

WHY HAS MONIRA BEEN NOMINATED?

Monira Rahman has been nominated for the 2011 World's Children's Prize for her courageous struggle to put a stop to acid and petrol violence in Bangladesh.

Most of those affected are girls, but women, boys and men are also attacked. The motive behind attacks on girls is often jealousy, and attacks on men often arise out of disputes over land.

Acid attacks have been common for some time, but previously the public didn't know about it, and the media didn't report it. Monira has changed all that. She founded ASF, the Acid Survivors Foundation, for all survivors of attacks using acid and petrol.

The organisation started its work in 1999. In the organisation's early years, there was more than one acid attack every day in Bangladesh.

Today, there are only half as many attacks. But the goal is for no-one – no child, no girl, no woman and no man – to be attacked with acid or petrol by the year 2015.

ASF helps survivors to live an active life, with dignity. They even offer plastic surgery, if necessary. The survivors themselves are the greatest activists against this kind of violence.



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Monira Rahman



The first time she saw a girl whose face had been destroyed by a man throwing acid, Monira Rahman was shocked. She had had no idea that men in her country, Bangladesh, did this to destroy girls' appearances for life. Often, the motive was jealousy.

The second time, Monira fainted. But since then, she and her organisation, ASF, have fought non-stop to save girls – and boys – who have been the victims of attacks using acid or petrol dousing. Monira and ASF have even managed to halve the number of acid attacks in Bangladesh.

Monira Rahman is a happy and very dynamic woman. She has always been that way.

“When I was born, my country belonged to Pakistan and was called East Pakistan,” explains Monira. “When I was six, civil war broke out. Our house was burned down, we had to flee, my father died from cholera, and we were extremely poor. But our country became

independent, and since then it has been called Bangladesh. When I was seven my mother moved to the capital, Dhaka, with us, her six children.

“My oldest brother became the head of the family. He

went into business, things went well for him and we became better off. I went to school, but I was terrified of my older brother coming home every afternoon. He used to shout and my sisters

Monira demonstrating with survivors of acid attacks and petrol dousing attacks. Thousands of men are demonstrating too.





“We have hundreds of survivors who are part of the fight against acid throwing and petrol burning attacks. They demonstrate, meet politicians, and press charges against the attackers,” says Monira.

and me. He made fun of us. We were punished for the slightest little thing. He used to beat us. I was terribly afraid of my brother. That was when I decided never to get married.”

Important teacher

In Year 7, Monira had a teacher who liked her and believed in her.

“She said I was clever. She gave me the courage to stand up for myself. She encouraged me to join debating clubs and express my opinions. She made my confidence grow. These days, when I meet all the people who have been injured by acid and petrol attacks, I try to act in the same way. I show that I like them, and try to give them confidence.”

After meeting this teacher, Monira became a student leader and demonstrated on the streets. She and her friends were attacked. Many were beaten and injured.

“I came to a realisation that we have to change society, but

that we can’t bring change through violence. The only way to find solutions is to discuss the problems together.”

During a severe famine following a cyclone that caused widespread flooding, Monira and other students cooked food for those affected. Monira saw a lot of terrible things. So once she had graduated from university, she started working as a social worker for an organisation that helped homeless women and children. At that time, women and children who lived on the street used to be arrested by police and locked up in appalling conditions.

Abused boy

“Once I went to look at an orphanage far away in a rural area. I was shown around, and I couldn’t see anything particularly wrong. Afterwards we were sitting in the office when I caught sight of a few children outside. I thought they were playing, and that they had thrown a ball through the open win-

dow, but it wasn’t a ball - it was a rolled up piece of paper. When I opened it out, it read: ‘Go to the boys’ toilet’. The door was locked, but I managed to get it open. Inside, a boy of 5 or 6 was lying on the floor. He had been tied up, he had a high fever, and one of his legs was broken. The staff had abused him and broken his leg because he had wet himself. That time, it was good to be able to intervene.”

For a long time, Monira worked with homeless girls



Even the government of Bangladesh has listened to Monira and ASF.

and women who had been locked up.

“They lived in a large, run-down, red building. They were locked up in large halls, and many of the rooms didn’t have any windows. There could be as many as a hundred people in the same room. The first day, I caught sight of a woman who was lying with her hands and feet bound. I untied the ropes. Then I was called to the manager’s office and he shouted at me. I replied that you simply can’t treat people like that. The manager didn’t say anything, but I think he agreed with me, because I didn’t get sacked.

