



Series: Best Practices in South Asia of Engaging Men and Boys to Transform Gender Discriminatory Practices

Engaging Boys and Men

to Stop Acid Violence in Bangladesh

Centre for Health and Social Justice
&
MenEngage Alliance South Asia

CASE STUDY : 4

THE FIGHT AGAINST ACID VIOLENCE AND ITS CONTEXT

Acid violence (or attack) means the throwing of acid or similarly corrosive substances on a person, usually on the face, with the intention to hurt or disfigure the person. Acid violence results in scarring, disfigurement, maiming, blindness of the victim, and life-long economic, social, psychological and various health struggles. In certain cases, acid

violence results in death.

Historically, a vast majority of acid attacks are against women and girls. The attacks are often done in revenge to the women/their families' refusal to accept marriage proposals or to pay dowry after marriage. It also happens when women and girls assert themselves and thwart sexual advances. A girl or woman making a decision and saying 'no' is seen as an affront and hard to take for boys and men.

There are also cases related to

land, property or money disputes. In many cases girls and women of the families take the brunt for these disputes but, boys and men also become victims of acid violence in these circumstances. Fights between boys and men over family-related matters, relationships etc could end up in acid violence.

Acid violence is a form of gender-based violence that reflects and perpetuates the inequality of girls/women and boys/men in society. Gender-based violence is common in Bangladesh, cutting

across economic, social and religious barriers. It impedes women's right to fully participate in society. It denies women their basic rights such as economic, social and political participation, and their personal fulfillment and advancement, while stripping them of self-worth.

In the main, the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) was formed to deal with the concerns of the rising trend of acid violence in Bangladesh, where the incidence of acid violence is one of the highest in the world.

ACID SURVIVORS FOUNDATION AND ITS STRATEGIES IN ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS

ASF was formed in 1999 to care for and support acid attack survivors (or acid survivors), and enable them to live with dignity. In recent years, ASF has widened its focus to build awareness on the root causes of acid violence. It undertakes both curative and preventive work against acid violence by providing acid attack survivors with medical and psychological services as well as legal and financial support, while

carrying out awareness-raising on gender issues, gender-based violence and acid attacks with a range of stakeholders, and engaging in advocacy and policy reform initiatives. ASF recognizes that the existing patriarchal system facilitates violence and discrimination against girls and women. It acknowledges that acid violence is part of a broader systemic problem, thus there is need to transform the existing patriarchal mindset to bring about gender equality and facilitate non-violence in society.

patriarchy. For this, it has been mobilizing men and boys in six districts in Bangladesh: Dinajpur, Sirajganj, Narsingdi, Bogra, Satkhira and Netrokona. Two of these districts, Sirajganj and Bogra, have the highest incidence of acid violence in Bangladesh.

In its work with boys and men who are acid survivors and all those who commit to stopping acid violence, ASF employs the following strategies that do not target men and boys but instead underscore that it is the



ASF deems it crucial to work with boys and men in this transformation process and engage them in challenging

patriarchal system which is the problem:

- Awareness-raising on gender issues and acid violence



- Anti-acid violence campaign focussed on addressing men and boys
- Promoting positive role models among men and boys
- (Male) stars'/celebrities' engagement with the campaign against acid attack and other gender based violence
- Facilitating debate on gender and other social issues, particularly acid violence
- Facilitating open dialogue between girls and boys, men and women
- Developing and disseminating user-friendly material on gender issues, generally, and acid violence, specifically.
- Training youth volunteers
- Facilitating school-based campaigns

ASF has also undertaken a first-of-its-kind study called

'Understanding Perpetrators' Perspectives: A Study on the Perspectives of Gender-based Violence with Special Emphasis on Acid Violence in Bangladesh,' in order to understand what leads men and boys to commit acid violence and thus respond more adequately to the requirements on the ground.

In 2010, ASF started developing survivors' at the community level to act as change agents to influence the government, civil society and community to be more accountable to the rights of acid survivors. Twelve change agents have been working in six districts raising awareness in ending this kind of violence as well as advocating for survivors' protection and rights through mobilizing government, media,

civil society and community members. In 2012, survivors' groups were developed to function as a platform for collective voices to demand justice, protect rights and advocate for social change.

There are currently 29 such groups in eight districts, engaging mainly men and boys. Some of the group members are also male survivors of acid attacks. The groups are not only addressing issues pertaining to acid violence but men and boys in the groups are also involved in resolving other forms of violence against women in their communities like dowry-related disputes and early marriage. This awareness raising campaign acts as an instrument for transforming attitudes of men towards women within the community and institutions, and as a result within society.

Campaigns in the community are implemented through various initiatives mobilizing the community. Like media engagement, school-based initiatives, a variety of community programmes, workshops for orientation of community leaders on a range of issues, advocacy with



stakeholders, dialogue with local administration, dialogue with various segments of society for effective implementation of the country's two acid related Acts.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

As a member of the MenEngage Alliance at the national and South Asia regional levels, ASF contributes over 16 years of its experience, knowledge and expertise in addressing acid violence. ASF works at multiple interlinked levels of intervention - the individual/self, family, community and structural domain to facilitate change.

