: Constructing gender identity in anti-acid violence campaign materials in Bangladesh

Keywords

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Abstract

This article examines representations of the female and male bodies in the Acid Survivors Foundation's (ASF) campaign materials and the assumptions of femininity, masculinity, violence and vulnerability underpinning these representations, in relation to the issue campaign strategies. It finds that women survivors are represented in ASF's campaign materials as victimized, discriminated and vulnerable in every aspect of their life. Women survivors' bodies are represented as 'defaced', helpless mothers and 'marked' women. Thus women's identity is constructed in the framework of victimhood and disfigurement, helplessness and motherhood, further normalizing female victimization. Active women involved in life struggle and exercising agency are also represented, but not in the posters – the most public campaign material. In contrast, men are presented as actors – be it as perpetrators of violence, as law-enforcement agents or as activists against violence. Thereby,

women are mainly represented as objects of violence, and only secondarily as agents, while men are portrayed as subjects – be it violent or protective. ASF’s materials show how painfully women are affected by acid throwing. However, lack of gender sensitivity reinforces dominant gender stereotypes, undermining feminist transformative politics and reinforcing patriarchal focus on the body of the women as the body of the disfigured, victimized Other.

1. Introduction

This article provides an analysis of the gender representations and assumptions underlying in Acid Survivors Foundation’s campaign materials against acid violence and hence explores how the female and male bodies are represented in the campaign materials. It also attempts to explore the assumptions of femininity, masculinity, violence and vulnerability underpinning these representations and thereby relates these issues with campaign strategies. This research article is based on primary data which consists of ASF’s printed advocacy and campaign materials: six posters, two leaflets, two stickers, one brochure, eight issues of *Voice*,¹ and an information kit with folder. The material contains textual and visual messages. In addition, seven in-depth interviews were conducted to get the insights of different issues relevant for acid violence and its representations in ASF’s campaign materials.

After gathering materials, and through repeated readings, I developed several charts tracing the representations. Through the careful reading of the texts and photos I explored their underlying meanings, paradoxes, assumptions and contradictions. I approached the text as an open system that can be read in different ways. According to Stuart Hall there are three ways: (1) dominant reading, which agrees with the intended meaning of the text; (2) negotiated reading, which is a mixture of intended meaning and the meaning derived by the individual reader; and (3) oppositional reading, which is the opposite of the intended meaning (Hall in Ramamurthy 1996: 211–12). Therefore, my reading and analysis of the gender representations and assumptions of ASF’s campaign materials may differ with someone else’s reading and analysis.

The texts and the images can be framed² in binary gendered oppositions such as activity/passivity, subject/object, victim/perpetrator. However, I attempted to go beyond binaries to explore the multiple meanings in the representations. I did not analyse all the images – be they textual or visual – as most of them are printed several times, and fall within the same frame. Rather, I analysed derived frames following Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995). Moreover, the analysis is complemented by secondary literature, and data and information gathered from interviews and informal discussion. I adopted critical analytical approach and analysed the representations from both macro and micro perspectives.

1. Voice is the quarterly newsletter of ASF and supplied a part of the materials for this analysis.
2. Framing is to ‘distinguish some aspects of a situation rather than others’ (Hajer in Gasper and Apthorpe 1996: 8). Gasper perceives framing in policy research and argument framing as ‘matters of inclusion, exclusion and attention ...’ (Gasper 1996: 47).

While researching I was engulfed by the dilemma as to whether it is ethical to publish distorted pictures of the survivors in the campaign materials. I was also very curious to know whether permission is sought by the ASF from the survivors for publishing these pictures. However, familiarizing myself with the wider perspective of campaigning I located myself as opponent to publishing distorted pictures and thus I took the standpoint of those who see these pictures as detrimental to feminist politics and expressive of women's double victimization. Publishing these pictures does not seem to me as affirmative but rather as a reinforcement of dominant gender ideologies and stereotypes.

Campaigning has a vital role for change and development in society. Validity for campaigning against violence against women in a gender insensitive society is, in my view, beyond question. Campaigning is used for disseminating information for awareness building, lobbying for affirmative action and building civil society coalition around the issue in order to establish justice, change and transformation. Awareness building through an advocacy campaign is more important wherein a legal safeguard is absent or if there is a lack of positive effect due to the prevalence and practice of traditionally inherited patriarchal values, notions and norms. Patriarchal attitudes towards women, structural gender inequality, and the dominant notion of masculinity and femininity perpetuate gender discrimination and violence against women. For that, the underlying assumptions and perceptions of a particular society need to be addressed simultaneously with the initiative of taking affirmative actions. Some immediate positive results can be achieved for the target group through development programmes, but the long-term comprehensive change can only be achieved if gender relations and power dynamics can be addressed properly in the campaign. However, to achieve the intended goals, advocacy strategies have to be designed carefully. If not, these might question the credibility and accountability of the organization on one hand, and become potentially detrimental for the objectives on the other. As ASF is the only coordinating NGO working for acid survivors, it is very relevant to research its advocacy activities and see whether these are built for long-term societal change in the line of gender justice.

Campaigning has a significant role in ideological transmission and construction of identities as well. Campaigning itself is a value-driven process. Information, knowledge and education carried out through campaigning materials constitute a certain value-added image and world view; the way women survivors are presented in the campaign materials constructs women's identity in the society. But the materials may be developed to reflect the way the dominant society perceives men and women, or the way the advocates like to portray them. Campaigning aims to shape opinion and moulds societal notion in favour of certain ideological standpoints. Thus, campaigning against acid violence against women is embedded in certain ideological apparatus as well. Through study of campaign materials and ASF's perceptions of female and male body, the organization's political stand on gender justice could be explored.

2. Gender identity and the body

Gender, as an analytical tool, has simultaneously shifted its meaning from the original biological denotation of the differential bodily identity of human beings to the structural social relations among individuals in general, and between men and women in particular (Connell 2002a: 7–11). It refers to the structural relations based on what the modes of interaction, positions in society and identities are constituted. Gender consists of arrangements and processes that bring differences into bodies in articulating everyday social practices. Gender identities and relations are social and constantly remain in the process of construction (Connell 2002b: 76–84). Therefore, the gender identities of men and women and the traits of masculinity and femininity are shaped through the socialization process. This theory implies that ‘one is not born’ a woman or a man with masculine and feminine characteristics, but rather one becomes a gendered being (Beauvoir 1949: 281) through personality-building paths engrained within institutions and social networks, i.e., state, community, market, family, schooling, peer group etc. Through the institutionalization of gender hierarchies, masculinities overrule femininities.

Masculinity has been the focus of study from different perspectives. Especially relevant here is essentialism, which contrasts masculinity as active with femininity as passive, and semiotic approaches, which go beyond the personal to ‘define masculinity through a system of symbolic difference in which masculine and feminine places are contrasted’ (Connell 1995: 68–70). Connell also talks about multiple masculinities and sees that, in a certain situation, one type of masculinity becomes hegemonic through subordinating and marginalizing others. However, he notes ‘Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type ... it is rather the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable’ (Connell 1995: 76).

Sexual politics categorizes gender based on the body where men are seen as ‘Self/Subject’ and women as ‘Other/Object’ (Conboy et al. 1997: 2). The masculine ‘Self’ is seen as transcending the body, while the feminine ‘Other’ is measured through the lens of the body: appearance, reproductive nature, size, shape and so forth, thereby, trapped in bodily limitations. Other’s body is seen as a cultural text or a statement where symbolic meanings are inscribed and communicated, thus different femininities are constructed. However these representational identities are always in tension with women’s lived bodily experience (Conboy et al. 1997: 2).