“These girls and women lived in fear. Every night, staff took a few of them out and raped them. Some of them didn’t even know their own names or where they came from any longer. They didn’t have any papers. I started to find out who was who, and managed to trace many people’s families. One woman had been locked up





Monira jokes with Sweety, filling her with courage for the plastic surgery procedure she is about to undergo.

➔ for 21 years. I helped her to speak again, and I found her family. I watched her come back to life. It was a wonderful thing to see. And I saw her leave that big red house and go home to her family.

“During those years, I learned that you shouldn’t be afraid to tackle the most difficult situations, and that you have to find strength in yourself first before you can give strength to others.”

First acid victim

Thirteen years ago, she met two girls who had survived acid attacks.

“Men had thrown acid at

them in order to destroy their beauty for ever. I hardly knew that that sort of thing happened in my country. Nobody talked about it or wrote about it. I had only ever read one little article about an acid attack. And now a 17-year-old girl was standing in front of me, with her face totally disfigured by acid. Her whole face had melted away, and one of her eyes had been destroyed. I was deeply shocked. When one of the girls began to speak, I saw her strength. She talked, she smiled and laughed - she was alive, despite her terrible injuries. Instead of seeing a dis-

figured face, I began to see a girl, another human being.

“But at night I had nightmares. I dreamt about the acid being thrown... I saw flesh and bones melting... I saw deformed faces... I heard screams. Every time I woke up I thought: How can something like this be possible in my country? And how can these girls be strong enough to be able to show themselves and explain why they were attacked?”

I fainted

“The media didn’t care about these two girls. But they had piqued my interest. I knew

that I wanted to find out more about this. So I started to go to hospitals and discovered that the burns units were full of victims of acid attacks. And every day, new patients arrived. There were children, girls, women, boys and men, but the vast majority were young girls. Everyone was crying, there weren’t enough beds for everyone, and there were no doctors. The conditions were horrific. I fainted, twice.

“I remember the second time I fainted. A girl came in with burns over 50 percent of her body. Her whole back was one big open wound. I remember thinking, there’s no way she’ll survive. We took her to a private hospital. But the conditions there were terrible too. The smell was the worst thing, and the wound was oozing. I fainted. A nurse took me out of the room. When I was feeling better, I went back in. The



The operation is over, and Monira congratulates Sweety – it has been a great success!



Children affected by acid throwing or petrol dousing gather at ASF, to spend time together and paint together.

girl survived. And I have never fainted again.”

Founded ASF

By now, Monira had realised that acid attacks were common. The motive was often jealousy. When a girl refused to marry a man, he would throw acid at her as a form of punishment. And there was acid everywhere - it was used in the textile industry, in the jewellery industry, in car batteries, everywhere. Every day, someone was attacked with acid. The vast majority were girls under 18 and children. But grown men and women were attacked too. Often, acid attacks on men were sparked off by conflict over land. Monira felt that she had to do something. But what?

Monira met a Canadian plastic surgeon called John Morrison. They decided to form an organisation that would help survivors. They called the organisation ASF, the Acid Survivors Foundation. Monira is now the director of ASF.

“We founded the organisation in 1999, eleven years ago. We didn’t have a penny. But we felt that we had to do it. At that time, there was one acid attack every single day. Since then, the number of acid attacks has halved - now, on average, there is one attack every other day. But our goal is to put a stop to them altogether, so that no children, no girls, no women and no men are ever attacked with acid again. We have also started to care for those who have been injured in attacks where someone has poured petrol over them and set them on fire.”

Afraid of being attacked

Things were tough at the start.

“It took a year before I could look at victims of acid violence without flinching and starting to cry. I had to get over that to be able to give

Monira cools down a young woman after her operation.

the victims strength. Of course, it is hardest for the survivors. Being attacked with acid or petrol is a terrible experience emotionally. From one day to the next, your life changes completely. No-one recognises you any more. Your nearest and dearest can’t even look at you. You don’t dare look at yourself in the mirror. It was hard for those of us who worked with them too. At the start, we used to go back to the office and shout at each other. We could release our feelings there. But we talked and talked about what we had

experienced, and we felt better and got stronger. Today, we have psychologists here at ASF. They help the survivors, but they also help the staff who work with them.”

Monira was also afraid of being attacked herself. In the early years, she always carried a bottle of water with her. She had learned from the plastic surgeons that the best thing to do after an attack is to pour water on the wound. Now, most people in Bangladesh know to carry on throwing bucket after bucket of water over the victim, for a long time. This can lessen the damage. And everyone knows that if victims get to the ASF hospital within 48 hours, they have a good chance of survival, and the damage can be limited.