In curative interventions, ASF provides immediate care and

treatment as an emergency response through a well-equipped 20-bed hospital which also provides plastic and reconstructive surgery in a low resource set-up. Rehabilitative interventions include psychological care, legal assistance, skills training and economic support for reintegrating into society.



Survivors are also part of a collective called 'survivor ambassadors' demanding justice.

On the preventive side ASF runs national and local campaigns to raise awareness on the legal and social consequences of acid attacks and disseminate information on what to do and where to go for help if an attack takes place.

ASF's parallel approaches at the local and national levels involving different stakeholders to prevent acid violence and help acid attack survivors include: Youth Campaigns, Bazaar Campaigns, Community Meetings, Acid Sellers and Users Meetings, Star Engagement, Day Observation and Media Campaigns. ASF has school-based activities as well as community programmes to engage different target groups. There are community leaders



working alongside acid survivors and ASF.

The organisation advocates at the national level for policy changes and at the local level for changes in processes and practices. It works with the government and was instrumental in enacting of Bangladesh's two acid prevention Acts - the Acid Control Act 2002 and the Acid Offence Prevention Act, 2002. It is an active member of forums set up under these Acts and

organizes dialogues with acid sellers and users to ensure their compliance with the laws. It also partners with other civil society organisations on the issue.

THE GAINS

ASF has emerged as a global pioneer in combating acid violence, contributing to meaningful and effective interventions. Its campaign has significantly reduced the number of acid attacks over the years. When ASF started its prevention

campaign in 2002 there were 494 recorded acid attack instances, which declined to 44 in 2016. The attacks still remain a grave concern however and the challenge is to sustain the downward trend and eliminate this form of violence in Bangladesh.

There are numerous testimonials on the transformation that ASF's work has helped bring about at the individual, family, community and institutional level.

STORIES OF THE ENGAGEMENT OF BOYS AND MEN



Sabalambly Unnayan Samity (SUS) is a non-government organization established in 1986. It is a partner with ASF in the acid survivors' network for prevention of VAW, social inclusion and gender equality.

SUS initiated efforts to stop acid violence against woman (SVAW) in Netrokona district with like-minded organizations in July 2003. In December 2003, a district committee of 18

members was formed comprising influential leaders, journalists, lawyers, physicians, teachers, NGO representatives, local government representatives, human rights activists, women leaders and students. The SVAW committee aims to provide legal support ensuring justice for survivors, creating awareness about violence against women and providing counselling and assistance to survivors to access

various services.

A strong partnership developed among the district SVAW members and union parishads and upazilas, which allowed them to work together on various initiatives such as mediation, fact finding, counselling of survivors and referrals for government legal aid services and funds. Awareness on violence against women was facilitated through

mass communication and campaigns at the school and college levels.

In Netrokona and Mymensing districts, SVAW committees are active in 64 unions within eight upazilas. There are numerous

stories of transformation through involvement of boys and men:

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I have been working on the issue for the last two years. With support from SUS and the local administration, I've led school-based campaigns and haat bazaar campaigns on the issue of gender related violence. There have been many discussions within the community. Despite many social obstacles in the beginning, over two years of persistent awareness raising through the Dapunia Union there has been impact against child marriage, dowry and acid violence.

— SAIFUL ISLAM —

65-year old local businessman and member of Dapunia Union VAW Prevention Committee

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I support actions to prevent various types of violence against women where Shapla works, that is, Bhaluka, Trishal and Gafargao Upazila in Mymensingh district. We organise monthly discussions on sexual harassment, dowry, domestic violence, child marriage, acid violence etc. We reach out to the local government and development partners for assistance, and given the emerging consciousness among community members, these issues are being dealt with successfully.

— SHAHJAHAN AHMED —

40-year-old tailor who is an acid survivor, now works as a change maker in the Shapla group in Mymensingh district, formed by the SUS awareness programme

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I was keen to work on VAW because of some personal incidents which left a deep impact on me. My mother faced a lot of domestic violence from my father and she died early; my brother did the same to his wife. I now work as a change maker in my community for transforming the attitudes of men towards women. I motivated my late sister-in-law's relatives to file a case against my brother for committing such atrocities against her. Through the support of SUS, I'm part of a group that organises school campaigns and fights sexual harassment and stalking of women in the locality.

In the beginning, I was teased and discouraged by my friends, it was not easy to get acceptance of my role as change maker. Slowly I and my fellow change makers have brought some positive changes which are manifested in the reduction of various kinds violence against girls and women of the locality.