Geetha (1998) explores how masculinity and femininity intersect with bodily love and hurt and how the language of love is translated into a language of terror in the context of women – battering in family life in India. She observes that through a complex set of activities, men’s suspicion and sexual love, possession and desire, authority and affection make women’s bodies more vulnerable and mark the body as ‘a topos on which patriarchal structures may map their vicious logic of domination’ (Geetha 1998: 315).

The dichotomous understanding of gender has become blurred by multiple orientations of masculinity and femininity; hence the identity of manhood and womanhood, as specific gender identity is no longer fixed (Connell 2002b). Masculinities and femininities are seen as cross-cutting issues intersecting with the sexual identity of men and women, caste, class, ethnicity, age, or social positions such as (Sinha 1995) colonizer and colonized. These intersections are both symbolic and institutional and have a nuanced role at an abstract level in different dimensions of human interactions. Connell further observes 'Gender ... centres on the reproductive arena and the set of practices ... that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social process' (Connell 2002a: 10). On the other hand, Scott (1986) sees gender as a social organization of sexual difference; attributed to a sexed body. She sees gender operating on a different level of society: from the level of subjective identity, to institutions and organizations, ideology and doctrine, and symbolic meaning. For her, our world views and meanings of gender are constructed not only through knowledge about the body but also within broader discursive practices.

Therefore, the body has become a site of contestation, theorized in different ways. The notion of the body as a biological entity has been rejected by feminist literature, which approaches the body as spatial/social phenomenon and a site of control. Davis observes 'The female body in all its materiality was regarded as the primary object through which masculinist power operated' (Davis 1997: 10). The body embodies different knowledge, subjectivities and sexuality. Therefore, feminists perceive body as 'of central importance for understanding women's embodied experiences and practices and cultural and historical construction of female body in the various context of social life' (Davis 1997: 7). While medical and legal discourses see the female body as sick and inferior, observe the association of femininity combined with maternity and monstrosity, Bordo (1997) explores how women's bodies have become a cultural canvas and a site of control. Douglas argues that 'the body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body' (Douglas in Bordo 1997: 90).

Foucault (1977) talks about the 'docile body', which is made through the regulation of different disciplinary agents and norms of cultural life. He perceives the body as 'a direct locus of social control' (in Bordo 1997: 91, McNay 1992), subject to normalization and discipline in different trajectories in the line of ruling feminine ideologies. However, going beyond the ideology Bordo mentions '...through the organization and regulation of time, space, and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity' (Bordo 1997: 91). For Bordo, the practical body is not necessarily a biological entity rather what Foucault (1977) termed a 'cultural/useful body' vis-à-vis 'intelligible body'.

The intelligible body includes our scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic representations of body – our cultural *conceptions* of the body, norms of beauty, models of health and so forth. But

the same representations may also be seen as forming a set of *practical* rules and regulations through which the living body is ‘trained, shaped, obeys, responds’, becoming, in short, a socially adapted and ‘useful body’.

(Bordo 1997: 103)

While body is seen to be marked by gender, embodiment of (dis)ability produces a ‘disable body’ as opposed to ‘able body’ that is also expressive of ‘intelligible body’ on one hand and needs to be translated into ‘useful body’ on the other (Shildrick and Price 1999; Wendell 1999). In this work, I will take as my starting point Bordo’s ‘intelligible body’ – the body understood through cultural conceptions of beauty and health as well as the practices and rules and regulation which the body is trained to obey and is punished for disobeying – and relate it to acid violence as a bodily practice of punishment that results in disfigurement, disability and the destruction of health. Because of dominant assumptions of femininity and masculinity and gender hierarchies, the female body is culturally subjected to the norms of beauty, and thus also the acts of violence against women target the body as a site and symbol of beauty. Thus, the women’s face is most often targeted in the acid attacks, and, not surprisingly, becomes a focus of representations in the campaign materials.

3. Representations

‘Representation³ is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things’ (Hall 1997a: 15). In other words, Hall is interested in representation as a practice through which meanings are produced and argues that media representations have ideological effects in society (Hall 1997b). Following Hall, this research will approach representations of gender in ASF’s printed materials as constitutive of different types of meanings, knowledge and identities.

Motherhood remains an important focus of gendered symbolic meaning, as my analysis of ASF’s materials will also show. It is often central to representations of women, especially in the resistance and nation-building discourses. This is evident in South Asian films, such as *Mother India* (1957), where representations of women went beyond the long-suffering mother figure and became instead a central figure, active protector of family and community (Rahman 1994: 308–9; Vasudevan 2002). In the newspaper war narratives of former Yugoslavia, Zarkov (1997) also finds that motherhood was a cultural metaphor, conveyor of ethnic self and Other.

3. Hall approaches representation from three perspectives: the reflective (refers to whether language merely reflects what is out there in reality); the intentional (refers to whether representations say what authors intend); and the constructionist (refers to whether representations construct meaning). The constructionist perspective consists of the semiotic approach which was pioneered by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the discursive approach associated with Michel Foucault. However, Hall finds while Saussure was concerned with language (its structure, signs and codes, in other words representation itself as a social fact), Foucault seems more interested in production of knowledge and power through representation what he terms ‘discourse’ (Hall 1997a: 15–50).

Representations of motherhood are also relevant in Bengali literature (Silva 2004). Referring to the play *Kabara* by Munir Chowdhury, Silva writes

A close reading of the dialogue between ‘mother’ and son highlights ... the symbolic configuration of the mother in nation building and resonates with ... persuasive influence of the Bengali mother. Within the parameters of Bengali nationalist discourse, a mother’s role is to encourage even exhort, her son to fight on her behalf, for the motherland.

(Silva 2000: 347)

In her analysis of representation of women in contemporary theatre in Bangladesh, Guhathakurata notes that

visual media is susceptible to male voyeurism and male ways of viewing the world, and given the historical domination of men in the industries which produce such images, it is not surprising that most representations of women in such media are fabricated by men to fit into entirely an andocentric world.

(Guhathakurata 1994: 283–4)

Representations of women in the discourses of history also resonate with similar trends: ‘...women were silenced, absent and invisible from the history as a result of an almost total masculine definition of the domain of history’ (Nasreen 1998: 1).

Similar things are happening in Bangladeshi newspapers. Muslem finds that ‘in most of the cases, women were passive participants or victims of events in news reports. Only in 13 per cent of the cases were women the active newsmaker’ (Muslem 1989: 151). Women’s invisibility and over-visibility in the media is the result of a process of inclusion and exclusion; marginalized in the mainstream media in relation to positive issues involving agency, women are over-presented in stereotyped roles and in advertising where women are objectified and sexualized (Ahmad 2002, Gallagher 1981, Vina 1995). In Bangladesh, rape reporting usually blames women for being raped, while the language of reporting sexualizes the crime. Furthermore, most newspapers publish photos of women victims of violent crimes, while male perpetrators remain unseen (Sarmeen and Ferdous 2001; 2002).

In this context of culturally produced meanings and practices, these representations will inform my research on the printed campaign materials of ASF and my assumptions about the female and male body underpinning the campaign strategies and representations.