People know now

“I was never attacked, and now I’ve stopped carrying a bottle of water around with me. Today, people know about this violence. We have hundreds of survivors, who are also activists. They demonstrate. They meet with politicians. They press charges against the people who throw acid. They find old victims and explain that even though their wounds are old, ASF can still help them. They manage to get thousands of men to demonstrate about violence against women on International Women’s Day. We have also managed to create our own Center, with a plastic surgery clinic. We offer



➔ completely free treatment. We have even sent some victims abroad for extensive plastic surgery. Some have been given new noses, even whole new faces. We have lawyers who try to help us make sure the guilty parties are caught and convicted. We have 80 staff, and 20 of them are themselves survivors of acid attacks.”

ASF has persuaded the government to make several changes in legislation. The organisation has also persuaded celebrities to participate in gala events, and ASF has helped write the script for a feature film about a school-girl who is attacked with acid.

The reward: a smile

Monira plays down her own role in all this success. She believes that it is the survivors themselves who have achieved it all.

“Those of us who work with survivors try to teach them to be strong. We try to encourage them not to hide

away indoors, but to have the courage to go out and show their damaged faces. We try to help them feel that they are worth something, that they can get an education, get married, have kids. For me, the greatest reward is seeing one of them start to smile again. That 17-year-old girl, who first got me interested in fighting acid violence, now lives in the USA. She will soon graduate as a nurse.

“The thing that brings the most joy to me is meeting the people whose lives have been turned around. I remember little Bubly. She was seven months old, and nobody expected her to survive. Her father had poured acid into her mouth because he had wanted a boy. She has had lots of operations, and now she is a lively ten-year-old, who everyone here just loves. Many survivors are now studying. ASF pays for their education for as long as they want to study.”

Married after all

Monira is telling her story from her little office. Soon she’s going to a meeting with an international organisation, to try to persuade them to give ASF some funding. She is constantly on the hunt for money, so that ASF can afford to continue its work.

“When I get back from that meeting, I’m going to meet some children who have been injured. Some have been brought in for operations, and others have just come for support. We try to paint together once a week. After that, I’ll go into the ward and talk to the people who have just had operations. Then I’ll go home to my family.”

When she was little, Monira decided that she would never get married.

“But then I met a man who was just like me. He had decided never to get married too. He was a TV cameraman, and he dedicated himself to reporting social problems and trying to make a



“The greatest reward for me is to see someone start to smile again,” says Monira.

difference. He put so much energy into his work. We were so alike. We fell in love and got married. Now we live in a small apartment and we have two boys, aged 8 and 12. They often come with me to work. My boys don’t see the scars, they don’t see the wounds, they just see friends. They usually celebrate their birthdays here.”



When Monira and ASF started their work, there was an average of one acid throwing incident every day. As a result of ASF’s protests and awareness raising work, the number of acid throwing incidents has been halved.

Sweety

wants to be a detective

14-year-old Sweety locked herself inside her sister's house for a whole year. She never went out, she just sat in a corner crying. She always wore a scarf over her face.

"I didn't have the courage to show my face."

When she found out that ASF, Monira's organisation, could help her with plastic surgery, Sweety got her zest for life back. She wants to become a detective and put all the men who have harmed her and other girls behind bars.

Here's what happened: Sweety lived in a village. She was always happy, she laughed a lot and loved dancing. She was doing well at school.

"One day, when I was thirteen, my 17-year-old cousin caught up with me on my way to school. He said, 'I love you. I want to marry you.' I replied, 'Firstly, I don't want to get married because I'm too young. Secondly, I don't have feelings for you. We've played together, and I feel like your little sister. And cousins shouldn't get married anyway.'"

Sweety thought her cousin would forget about it and leave her in peace. But he went round and told everyone in the village, 'Sweety is

madly in love with me and we're getting married'. He even told them the date of the wedding!

"When his father, my uncle, came to our house to talk about the wedding, I explained that I didn't love him at all. I said that his son was really bothering me."

"But then my cousin started telling everyone that he would poison himself if I

didn't marry him."

"I tried to talk sense with his father – he's a police officer. But he just said, 'If my son takes his own life because of you, you will bring shame on our whole family. You must marry him.'"

Living hell

Sweety's father lived far away. Sweety and her mother were forced to agree to it.

"I knew that he wasn't good – he drank and he smoked marijuana – but I was forced to marry him. I was only thirteen. After the wedding, my husband said, 'I married you to punish you. From this moment on, your life will be a living hell.'"