— DELWAR HUSSAIN —

Class X student in Shambhuganj High School

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“I used to be quite indifferent about the violence that used to happen against women. In 2014, I got involved in a school campaign organized by SUS. With the help of teachers in the school, a few of the students developed a 'school cabinet' or student watch group. In the group, we regularly discussed our (gendered) attitudes and slowly change happened. Our watch group started to fight against sexual harassment of school and college-going girls. Sexual harassment is one of the reasons that prevents girls and women from pursuing education. We started keeping a complaint box and then we started taking action. First, we talk to the boys in a friendly manner to refrain from such kind of behaviour, then if they do not listen the watch group takes the help of the local administration and police.

We are also working in the locality to reduce the rate of child marriage by making people aware about the demerits of early marriage and also partnering successfully with the local administration in campaigning against it. In our group discussions where there is participation of teachers, students and volunteers from SUS, the attitude towards female students has become quite positive, like, group members are respectful and cooperative with the girls now.”

— **ASHIKUR RAHMAN** —

Class IX student in a school in Mymensing town

“I and my team have to walk a long way to undertake activities for preventing and eradicating violence against women. We have developed skills to manage and reduce land disputes which are common in the Char area.”

— **WAZEDUL ISLAM, 36 years** —

65-year old local businessman
and member of Dapunia Union VAW Prevention Committee

“Our dramas are based on the issues of violence against women and gender disparity. Arak theatre performed stage shows in many districts of Bangladesh. As part of the campaign against acid violence, we perform in a truck on each national day in big bazaars and in different public places. These kind of cultural awareness activities are quite effective in changing the attitude towards women and in contributing to reducing the rate of acid violence and raising awareness on issues like dowry and child marriage.”

— **REZAUL KARIM REZA** —

49 years, is a journalist and also founder of the progressive Arak Theater group





THE CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

There have been several barriers faced in effecting change through the engagement of boys and men in this programme. Programmatically, there needs to be conceptual clarity on how to engage boys and men, unpack masculinities and facilitate genuine gender equality. It has

been found that patriarchy and its manifestations are so deeply entrenched everywhere that relentless efforts will be required and enormous time for men to give up their power, and to change their attitudes towards women and recalibrate gender relations. Asking men to be accountable and questioning their actions, even when it is obvious that they are abusing

their power, is difficult.

In addition, though Bangladesh has committed itself to gender equality with laws and policies attesting to this commitment but the gap between policy commitment and practice is glaring and accountability for this commitment must be shown by those in public offices.

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ABOUT THE CASE STUDIES

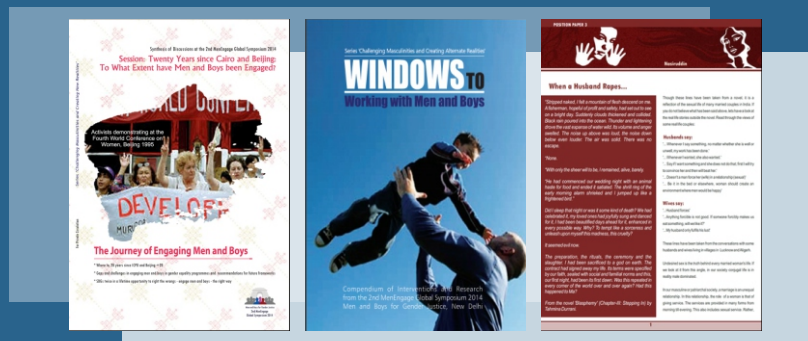
Five case studies have been put together by the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) in *the series Best Practices in South Asia of Engaging Men and Boys To Transform Gender Discriminatory Practices.*

These are practices developed by MenEngage South Asia network's member organisations in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and India. The purpose of developing these case studies is to provide increased visibility to organisations and issues related to work with men on masculinity, gender based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights and gender equality. The five case studies are:

- 1 Engaging Men and Boys Against the Practice of Chhaupadi in Nepal
- 2 'Awaaz Do' (Speak Up)- Engaging Youth to Address Violence Against Women in Odisha, India
- 3 Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality in Sri Lanka - Resisting 'Karumaya' (The Fate Of Women)
- 4 Using Communications For Exploring Masculinities - Work With Young Men In Urban India
- 5 Engaging Boys And Men To Stop Acid Violence In Bangladesh

About CHSJ

CHSJ (chsj.org) is an Indian civil society resource organisation working on issues of masculinities and gender justice. It focuses on networking, capacity building, research and implementing strategies it has developed on working with men and boys for gender justice through field based interventions. Its work is grounded in 10 states. Some of the material brought out by its Resource Centre on gender and masculinities can be seen here:



- <http://www.menengagedilli2014.net/knowledge-products-link-page.html>
- <http://www.chsj.org/positions-papers.html>
- <http://www.chsj.org/resource-centre-on-masculinity.html>
- <http://www.femindia.net/>

About MenEngage South Asia

The global MenEngage Alliance (menengage.org) has a strong presence in South Asia since 2007, where it is known as MenEngage South Asia (MESA). Through country-level and regional alliances, MESA seeks to provide a collective voice on the need to engage men and boys in gender equality and addressing masculinities, to build and improve the field of practice around engaging men and boys in gender justice, and advocating before policymakers at the local, national and regional levels.