4. Representations of women: Construction of femininities

In ASF's campaign materials women are represented almost exclusively as victims of acid violence. The case studies portrayed in the materials also stress that acid was thrown on women without any provocation from the victim. Their offence was that they did not surrender to patriarchal authority or the ill intentions of men. One of the ASF's employees stressed: 'As women are considered inferior and weaker than men in a patriarchal society, victimization and oppression of women is seen as normal' (interview, 23rd August 2006). However, it seems that the ASF's representations reflect this same assumption of normalization of women's oppression. The survivors are represented as victimized, discriminated and vulnerable in every aspects of their life. ASF's campaign strategies and materials indicate that men throw acid at women for a specific reason: to deface and disfigure women. In doing so, they also destroy women's livelihoods and well-being. Livelihood and well-being are related to social and cultural assumptions about facial beauty and the normalcy of the physical structure of the body. This disfigurement has a significant effect on the victim. In certain patriarchal societies and communities, the impact may be devastating. ASF's material stresses the severity of the impact: 'The attack deprives survivors of a full and secure life, rendering them legally and economically vulnerable to disability, poverty, destitution and social exclusion during the process of treatment, rehabilitation and legal recourse' (ASF 2003b: 8). Thus, ASF's material argues that women's lives are shattered; women are deprived of growth and the opportunity to flourish: they become vulnerable and subject to multiple victimizations for the rest of their life. This perception of women's vulnerability and the multiple victimizations in ASF's materials seems conceptually very close to Nussbaum's capability lens.

In relation to the capability of having the right to live, ASF shows that in most cases acid is thrown not to kill but rather to make the survivor a 'living dead' which brings more pain and shame to the survivors (ASF 2005b: Forward). Some victims die due to severe injuries while others try to commit suicide being ashamed of their misshaped face and life (*Voice 1: 5, Voice 4: 2-7*). Women's health is also seriously affected by acid violence as acid leaves a permanent burn injury, disfigurement, blindness and often deafness. 'Women's reproductive organs are also targeted by the perpetrators' (interview, 7th Sept. 2006). Moreover, women are usually traumatized, which affects their psychological and emotional health. Visible marks on face and body remind the survivors of the horrible ordeal (*Voice 4: 2-8, Voice 2: 9*).

Women's bodily integrity is also impacted upon by acid violence. Nussbaum (1999) includes free movement, opportunities for sexual satisfaction and reproductive choice as part of bodily integrity. ASF's material and the interviewed staff argue that women survivors are not accepted as normal in society. Because of the mark on their face, survivors face harassment on the street, restricting their free movement (interview, 7th Sept. 2006). Acid victims also face problems getting married, and marriage is the only legal way of having a sexual relationship in Bangladesh (ASF 2003b: 8). And as marriage is hampered so is reproductive choice.

ASF's representations follow senses, imagination and thoughts as capabilities described by Nussbaum. It is noticed from the ASF materials that an acid attack disorient and disconnect the assaulted women from the mainstream society. Due to social stigma, young girls and women quit education and public spaces (ASF 2005b: 15), which hampers their creativity and enjoyment of their senses. Nussbaum also notes that 'The threat of bodily violence is a way in which women have for centuries been silenced, prevented from using thought and imagination to stake out a place in the world' (Nussbaum 2005: 172).

Nussbaum defines emotion as the capability to love, care and grieve. ASF's material indicates that this emotional capability of women is damaged by the acid attack. Facially disfigured women are rejected in Bangladesh. Therefore, survivors are hardly loved and cared for in the society in an emotional sense; their burnt, disfigured faces and bodies are seen as 'unlovable' and not worthy of care (ASF 2005d: 1). ASF does not provide data on how many women are abandoned, stigmatized or isolated due to acid attack. However, it argues that, in most cases, survivors are not well accepted by their family and community (ASF 2005b: 3). Moreover, serious disfigurement left unmarried women unable to find a husband and 'the consequences are harsh in a society where social acceptance comes only within marriage and motherhood' (ASF 2005b: 15).

ASF's materials show that women's emotional lives and attachment are also damaged by violence, especially if attacked by a close relative or a husband. Their affiliation with other people – making friends, professional affiliations (if they work) – is changed by experience(s) of violence (ASF 2005d: 1). Married women face difficulty in becoming a full actor in their community and the wider society (ASF 2003b: 8). They are sometimes treated as if the attack is their fault; they face humiliation and discrimination in many aspects of life. ASF's executive director Munira Rahman mentions that 'The perpetrators are in effect aiming to deprive the victims of all the joys we take for granted' (ASF 2005b: Forward). For this pervasive effect, survivors' capability to exercise practical reasoning is also hampered (interview, 7th Sept. 2006).

Nussbaum mentions control over one's own environment as capability: '... violence and the threat of violence greatly influence a woman's ability to participate in politics, to seek employment and to enjoy a rewarding work life and to control land and movable property ...' (Nussbaum 2005: 173). ASF's material reflects on the ability of women to engage with their surroundings. Survivor women face problems in participating in sociocultural and political process and activities. And sometimes, they cannot go back to their families and communities because the perpetrator is still free (interview).

While it is impossible to overstate the severity of acid violence and its multiple consequences on the lives of its victims, the representation of the consequences of violence in ASF's posters (and much of the other materials) seems to be not only focused on the loss of different capabilities and chances in life, but to define women's entire lives through incapacitation, vulnerability and victimization. On the one hand, ASF started working to stop acid violence applying a holistic approach to address the

problem – looking at every aspect of victims’ lives. On the other hand, it is precisely this holistic approach (once placed in the light of victimization) that has created an image of almost total debilitation of women. However, as the analysis will show, different printed materials offer different pictures. The posters create a sense that women are only and always victims. Their agency is rarely present and this ultimately reinforces the dominant gender ideology of women as passive victims and vulnerable in society. Other material (the information kit, *Voice*) offers both the image of total victimization and vulnerability, *and* life struggle and agency.

Perceiving women only in the light of a capability framework – as ASF seems to do, focused on the physical body as the only source of well-being – misses women’s subjective identities, which, while embodied, cannot be reduced to the physical body. Postmodern feminism emphasizes exploration of subjectivities and symbolic meaning in the body, continuously re-created through discursive practices which may provide a fuller understanding of the representation of women acid survivors and construction of femininities.

4.1 De-faced, helpless motherhood

Motherhood seems to be a major framework through which women survivors are presented. Most of the posters show women with small children in their laps, or next to them (fig. 8). The posters in figures 2 and 3 carry the slogan ‘COMBAT ACID – SAVE WOMEN’ and portray a survivor lying with her newborn baby, also injured by acid. Her forehead, face and hand are severely burnt. The baby is crying. The mother is placed in such a way that the wounds on her upper body are clearly visible. The texture of her cheek, nose, forehead and eyes are rough and misshaped. Her eyelids have been burned out and her eyesight is completely destroyed. She cannot see her baby, though the baby is still under her protection, lying by her mother’s chest, wrapped by the mother’s injured hand. The black and white tonal value easily differentiates between her body and burnt face, as if to say: there is a beautiful mother who suddenly becomes unlovable, defaced, who can no longer be seen as a mother. A ‘real’ mother’s face is thus imagined as calm and soothing. Due to acid burning an unreal mother appears, whose face is no longer mother-like.