Sweety's life really did become unbearable. She had to stop going to school. She was abused. After a while, she



TEXT: MONICA ZAK PHOTOS: KIM NAYLOR





When her girlfriends come to visit, Neela shows them her wedding sari. She even jokes about her terrible wedding day.

any new victims of acid violence. If that happens, we mobilise to support them. Today, most people in Bangladesh know that if someone gets acid on their skin, you should keep throwing buckets of water over them for a long time. Sometimes we find people with old injuries. Last week we found two. We tell them that they can get help from ASF for free, and that we can

arrange transport to the hospital.”

Neela has gone back to school.

“You can get a grant from ASF for as long as you want to continue studying,” says Monira. “If you want to go on to university, we’ll pay for that too.”

Laughing again

Neela has lots of girlfriends. They do homework, listen to pop music on the radio and

dance together in her room. Today, Luna, Rita and Putui have come to look at the new house. Neela laughs and jokes lots. She even manages a joke about her disastrous wedding. She brings out her wedding sari and shows it to her friends.

“I don’t understand how you can be so happy, and how you have the confidence to meet new people,” says one of them.

“But I haven’t changed. I have my scars; they’ll never go away. But on the inside, I’m the same Neela I’ve always been.”

Parents forgiven

One of her girlfriends asks whether she is angry with her parents. After all, they forced her to marry that terrible man.

“No, I understand how it happened. They were tricked. They didn’t mean for anything bad to happen. I have forgiven them.”

Neela’s father pops in and says that it’s great that Neela is studying. He says she is so quick-witted and logical.

“I think she’d make a great lawyer,” he says.

“But I’m more interested in studying management at university. I want to work in a bank.”

“It’s up to you,” says her father, laughing. “We will never do anything against your will again. Your mother and I are so proud of you.”



Neela has forgiven her parents for marrying her off, and her father has helped to get her ex-husband sent to prison. “My parents were tricked,” says Neela.



Sweety waiting for plastic surgery to stop her mouth from hanging open.



Nervous wait for the operation.



Sweety will be given anaesthetic before the operation.



Soon it'll be time for the operation.

➔ and her husband moved to another city where they both got jobs in a textile factory.

“We worked in different departments. I found out from another girl that he had started seeing a girl who worked in his department. In the evening I asked him if it was true. He pulled out a knife, cut my arm, poured salt in the wound and said, ‘If you scream I’ll kill you’. I didn’t scream, I just cried quietly. Allah gave me strength.”

Threatened with strangling

Another day, Sweety’s husband asked for money to take his new girlfriend to the cinema. Sweety refused, so he tried to strangle her with a rope. When their landlord came running, Sweety’s husband said, ‘It’s nothing. Just a little family problem.’

“He had a special stick for beating me. Another time he wanted money from me to take his girlfriend out to a Chinese restaurant. I refused, but he took the money from my bag and left. I knew

which restaurant he was at so I went there and said, ‘I refuse to accept this. I’m leaving you. I’m moving back to my mother’s house.’ He replied that he could have as many girlfriends as he wanted. He said he would get five girlfriends and be with them right in front of me.”

Set on fire

“When he came home that night, he tied me up and started beating me with the stick. Then I must have fainted. Suddenly I woke up - I

was on fire. My hair, my skin, my clothes, everything was burning. He had poured petrol over me and set me on fire. Thankfully the owner of the house saw the smoke and came running. There was a bucket of water inside the door, and he threw it over me.”

Sweety survived and was taken to hospital. She had to pay for injections and treatment. Her father sold all his land to pay for her medical care.

“It was a horrific time. The



Sweety is under, and it's time for the operation to start.

doctors seemed like real butchers. I was convinced they were trying to kill me.”

Locked herself in

Three months later, Sweety came home. Her mouth was hanging open and it was hard for her to speak. She could hardly move her head, and there were ugly scars all over her body.

“I just sat there crying. I didn't go out. But after a year, my sister said, ‘You're a burden. You have to try to earn money and help mother and

our little brother.’ So I was forced to go out. But it was so hard to see how people turned away when they saw my face.”

Sweety learned to embroider. A couple of teaching jobs came up but she didn't get them.

“I was too ugly. The only thing I could do was hold extra lessons for junior school pupils at home. I taught them to dance, too. Then I started school again. And I got to take care of a little library. I started to read books, espe-

cially detective stories.”

One day, Sweety's sister met a woman who was part of ASF, who herself was a victim of acid violence. She told the woman about her sister Sweety.

“It was only recently,” explains Sweety, beaming. “That woman found me and told me about ASF. I had never heard of ASF. The woman said that if I went to the ASF Center in Dhaka, they had skilled plastic surgeons who could operate on me.”

