UNSTOPPABLE
THE COURAGE WITHIN

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ACID SURVIVORS FOUNDATION
Tribute

to all the acid survivors who have overcome immense challenges not only to survive but cherish life through indomitable inner-resilience.

www.acidsurvivors.org

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Founding Chairperson Kazi Fazlur Rahman,
Founding Executive Director Dr. John Morrison,
Jainab Eva first survivor representative in ASF’s governing body and
UNICEF representative at the inauguration of ASF on 12th May, 1999.

A protest rally by the survivors in the early days to raise awareness to end violence against women.
In a society where women do not enjoy equal rights or consideration to men, they are subject to inhumane acts of discrimination and violence. Under such circumstances, being a woman can be an extremely vulnerable position. Baby girls are often considered a burden on the family. Baby’s only crime was to be born a girl, her punishment being fed with acid by her father when she was 7 months old. From the outside, Baby looks like any typical 14-year-old girl; constantly smiling, an accomplished dancer, and always bright, she has not let her internal injuries affect her warm and personable nature. The physical consequences of the attack are deep and the long-term consequences are sure to be many, but you would not guess it. Baby is intensely focused on her education. She is currently a student at one of the best girls’ schools in the country, where she has a chance at a bright academic future.

The consequences of acid violence is not limited to the victims but also their family members. Where the victim is a child the mother has to suffer the most. Baby’s mom, Parul, was only 16 when it all happened. On top of the grief of her child’s suffering she also lost her marriage. However, she turned around to become an activist and now works in a human rights organization ‘Ain O Salish Kendra’ (ASK).
Bably was almost a year old when this photo was taken upon the arrival of Her Excellency Princess Anne’s visit to ASF.

As an infant who was fed acid by her father, Bably overcame incredible odds by simply surviving the attack. She weighed only three kilograms at the time and caregivers at ASF had to struggle day and night to save her. Dr. Hiles and Healing the Children, USA had to operate numerous times to bring her to the condition she is in now. She still requires medical and psychological support from ASF.

11 years after their first meeting, Princess Anne returns for a visit to ASF and meets Bably, now an accomplished student and dancer. The meeting was a happy reminder of the astonishing progress that Bably has made.
Bably’s participation as an activist began early in life. Here, she is with her mother Parul and another survivor-activist, preparing candles for a vigil celebration during International Women’s Day, 2005.

Bably is proof that, no matter how young, one can always educate others on the importance of protesting acid violence. Here she is barely bigger than the banner she holds up, which reads, “Stop Acid Violence, Restore Law and Order.”
That Bably has thrived and become an active and happy young girl is almost beyond imagination.
With persistence and hope, Bably has become an excellent student at one of Bangladesh’s most reputed schools.

Due to her internal injuries, which causes speech difficulty, she still requires speech therapy to avoid being ostracized.

Bably along with Sweety, another survivor, went to receive the World’s Children’s Prize award in 2011, presented by Queen Silvia of Sweden to Monira Rahman for her courageous fight to put an end to acid and petrol violence in Bangladesh.
Survivors ready to depart for Spain to receive treatment.

Survivors after returning from Spain.
Majeda, in 1998, sits at DMCH after her attack, 8 months pregnant and concerned about what will happen after the birth of her baby.

Majeda’s sister helps her eat, as her acid wounds have left her blind in both eyes and most of her face is covered in bandages after treatment.

For survivors, the post-attack period is the most difficult in terms of learning to care for themselves in their new bodies and even the simplest of tasks become challenging.
In the photo, Emon, 8 years old, gets ready for a day at school.

After a series of treatments at home and abroad (UK), Majeda has regained partial eyesight. These days Majeda works at her home district, Comilla, as a change agent, a point of contact for other acid survivors to turn to for support. She visits key government bodies in Comilla regularly to raise awareness against acid violence and pursue local government to do its part in providing financial and employment assistance to survivors.

Emon, Majeda’s baby, is only 3 days old here. Majeda cannot see her son, but knows that he can see her. One can only imagine her agony. To add to her miseries, her husband immediately remarried on the grounds that “a blind woman is incapable of looking after a family”.