This same photograph is reproduced in three out of six posters. With a bigger size edition it is super-imposed onto the upper part of a poster (figure 4), which carries the slogan ‘POUR WATER – SAVE LIFE’. The same size image is published in the poster in figure 2, containing the slogan ‘DON’T LET EVEN A SINGLE MORE FACE TO BE BURNT’. Embodying the helpless and victim motherhood, these representations construct the identity of the acid survivors as ‘defaced’ mother.

In the posters motherhood is also presented as helpless. In the poster in figure 1 (containing the slogan ‘STOP ACID VIOLENCE – YOU CAN HELP!’) the mother is lying on her arms, while her son is placing his hand on her head with a gentle touch as if giving her, the helpless mother, hope and care.

By setting the mother in the foreground, against a white background, using soft light, a sense of purity is created. The son's back, also burnt, faces the viewer, and appears as protective shield between the mother and the viewer. Here the mother, who is comforted by her son, represents a reversal of the dominant role of motherhood and thus portrays the mother as more helpless than she should be. Thus, ASF's posters reduce the motherhood of the survivor to a motherhood of helplessness. ASF's leaflet, brochure and information kit also follow the same line of representation.

4.2 Marked womanhood

Not all women on the posters and other materials are mothers depicted with small children. Some appear simply as women, with no symbols of motherhood around them. But all of them are represented as 'marked women' – with the visible burns and injuries, mostly on their faces. ASF's material stresses that targeting the face is deliberate – the attack is supposed to leave a mark for everybody to see, so that the community knows the woman was punished for disobedience, non-feminine, uncontrollable behaviour. The mark represents the symbol of a 'problematic character'. It is understood that acid is thrown not to kill, but rather to make the survivor bound to live the rest of her life with the mark on her body. Face is perceived as the primary site for the marking, as it is clearly visible.

The poster in figure 5, produced for International Women's Day 2005, contains the slogan 'WE MEN PLEDGE TODAY – NO MORE ACID ATTACKS' and carries a photo of a woman survivor whose face is horribly marked by the burn, against the white background. She is looking upright and exhausted, aggrieved with her condition. With bob-cut tidy hair, she is standing in the foreground as if she does not care and at the same time is extremely disturbed. The poster in figure 6 was published for International Women's Day 2006. Nine individual pictures, including one female survivor, are arranged together in the middle. All of the individuals, except the survivor, wear a cape, a T-shirt or a white ribbon. It is as if the survivor is carrying the message of their pledge to stop acid violence. The same photo was also published in a leaflet for the men's gathering on International Women's Day 2006 and for a sticker titled 'We Alert Men'. Another photo (on the back page of *Voice 2*) shows a survivor speaking to an assembly of men. ASF believes strongly that men's initiative is required to stop the violence. Thus, the photos of survivors speaking to men are representations of a living narrative of their horrible experiences.

ASF also published before-and-after photos. On the cover page of the only brochure of ASF, with the title 'My name is Rubina', we see a photo of Rubina before the violence: a beautiful feminine face, clear of skin, with smooth cheek and nose and affectionate eyes. And then, all a sudden, all of her beauty was taken away by acid. With the active help of her husband, her husband's

brother-in-law poured acid on her face, making her features totally unrecognizable. In the 'after' picture, her face looks as if covered with a ghostly mask. Three photos of Rubina's face after the violence, and one before, indicate the extent of the damage, the severity of the violence. All of these photos indicate that once marked, the woman is marked forever.

4.3 Active and forward-looking women

While 'defaced mother' and 'marked woman' are the dominant ASF's representations, ASF's material also shows survivor women as active winners in their life struggles, re-emerging from total despair through psychological strength and determination. Survivors also appeared on one poster as demonstrators, activists against acid violence. The poster in figure 1 (with the slogan 'STOP ACID VIOLENCE – YOU CAN HELP!') appeals to people to come forward to stop acid violence and inspires them to stand by the survivors. It carries a photo of survivors in the procession holding torches, sticks and festoons. The slogan written in one festoon carried by a survivor reads 'WE HAVE HANDS – WE WILL MAKE THEM TOOLS'. The closed fist of a survivor is placed just over the slogan as a symbol of power. On this photo, survivors are vibrant and they are full of determination to go forward with their mission. Republishing this photo in other campaign materials does construct a space for challenging the violence and engages survivors in transformative politics, though not adequately enough to challenge the overwhelming representations of survivors as victims on the other posters.

The most prominent portraits of survivors as actively engaged in life appear in *Voice*. In a programme organized by ASF on 28 April 2005, in honour of survivors, a survivor named Asma proclaims: 'From the doors of despair I stand at the door of success' (*Voice* 5 & 6). She looks happy and cheerful, shaking hands with the chief guest while an award for her struggle was handed over to her. Her smiling face is an indication of her success and satisfaction, offering an inspiration for other women. Her posture indicates determination and confidence, giving a message that she is not defeated. The *Voice* quotes her:

After the attack, I was physically disabled and worked extremely hard to overcome this. I work and interact respectfully with my family and society. This March I am going to Germany, on behalf of ASF, to participate in a program, which I am very happy to do...I would like to ask my attacker whether he has achieved anything by attacking me. Can he talk to his parents holding his head high? Now you are in prison, unable to enjoy life, while after a lot of struggle, I have been given new opportunities and am enjoying myself.

(*Voice* 5 & 6: 9)

In another portrait we see Shamima, a young woman attacked by her husband (*Voice* 8: 10). She became a role model for other survivors as she defeated acid burning by her perseverance, skill and achievement. She enrolled in training in how to sew, along with education; later, she organized 43 women and established a women's welfare organization where handicapped women are given training on different crafts. 'Acid victim Shamima's self confidence has shown the path of life to many disabled women' (*Voice* 8: 10). A group photo with Shamima and her organization has also been published. She is placed centrally to appear as the dominant subject. Her work is displayed in the picture, indicating the level of her craftsmanship. She is a trainer, which means that even being burnt she can still teach the others. Her poem is also published: 'When I wanted to stand straight holding all power of the earth; suddenly my rebellious mind becomes quiet; half of my soul searches for peace; my burnt soul teaches me to taste the new life' (*Voice* 8: 10). Here Shamima is portrayed as entrepreneurial, active and creative as opposed to passive, helpless and a victim.

Peyara Begum, a women survivor, is also presented as a success story in the *Voice* (*Voice*, 4: 11). Attacked by her house's tutor and initially shattered by the violence, Peyara proved to be self-sufficient through her own labour and with assistance from ASF. She took training in performing arts and now performs in the ASF's theatre, and organizes informal meeting with neighbours to discuss women rights issues. Because of her versatile qualities she is now well known in her locality and respected by others. In a series of photographs she is seen receiving an award, speaking to people, laughing with neighbours, discussing women issues, and speaking to other participants in the training workshop. These photos portray her as a successful survivor who transcended the pain of acid burning and gradually became a role model for other disadvantaged women.

4.4 Women survivors' bodies as commodity?

Representation of distorted women survivors' photos in the campaign materials is a contested issue. When I asked whether publishing disfigured female bodies in material is a way of commodifying women survivors' bodies in the market of fund-raising, one interviewee notes 'Yes'. In different media representations women's bodies are used and commodified purposively: in advertising, for example, women's sexuality is displayed and women are presented as sex objects, which helps entrepreneurs to get a good return on their investment (Ahmad 2002, Gallagher 1981, Wells 1996). Bangladeshi mainstream films also show similar trends (Sultana 2002). In the case of disaster and violence, the violated body is often portrayed in order to attract sympathy from potential donors. The dignity of the body is rarely considered.