Afraid of operation

Sweety was very nervous as she travelled to the capital and made her way to ASF. She was afraid of hospitals and doctors. The doctors had treated her so badly after the attack. But Monira and the rest of the staff talked to her lots to calm her down. ‘All treatment is free at ASF, and you will get pain relief. Our brilliant plastic surgeons will operate on your mouth to stop it from hanging open. And you will hopefully regain movement in your neck.’



The doctors take skin from Sweety's thigh and transplant it to her face.



For several days after the operation, she has a bandage round her head.



Sweety is both curious and nervous as the doctor starts to take the bandage off. What is waiting for her underneath it?



The nurses take away the last pieces of bandage. Sweety still doesn't know how the operation has gone...



"I have met so many other people here who have been attacked with acid or petrol, and who have had operations and now live normal lives. They have given me courage. And I have met children who have been hurt too. I have danced with them. And we have laughed so much together. But deep inside I am extremely nervous. I'm so afraid of the operation."

Sweety's smile

A few days later, Sweety has her operation. Afterwards,

the doctors say everything went well. They took skin from her thigh and transplanted it to her face. She is wrapped in bandages for several days. Then one day, the doctors and nurses gather round her and start to take away the bandage. They hold up a mirror.

Sweety stares into it.

Her mouth isn't hanging open!

She can talk easily!

Slowly, she turns her head - she can move it without any difficulty.

Then Sweety smiles!

And Sweety's smile spreads to everyone standing around her. Sweety says:

"I just want to cry. I want to cry because I am so happy."

Wants to be a detective

Sweety has reported her ex-husband to the police for his terrible crime against her. There is a warrant out for his arrest. But nothing has happened. Now and again, he comes back to the village to visit, but he never gets caught. Sweety thinks he has bribed the police. She knows that he lives down south and

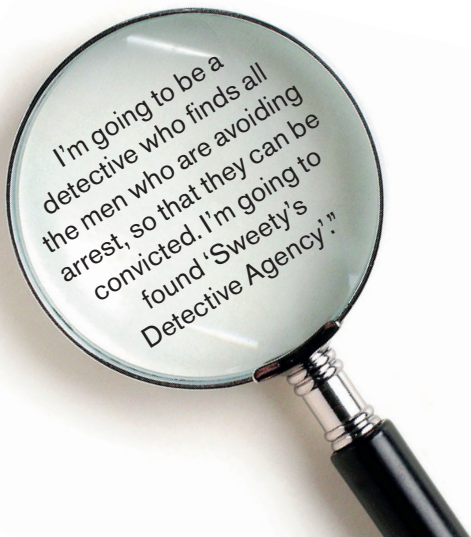
has a new wife.

"But now I know exactly what to do. I'm going to have another operation so that my face looks even better. And with ASF's help, I'm going to study. Then I'll become a detective. I'm going to be a



Sweety can hardly believe her eyes. Her mouth isn't hanging wide open any more. Here comes the smile! She is so happy.

detective who finds all the men who are avoiding arrest, so that they can be convicted. I'm going to found 'Sweety's Detective Agency'." 🌐



Monira's dream of a big hospital for survivors

"Acid is also used as a weapon in other countries," says Monira. "In Pakistan, Uganda, India, Cambodia... but ASF now has sister organisations in other countries too. My dream is to build a large, modern hospital in Bangladesh. We could take survivors from other countries too, and hold all sorts of training courses. We have so much to learn from each other. And we all have the same goal - to put a stop to the use of acid and petrol as weapons."

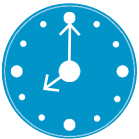


A day in the life of



7.05 Alone with teddy

My mother has gone to work. I cuddle my favourite teddy bear so that I won't feel lonely. He always makes me happy.



08.00 My favourite dress

When I don't have anything else to do, I try on clothes. This dress is my favourite one.



09.30 To school

To make sure I don't get kid-napped on the way to school, I always travel with my neighbour and her daughter.



7.30 Can't go out

My father wants me to come and live with him. I won't do it. He has a new family now. He thinks that if I move in with him, he won't have to go to court and he won't end up in jail. When I said no, he said that he would kidnap me. So I can only go out if my mother is with me. I can see children playing outside, but I'm not allowed to join them.



15.00 Time for homework

Home again. First I do my homework. I love English.



Bubly



16.00 A hug for mum!
Finally, my mother gets home.

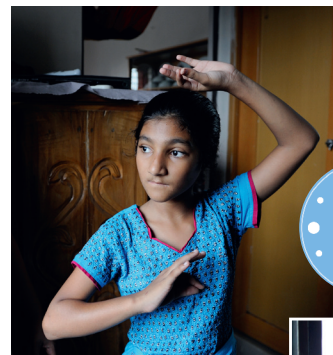


16.30 Playtime
My friend Sadi and I play with cuddly toys and Barbie dolls and play snakes and ladders.

17.00 Music with mum
After dinner, my mother teaches me new songs and how to play the accordion.



18.35 Hurray!
Mum is coming out with me.



18.00 Dancing time
Mum teaches me new dances too.



18.30 Please mum...
Can't I go out and play with the other children? Not on your own, says mum.



19.30 Night night!
I crawl under the mosquito net to sleep. "Good night mum. Now I know what I'm going to be," I say. "What?" wonders mum. "A plastic surgeon." "Good idea. Good night Bubly."



Neela wanted to be

Neela's face and body is covered in ugly scars. A few years ago, she was a beautiful 15-year-old schoolgirl who was forced to marry a man 20 years her senior. When she is asked whether she wants to have more plastic surgery on her face, Neela shakes her head.

"Now I'm used to my scars, and this is what I want to look like in the future," she says.

Today, Neela spends a lot of time fighting for other victims of acid violence. She wants to help Monira and ASF, after all the support that she has had.

"I always wanted to be an actress," says Neela. "I grew up in Dhaka, the capital city. I went to a normal school, but my father had also enrolled me in a cultural school, so I went there in the afternoons. I studied, singing, dance and drama there. I loved standing on stage, feeling a connection with the audience. I had made my decision - I wanted to be an actress and work in theatre, playing characters with serious problems and strong feelings."

Forced marriage

Old photos of Neela show a young girl who looks like a glamorous film star. A man who worked abroad, but had come home to find a wife, happened to see one of these photos.

"My uncle told me that there was a man who had seen a photo of me, and that was enough for him. He wanted to marry me, and no-one else would do. I was 15 years old, and there was no way I wanted to get married. I said no. My parents supported me. But an uncle, and some other relatives, tried to convince me and my parents. Yes, he was 35 years old, this man called Akbar, but he had

money and a good job abroad. Finally, I agreed to meet him. I didn't like him, not in the slightest. And I certainly didn't want to get married. The only thing I wanted was to carry on at school and then become an actress.

"After meeting the man, I went to bed. The next morning, my father told me that he had agreed to the marriage and signed some papers. His oldest brother and some other relatives had put pressure on him. The wedding would take place immediately. Afterwards, Akbar would return to his work abroad, and I would be able to stay on and continue my studies.

"He promised that I would be able to keep living at my parents' house. Akbar said. 'You can do everything you want to, although you are married. You can keep going to school. I like modern girls.'"

Life in pieces

"Nothing turned out like he had promised. My life was in pieces. He didn't let me stay with my family - he forced me to go with him to the village where his parents lived. On the wedding night, I was ter-

rified. I was shown to a room with a bed. I cried non-stop. He tried to force himself on me, but I just cried and cried. In the end he gave up.

"The next day, he left to go back to his job in another country, but I had to stay with his parents. They had a farm. They locked me into the house, and didn't let me go to school. Instead, I had to help on the farm. My mother-in-law found fault with me all the time. I couldn't cook, I did everything wrong, I was

useless at tending to the animals and no good at helping with the harvest. After all, I had only ever gone to school and learned about dance, music and drama. Now I was expected to know everything about farming.

"My father paid the family some money so that they would be kinder to me. But that didn't help. After a few months, the day I had been dreading arrived - my husband came back. We still hadn't had sex, and he tried



e an actress



“I wanted to be an actress – I loved being on stage. At first, I refused to look in the mirror after the initial operation following the acid attack. But you gave me the courage to look, and I didn’t faint,” says Neela to Monira.

again. I was really scared of him, but I was angry too. I told him that I had been tricked. ‘You said I’d be able to stay at home and keep going to school.’ He hit me and I screamed. People outside the house were wondering what was going on but he shouted, ‘Everything’s fine.’”

Glass of acid

“After a while he went out. I lay on the bed, shaking, but I finally managed to fall asleep. Suddenly, I woke up to see

him standing in the doorway with a glass in his hand. He said he had brought a glass of water, in case I was thirsty. I could see he was angry, but I had no idea what he was planning. It wasn’t water in the glass – it was acid. He walked over to the bed and threw the acid right in my face. The pain was extreme. I remember hearing a voice shouting, ‘This is your punishment’.

“I screamed, ‘Mum! Dad! Help me!’