The more photos of helpless and misshaped women are shown the more there is a chance of funds to flow into the particular institution. Dominant gender narratives of society teach

campaigners that people – and donors – are probably more sympathetic to helpless women than to helpless men.

(5th September, 2006)

Therefore, women survivors' bodies are thought to be more instrumental for fund circulation. However, one ASF official says:

We don't use women survivors' pictures for fund generation. Rather we use them to show the serious consequences and severity of acid attack on women's bodies and capabilities. By doing so, we want to increase awareness among the masses against acid violence.

(17th August, 2006)

'If this is the case,' I asked, 'why don't you publish men survivors' photos?' The answer was: 'We will do in future'. However, another says that the severity of violence is only one side of the coin: funds are coming in the name of the defaced women, ultimately commodifying women's bodies. One interviewee insisted that if male survivor photos are published the foreign fund generation might not retain the same flow. This critique may sound cynical as funds are collected for welfare and rehabilitation of the survivors, and in 2005 ASF's Executive Director was honoured with the 4th Human Rights Award from Amnesty International Germany for her contribution. Nevertheless, NGO accountability is a contested field both in local and global circles (Edwards and Hulme 1996b, Ebrahim 2003, Hilhorst 2003, Kamat 2004). There is an understanding that the wider agenda of NGO politics is being co-opted by the funding institutions emphasizing non-transformative politics (Kamat 2004). Hilhorst mentions that NGOs are 'extensions of depoliticized neo-liberal development discourse' (Hilhorst 2003: 7).

Furthermore, not everybody involved in the struggle against acid violence agrees with the use of the photos of victims. *Prothom Alo*, a highly circulated Bengali daily newspaper, is campaigning on the same issue and collecting funds from local sources using a slogan, a logo and a symbolic sketch in the campaign material, instead of photos of disfigured faces. This strategy seems to uphold the dignity of the survivors better than the display of the misshaped bodies. Realizing the severity of acid violence, this newspaper started raising awareness and engaging in rehabilitation and reintegration work forming a special fund in 2000 (*Prothom Alo*, Booklet, 2002). It has produced posters, leaflets and stickers for campaigning;⁴ it believes that publishing distorted pictures represents victimization of the survivors and invasion of privacy, as in most cases permission is not sought beforehand. It is also thought that survivors are not always in a position to act with free will.

4. During data collection I have also collected *Prothom Alo's* material for comparison with ASF, but the amount of material on both sides proved to be too much for the limited space of this article. I hope to pursue the research on those materials at a later point.

5. Representation of men: Construction of masculinities

Men are very important for the ASF's activities, and this is evident on their printed materials. ASF wants to engage men in the struggle against acid violence, and its printed material targets men (figure 9). However, the representational effects of this – and especially the posters – are rather problematic. Firstly, there seems to be an essentialist perspective of men as active, compared to an overwhelming representation of women as passive victims. Secondly, representation of men as activist may be perceived as co-opting the women's movement. Men's activity in the posters has three forms: one as perpetrators of acid violence; another as law-enforcement agents; and third as activists against acid violence – be they well-known intellectuals or ordinary men demonstrating on the streets.

5.1 Perpetrator's masculinity

Though ASF uses only one photo of a perpetrator for its posters, this photo is repeatedly used in other materials. Many different men are mentioned in ASF's printed campaign material as perpetrators of acid throwing: male youths who offer romantic advancements to girls (Leaflet: Extend Your Hand), husbands who demand a dowry from their in-laws (*Voice 4*), male neighbours or close male kin who want to have illegal sex (*Voice 4*) or relatives who want to deprive women of property rights (*Voice 3*). Furthermore, it seems that for the ASF every man could be a perpetrator. The leaflet titled 'Extend Your Hand' (ASF, 2006) states: 'my sister, your daughter could be the victim of acid violence'. Connoting women – sisters and daughters – only as victims, the ASF implies that other men – someone else's sons and brothers – are potential perpetrators. The slogan is meant to invite sympathy for the unknown, non-kin women by associating them with known women. Thus, it invites men to protect all women as kin, regardless as to whether they are kin or not. However, in doing so, the slogan implies that it is those men who are not kinsmen who are the perpetrators. While this is statistically not true – women are attacked by their kin as well – this assumption also leaves open the fact that every man is kinsman to some women. Thus, all men do remain defined as potential violators, even though the campaign invites them to protect women.

Men are also portrayed as collaborators with and instigators of acid throwing. In the brochure, Rubina, a woman survivor, explains how her husband and brother-in-law attacked her. Representations abound with stories about male perpetrators, though research shows that women also throw acid sometimes (Wesson 2002: 96). ASF's materials do not reflect on any women perpetrators. Furthermore, acid throwing itself is perceived as masculine as it is defined as caused by the male attitude towards women (ASF 2003b: v): it is defined as provoked by the power structure, which is masculine in nature and serves patriarchal interest (ASF 2005c: 15–16). In terms of power

relations, acid perpetrators are presented as superior in society compared to victims and hence their masculinity appears unchallenged. They are also politically and economically powerful; perpetrators are seen as coming from a well-off family while the victims are seen as very poor and marginalized in most cases. Moreover, the perpetrator's power is increased by political and police patrons, who guarantee their immunity and save the perpetrator in cases of trouble (ASF 2005c: 15–16). Disfiguring a girl by throwing acid is perceived as a mechanism to terrorize women and men, and hence establish the superiority of the perpetrator's own masculinity above other's masculinity (ASF 2005c: 15–16). The perpetrator's masculinity is constructed and established through the disfiguring of a woman's body.

While the ASF's analysis of gendered power relations is accurate, representation of all men as potential perpetrators is essentializing. The plea for men to take up protection of women against other men further supports patriarchal assumptions about male omnipotence and creates a distinction between the male perpetrator and the male protector. In this representation women are only a token in a relationship that is, essentially, a relationship between men. Representation further informs the audience that a 'real man' would not throw acid: rather only cowards throw acid. Thus, the perpetrator is perceived as less masculine than the protector. The acid throwing is thus analysed as an act of re-establishing, reclaiming masculinity, defined as power to control and possess, but it is represented as an act of loss of masculinity. Thus, ASF's campaign tries to undermine the dominant notion of masculinity as violent, and to deny justification to such violence. But by doing so, it still calls upon dominant masculine dichotomies – cowardice is defined in relation to man hurting a woman, precisely because the woman is seen as weaker, and in need of male protection.

Furthermore, after the crime, perpetrators are depicted fleeing and hiding to avoid policemen, whose masculinity – symbolizing state – is set against the perpetrator's masculinity. In the photographic representation – such as in figure 3 – a perpetrator is caught by the policemen and brought to trial, surrounded by police. The poster carries the slogan 'COMBAT ACID – SAVE WOMEN'. However, the photo indicates two contesting masculinities fighting each other – one fighting for the good of women, and the other against it. The perpetrator appears aggressive by his look and unruly clothes and needs four policemen to discipline him.

5.2 Rescuing masculinity

In contrast to the perpetrator, men are thus also presented as rescuers, protectors and protestors in ASF's campaign materials. Men are actually over-represented as activists for combating acid violence. Most of the campaign materials portray demonstrating men, not demonstrating women. Men are positioned as the last opportunity for preventing acid violence. The leaflet 1, published for

International Women's Day 2006, states 'only an alert man can make another man aware'. This statement connotes that creating awareness is an activity of an alert man, but not an alert woman – as if men have magic power over other men to stop violence.