“The neighbours came

running and took me to hospital. A relative took me from the hospital to ASF. I was lucky - I got there within 48 hours. At the clinic there is a 24-hour on-call system, so I had an operation straight away.”

Neela refused to look at herself in the mirror afterwards. The girl who had turned heads with her beauty knew that her face was almost black and disfigured. She had heard that many people faint when they see them-

selves in the mirror for the first time after an acid attack.

“Finally, I plucked up the courage. Monira and many others with scarred faces had talked to me. They gave me the courage to look. I didn’t faint.”

Monira’s visit

Today is a big day. The family have just moved into a new house in the city of Sirajganj, where Neela’s father works as a police officer. The big news is that Monira is coming to





Monira's coming!

It's a big day for Neela. Monira is coming to visit, after driving for several hours to get there. She gets a welcoming hug.



visit. She has been driving for hours to get there. Neela meets her with a beaming smile. They hug each other, and walk hand in hand along the narrow alleyways. When they get into the house, they curl up on the bed and talk for hours.

"I remember when you came to us," says Monira, giving Neela a hug. "You were in a bad way. Your skin had been burned by the acid, and it was dark and hard like

leather. We transplanted skin from other parts of your body to your face straight away, but to be honest I didn't think you would survive.

"One month later, I walked into our physical training unit. I saw a girl who was covered in bandages, but who was up on her feet, exercising. I asked, 'Who is that?' and when I heard someone say it was Neela, I was over the moon. It was a miracle that

you survived. After three months and several operations, you were able to go home."

"We can keep working on your face," says Monira. "I can arrange another operation for you."

Neela shakes her head.

"You don't need to do that. I'm not interested in more plastic surgery. I'm used to my scars now, and this is what I want to look like in the future."

Ex-husband jailed

With help from her father and ASF, Neela has pressed charges against her ex-husband. He's now in jail.

"So I don't need to be afraid of him any more. And now I have the courage to show my face without being ashamed. I have the guts to talk to groups, and I do it a lot. I am a real activist against violence. I lead demonstrations. I track down decision makers and make demands. I visit schools and try to make sure that none of the students will ever throw acid or petrol. That is important. Here in my city, there are 160 activists, and all of us have been victims of acid or petrol attacks. We make noise and we demonstrate. And we support each other. We have a network and we keep track of



When Monira says that she can arrange another operation if Neela wants it, Neela shakes her head.

"Now I'm used to my scars, and this is what I want to look like in the future."



When her girlfriends come to visit, Neela shows them her wedding sari. She even jokes about her terrible wedding day.

any new victims of acid violence. If that happens, we mobilise to support them. Today, most people in Bangladesh know that if someone gets acid on their skin, you should keep throwing buckets of water over them for a long time. Sometimes we find people with old injuries. Last week we found two. We tell them that they can get help from ASF for free, and that we can

arrange transport to the hospital.”

Neela has gone back to school.

“You can get a grant from ASF for as long as you want to continue studying,” says Monira. “If you want to go on to university, we’ll pay for that too.”

Laughing again

Neela has lots of girlfriends. They do homework, listen to pop music on the radio and

dance together in her room. Today, Luna, Rita and Putui have come to look at the new house. Neela laughs and jokes lots. She even manages a joke about her disastrous wedding. She brings out her wedding sari and shows it to her friends.

“I don’t understand how you can be so happy, and how you have the confidence to meet new people,” says one of them.

“But I haven’t changed. I have my scars; they’ll never go away. But on the inside, I’m the same Neela I’ve always been.”

Parents forgiven

One of her girlfriends asks whether she is angry with her parents. After all, they forced her to marry that terrible man.

“No, I understand how it happened. They were tricked. They didn’t mean for anything bad to happen. I have forgiven them.”

Neela’s father pops in and says that it’s great that Neela is studying. He says she is so quick-witted and logical.

“I think she’d make a great lawyer,” he says.

“But I’m more interested in studying management at university. I want to work in a bank.”

“It’s up to you,” says her father, laughing. “We will never do anything against your will again. Your mother and I are so proud of you.”



Neela has forgiven her parents for marrying her off, and her father has helped to get her ex-husband sent to prison. “My parents were tricked,” says Neela.

“Good Muslims don’t throw acid”

When Mohammed’s sister Asma refused to marry the son of the most powerful family in the village, he took revenge by throwing acid on her.

“We managed to get him jailed for life, but his family are constantly persecuting us. Personally I want to teach people that our religion is against all violence. Good Muslims don’t throw acid,” says Mohammed.