The male activist opposes the masculine force of a perpetrator's masculinity. In figure 5, the poster for International Women's Day 2005, male activists in the procession look rather ashamed, aggrieved by the fact of acid violence. They are pledging and pleading: 'NO MORE ACID ATTACK: STOP ACID ATTACK – SAVE WOMEN'. These men are seen as determined to stop acid violence and save women at any cost. They show the death sign to potential perpetrators. They appear as rescuers and protectors of women. However, acid violence is still going on, and, some argue, increasing. So, is the acid thrower's masculinity stronger than the protestors' masculinity? Is the campaigner's masculinity undermined and overshadowed by the perpetrator's masculinity?

Figure 6 shows a group of intellectuals from the fields of literature, journalism, art, and culture. Almost a dozen photographed torsos – looking like a picture gallery of wise men – is placed in the middle of the poster, surrounded by a red circle indicating men's solidarity with the survivors. This same picture is produced in a leaflet and a sticker. These men represent the rescuing of masculinity too, as their intention is to create mass awareness among the men to stop acid violence. Creating different representations of male perpetrators, police and citizens through discursive practices in the campaign discourses, ASF produces multiple masculinities around the issue of gendered acid violence in Bangladesh. The perpetrators' masculinities are represented as both threatening and false/improper, the activists represent wise, conscientious, and protecting masculinities, and the state represents justice-providing and disciplining masculinity.

However, masculinities in the ASF's materials do not only stand against each other, but also against femininity. Among all the photos published in ASF's campaign materials, only one (which reappeared in different materials) portrays a procession of female survivors against acid crime. Coverage of Women's Day's activities in *Voice* overwhelmingly shows men as activists; men are speaking, announcing, gathering, rallying, while women are shown in traditional gender roles like performing, singing and lighting candles to welcome the (male) campaign heroes. The ASF's material reminds me of a folktale, with a heroine (a helpless woman crying) trapped in danger and finding no way to get out of it. Then, a hero – a man – comes to her rescue and eventually succeeds in releasing her. ASF's campaign material also essentializes such gender assumptions. ASF believes that men are not only women's oppressors they are also friends of women. While this may be so, the representation does not really show men sharing the task of changing gender inequalities with women, but rather taking over the task of saving women. The assumption behind the campaign is that the more men's positive image is highlighted, and the 'idle man' is created, the more illiterate people will take them as a role model. And by involving men this way acid violence could be combated (*Voice* 3).

Beijing plus 10⁵ also emphasized on the need to involve men in the women's movement. Feminist movements worldwide perceive that men should be included in their activities. Thus, justifiably, the ASF-engaged men have organized a men's rally every year since the first one in 2002, in collaboration with *Prothom Alo*. However, this has to be done in such a way that dominant gender assumptions are not reinforced and women's politics are not co-opted by men. ASF does not seem to have avoided this trap. Its approach poses two challenges: (1) it essentializes dominant gender hierarchies and the power of man to rescue women; (2) it transfers political agency to men and thus symbolically represents a takeover of the women's movement by men.

5.3 Whose body matters?⁶

The poster in figure 3 which carries the slogan 'COMBAT ACID – SAVE WOMEN' carries another representational element: it displays a photo of the perpetrator with the face blurred. This photo has also been used in other posters/material as well. The blurred face was published on the poster (produced to be displayed in public places), while a non-blurred face was published in the *Voice* and in the information kit (used mainly as reading material). Furthermore, there are lots of female survivors' photos in the materials – all not blurred. Thus, the use of the blurred photo raises a question: why is the perpetrator's face blurred, while the survivor's face is not. When asked, none of my interviewees from ASF could give an answer to this.

I wonder further if this representation means that men should not be shown as criminals, or in an undignified and vulnerable position. Does it indicate ASF's gendered attitude to dignity and honour? Is the blurring of the face a protection of men's identity? Is this protection there to save his honour? Is honour only for men? Do only men's bodies matter? One could argue that the blurring neutralizes the individuality of the perpetrator and draws on the assumption that all men are potential violators. This interpretation would certainly be in line with the previous analysis.

What is clear is that ASF's campaigning materials are gendered. In the posters, women are overwhelmingly represented as objects of violence, and only marginally as protestors, while men are portrayed exclusively as subjects, be it violent or protective. Statistics show that acid violence occurs against both men and women, even though the majority of the victims are women (ASF 2005a). However, the above analysis shows that acid violence has been represented in ASF's campaign materials as an exclusively female issue; its visual and textual materials abound with female victims, thus normalizing female victimhood. One ASF's official also states that:

We have not taken the issue from the gender perspective. Rather, we work on it as a human rights issue. In the beginning, women were overwhelmingly affected by acid violence,

5. Beijing Plus 10: An Ambivalent Record on Gender Justice The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. A United Nations conference on women's rights.
6. This term is also used in Witz 2000.

therefore our campaign materials concentrated on women survivors. It could be understood as an affirmative action.

(3rd & 13th August, 2006)

However, even though women are the majority of the victims, it does not mean that they are only victims, or that their subject position should only be victimhood. ASF's brochure, information kit, and *Voice* also show active, lively survivors, passionately engaged with their lives. But the posters – the campaign material of the public actions – do not.

Furthermore, causes of acid violence against women and men are not the same. Structural and cultural inequalities relating to gender hierarchies (control of sexuality or of property) affect women and men differently, making women the target of many different forms of violence, including acid violence. The photos, editorials, essays and posters argue that structural and cultural issues need to be addressed. The material shows how painfully women are affected by acid violence. However, lack of gender sensitivity in representational strategies reinforces dominant gender stereotypes and undermines feminist transformative politics. As none of the printed public campaign materials display men as survivors, they fall out of the frame of representation. Therefore, campaigning replicates the patriarchal focus on the body of the Other, as the bodies of male survivors are not made as vulnerable publically as women's bodies are. Moreover, man's body has been exempted from being seen as an undignified criminal, essentializing dignity and honour for men.

6. Conclusion

This article was concerned with representations of female and male bodies in ASF's campaign materials, and the assumptions of femininity, masculinity, violence and vulnerability underpinning these representations in relation to campaign strategies. This study finds that women survivors are represented in ASF's campaign materials as victimized, discriminated and vulnerable in every aspect of their life. Women survivors' bodies are represented as 'defaced', helpless mother and 'marked' women. Thus women's identity is constructed in the framework of victimhood and disfigurement, helplessness and motherhood, further normalizing female victimization. Active women exercising agency are also represented, but not in the posters – the most public campaign material. In contrast, men are presented as actors – be it as perpetrators of violence, law-enforcement agents, or as activists against violence. Thereby, women are mainly represented as objects of violence, and only secondarily as agents, while men are portrayed as subjects – be they violent or protective. ASF's materials show how painfully women are affected by acid throwing. However, lack of gender sensitivity reinforces dominant gender stereotypes, undermining feminist transformative politics and reinforcing patriarchal focus on the body of women as the body of the disfigured, victimized Other.

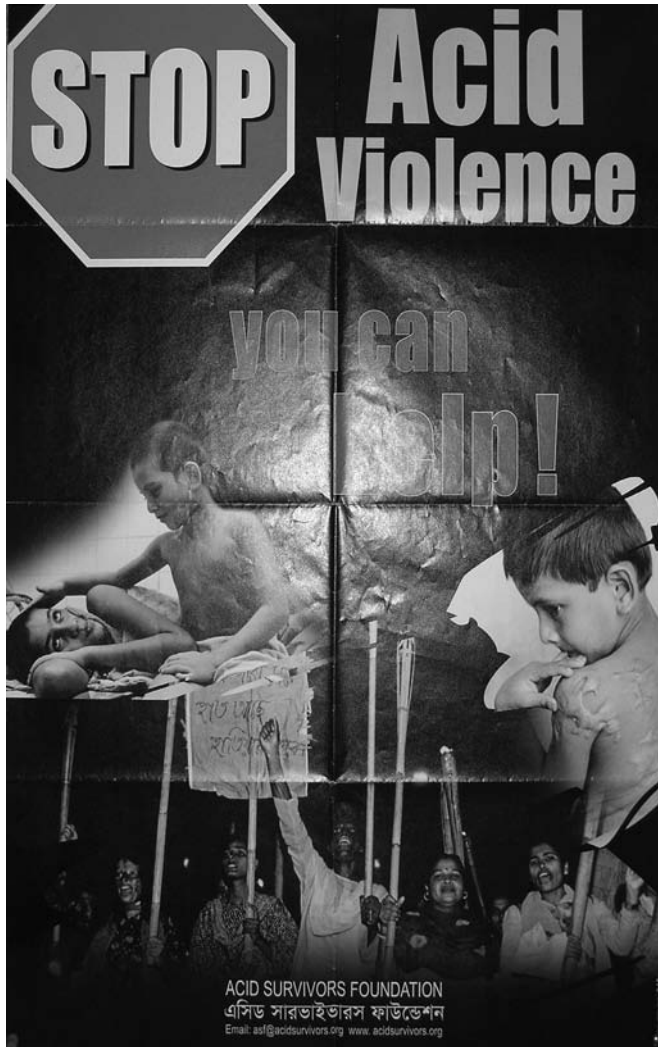
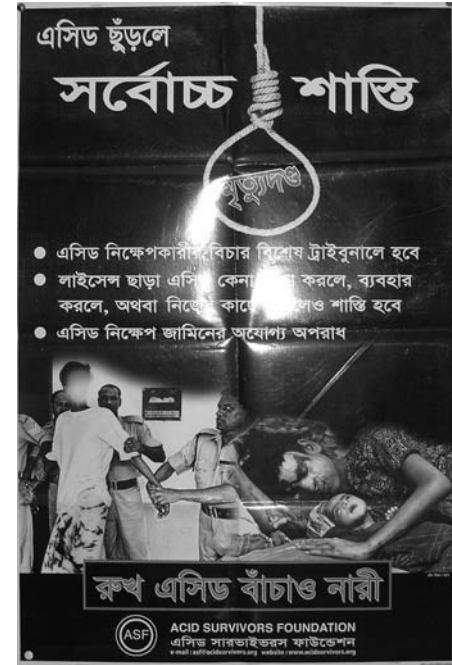
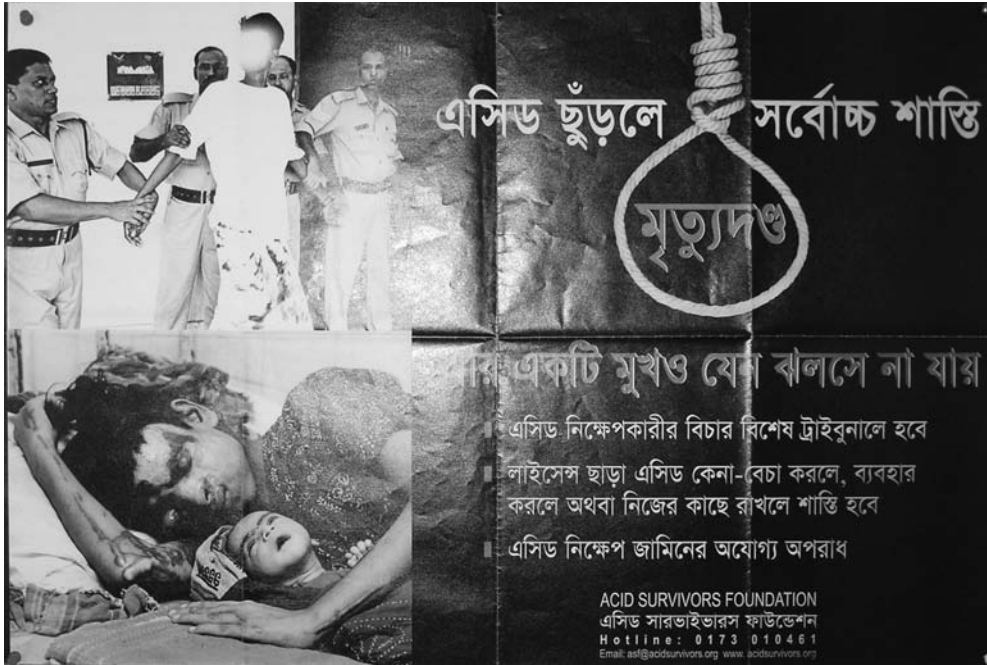


Figure 1: 'Stop Acid Violence – You can help!' An ASF poster.



Figures 2 and 3: 'Combat Acid – Save Women'. A pair of themed ASF posters showing variations of layout.

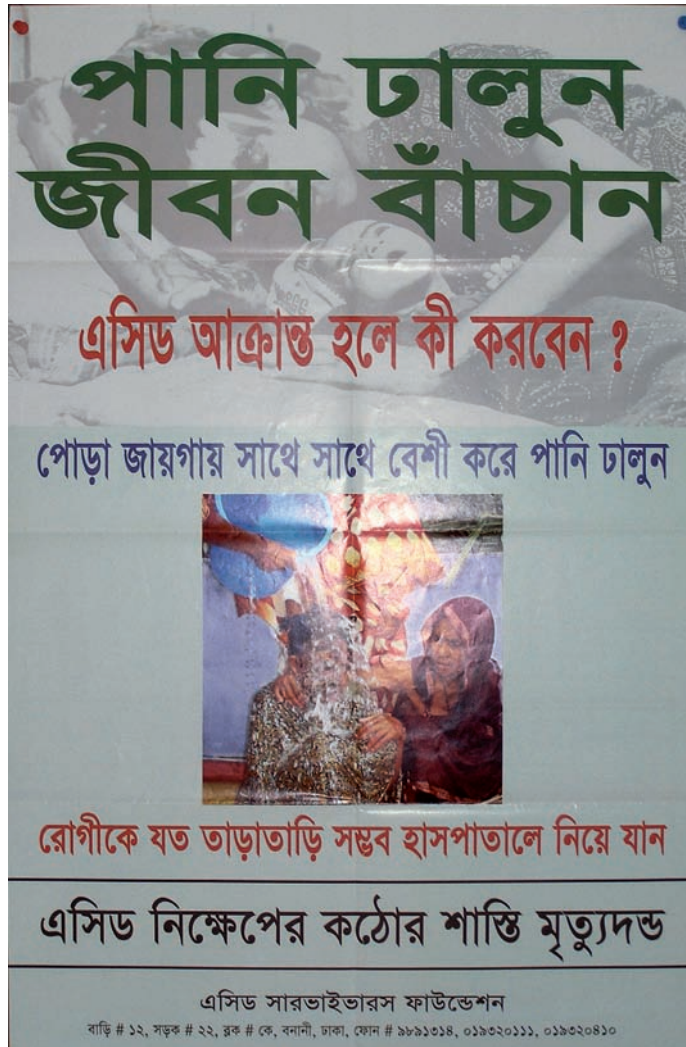


Figure 4: The motif from figures 2 and 3 is reapplied in the poster 'Pour water – Save Life'.