“When I was little we had a farm,” says Mohammed, 14. “We had a good life. But the son of the richest and most powerful family in the village wanted to marry my sister Asma. She didn’t want to. He said that if she didn’t marry him, something terrible would happen. Still she refused. Early one morning, when my father went out for morning prayers and left the door open, he came in and threw acid on Asma.”

“Some landed on me as well, and I woke up from the pain and the noise of my sister shrieking. My oldest brother switched on a torch and saw who threw the acid. He and my father took Asma to hospital - she lost the sight in one eye, but she survived.”

Life in prison

“My family reported the guy who threw the acid to the police. We had to sell all our land to take him to court. We are poor now, but he got a life sentence. Then his rich and powerful family started to persecute us. My father leases land now. At harvest time, they drive their cows onto our land to destroy all our crops. They threaten to cut our Achilles’ tendons to make us say that we lied in court, so that the case will be retried.”

“I was seven years old when Asma was attacked and the persecution of my family started. Today I am 14. I feel small and afraid. The only thing that makes me feel safe is that Allah is with me. He is strong. I am in first year at a Qur’an school. I want to be a Religious Education teacher or an Imam. Then I will teach people that our religion is against all violence. Good Muslims don’t throw acid.”

Happily married

Mohammed’s sister Asma is now married to a man she loves. They have a little daughter, and Asma works at the ASF Center in the capital. During the holidays her brother Mohammed goes to stay with her in Dhaka.

“I can relax and feel safe there,” says Mohammed.



Mohammed and his sister Asma.

Rumi from Pop Idol:

“Real r

Five years ago he was in Pop Idol on TV. Since then, everyone in Bangladesh has known who ‘Pop Idol Rumi’ is. He’s the most popular singer in the country and he demonstrates against people who throw acid. “No real men throw acid,” says Rumi.



“Called me monkey-face”

When Mamun was a newborn baby, a relative threw acid in his face. When he started school he was bullied and the children called him ‘monkey-face’. Mamun has just had plastic surgery for the tenth time and no-one calls him ‘monkey-face’ any more.

“My brave mother put a stop to the bullying at school and in the village,” says Mamun, 9. “All the children used to make fun of me. When I started school they all gathered round me, shouting ‘monkey-face’ or ‘brown monkey’. I ran home crying and refused to go back to school. So my mother went there. She talked to the teachers, and the children. That gave me the courage to go back to school, and the bullying stopped. These days, no-one calls me ‘monkey-face’ or ‘brown monkey’ any more.”

Here’s what happened: Mamun’s family are poor. A relative gave them some land to build a house and grow some crops. One day, the relative demanded the land back. Mamun’s father refused. That night, the relative came and threw acid on baby Mamun and his parents.

“A sudden burning pain woke me up,” says his mother, Mageda. When I looked at my little boy I saw he had terrible burns. I picked him up and ran to see the doctor in the village. He knew about ASF. And he knew that if you



Mamun’s mother put a stop to the bullying at school. She got acid on her arm too.

get victims of acid attacks to the ASF hospital within 48 hours, they can often be saved and the damage can be limited. My boy was badly burned - more acid had landed on him than on me or my husband. We thought Mamun was going to die. His face was badly disfigured. He

has just had plastic surgery for the tenth time.”

“I am just an ordinary boy in Year 2,” says Mamun. “I have lots of friends and I play cricket. I support the Royal Bengal Tigers cricket team.”

I men don’t throw acid!”

Rumi goes on demonstrations with victims of acid violence, and talks about them between songs at his concerts.

“I often play at concerts and on TV and radio. I always focus on the men in the crowd. I say that real men don’t throw acid. Real men don’t see the scars on the faces and bodies of people who have been injured. A real man doesn’t look at appearances – all people are beautiful.”

Singer Rumi had his eyes opened to what was happening in his own country by his uncle. He had worked abroad

for eight years before moving home. Two days later, he caught sight of a girl. One half of her face was beautiful, and the other totally destroyed by acid.

“My uncle fell madly in love. Today they are happily married. Ever since then I have felt real empathy with all victims of acid violence. I feel it in my soul, and I want to fight against this for the rest of my life. I usually tell the men in the audience that they must respect the wills of girls and women. It is wrong to take revenge by throwing acid. I tell them that any man who destroys a girl’s appearance

will be despised for the rest of his life.”

“I believe it’s important to use your position to make a difference.”

Listen to Rumi from Pop Idol on YouTube: [Rumi.Bangladesh](#)

Rumi with friends from ASF, who are victims of acid violence.



TEXT: MONICA ZAK PHOTOS: KIM NAYLOR