Figure 5: A poster for the 2005 International Women's Day: 'We men pledge today – No more acid attacks!'



Figure 6: A poster for the 2006 International Women's Day.

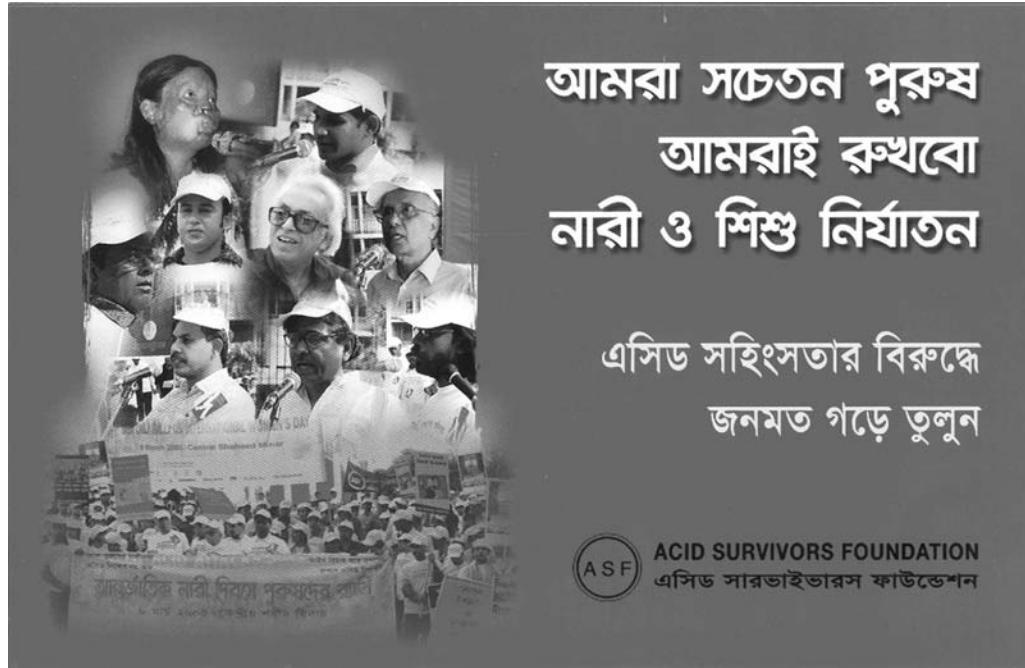


Figure 7: The motif from figure 6 is applied again for use in the 2006 International Women's Day sticker: 'We alert men!'.



এসিড নিক্ষেপের বিরুদ্ধে আমরাই গড়ে তুলতে পারি সামাজিক আন্দোলন

রেখা বা মনির মতো আর কারো জীবনে যেন না নেমে আসে এমন এসিড-অভিশাপ, জীবন থেকেও মৃতের মতো বেঁচে থাকার যন্ত্রণা। আর একটি মুখও যেন ঝলসে না যায়, আর একটি আর্ত-চিৎকারও যেন না কেঁপে ওঠে আকাশ-বাতাস। এ জন্য এসিড নিক্ষেপকারীদের বিরুদ্ধে সচেতনতা গড়ে তুলতে হবে। আর আমরাই করতে পারি অনেক কিছু। আসগর মিয়া আর লতিফরা আছে সমাজের মধ্যেই। ওদের চিহ্নিত করে সামাজিকভাবে বয়কট করতে হবে। সমাজের সকলকে বোঝাতে হবে— এসিড ছোড়া এক ভয়ানক মানবিক অপরাধ। সরকার এসিড নিক্ষেপের সর্বোচ্চ শাস্তি মৃত্যুদণ্ড বলে আইন জারি করেছে— এ কথা সবাইকে জানাতে হবে। বলতে হবে, লাইসেন্স ছাড়া এসিড ক্রয়-বিক্রয় আইনত দণ্ডনীয়। পরিবার থেকে, সমাজ থেকে উপড়ে ফেলতে হবে এই জঘন্য অপরাধকে। এই অপরাধীর স্থান নেই কোথাও— পরিবারে, সমাজে বা রাষ্ট্রে, এ কথাটা মনে রাখতে হবে। এসিড সন্ত্রাসের বিরুদ্ধে সামাজিক আন্দোলনে একে একে যোগ দিচ্ছে সবাই। জেগে উঠছে আত্ম-সচেতনতায়। আপনিও যোগ দিন মানবিক এই আন্দোলনে। আপনিও যেন সোচ্চার... বলুন, আজ থেকে একটি মুখও ঝলসে যাবে না আর।

আপনার-আমার সম্মিলিত প্রয়াস
রুখবেই রুখবে এসিড সন্ত্রাস

এসিড সারভাইভারস ফাউন্ডেশন

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Figure 8: Motherhood operates as the framework through which women survivors are presented.

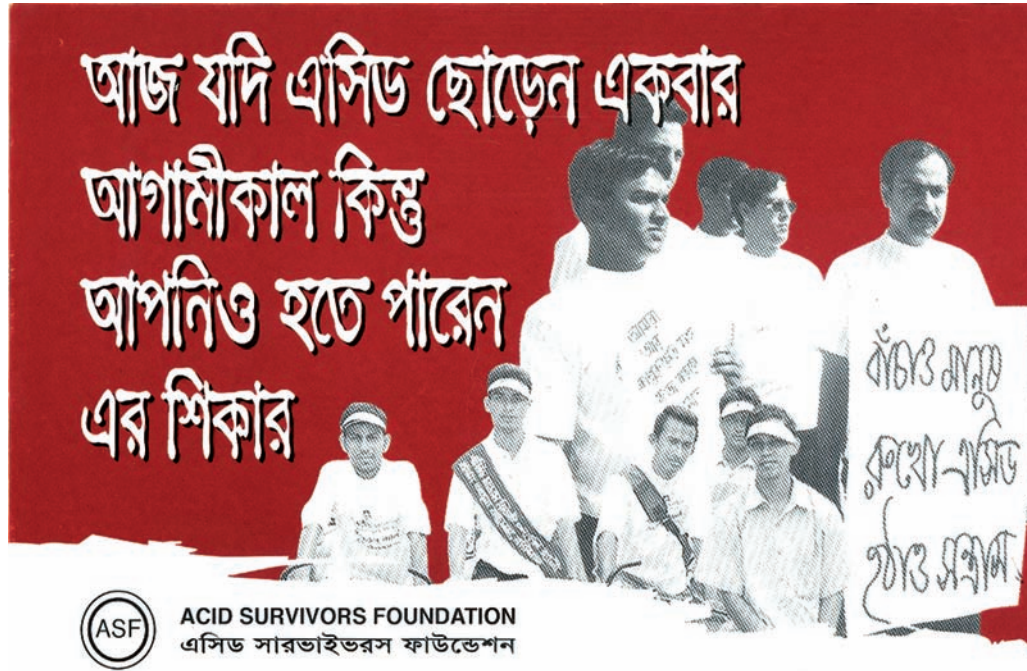


Figure 9: The ASF targets men in the struggle against acid violence.

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