August 1998

February 2006

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Stars Against Acid Throwers (SAAT), a forum of prominent celebrities from different fields coming together to raise awareness and contributing to the early movement against acid violence.

SAAT organized a “Charity Ball” in 2000 at the Sheraton Hotel to raise awareness and funds.
In the late 1990s, Bangladesh experienced a rise in the number of acid attacks. At that time, the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) only had an 8-bed burn ward that was often overflowing with patients. Dedicated doctors did their best to treat patients even in the most constrained of situations. In the photo we see a patient being treated at the balcony of the DMCH, ward 35.

In the photo, Dr. Ronald William Hiles and Dr. Shamanta Lal Sen are examining a patient before surgery in the early days.
These days, ASF has a more developed facility and is on its way to becoming a center of excellence for providing high-quality burn care in a low resourced set up.

Burn care is complicated and difficult to treat, but ASF is able to administer care with a very low rate of infection.

In ASF’s earliest days, caregivers had to administer care by torchlight. What they did not have in terms of resources, they well made up for it with dedication and ingenuity.
Over the years, ASF has worked with a number of international experts, like Dr. Hiles, who have come to Bangladesh to aid capacity development of Bangladeshi professionals in state of the art medical procedures, both at ASF and other institutions.
Physiotherapy is one of the services offered at ASF as a part of its holistic program for recovery. It is essential to reducing contracture, a result of extreme scarring. "Range of motion" physiotherapy is essential in helping to ensure that a patient can regain functionality. Here, a patient receives physiotherapy to ensure her limbs stay strong and flexible.
ASF provides care for the survivors in a holistic approach which includes psychological care from the very beginning of treatment. Early psychological interventions help survivors overcome trauma from their violent attacks quickly. ASF has a team of qualified psychologists and trained peer counselors providing counseling and therapy services to the survivors at the ASF Hospital and also in community.
These series of photographs of Bina won the World Press Photo Award in 1998. This photo among others led to Bina’s trip to the USA endorsed by Healing the Children, so that she could receive surgery at Shriner’s Hospital in Ohio. Bina’s journey was documented as a part of ABC’s “Faces of Hope” program, where journalist Connie Chung followed up on Bina’s and another survivor’s homestay with an American family. After the conclusion of the program, Bina decided to stay in the US where she is now a trained and certified nurse.
Bina, back row right, stands next to her cousin Mukti, behind their mothers. Bina’s story came to light in 1998, after a number of international news agencies covered her story. Bina had attempted to save her cousin Mukti from an attack. As close as sisters, Bina and Mukti were sleeping next to one another one night when 4 men came into their room and attempted to hurl acid at Mukti for refusing their romantic advances. Bina threw herself before Mukti and was showered with the caustic fluid.

Bina became one of the most outspoken and recognizable figures in the anti-acid violence movement at the time. Charismatic, strong and opinionated Bina was one of the first survivors to speak out about her experience. Instead of shying away from intense social exposure, Bina became a fierce and fervent advocate for acid survivors’ rights.

Bina lost her left eye to the attack, but her right eye is as expressive as ever.
A moment of still, peaceful reflection. The sun shines through the window as Bina gazes upon the world outside.

Bina and Muki sharing a walk and ready to take on the world.
Thousands of men and boys gathered from all over Bangladesh to show solidarity in the fight against acid violence on International Women’s Day in 2002.

ASF realized the importance of involving men in its campaigns as 99% of the perpetrators of acid violence are male.

Involving men in protesting violence against women continued and contributed in overall reduction of acid violence.
The look in the survivors’ eyes reflects their courage, determination and hope for the future. They continue to inspire victims of all forms of violence that anything is possible when you - face the courage within.
Peyara has become one of ASF’s and acid survivors’ most vocal and effective champions. Her story has inspired many to see acid violence for the heinous and multi-faceted evil that it is, not only does it wreak havoc on the appearance and psychology of its victims, but it also drastically affects their familial and social relationships, and is a significant drain on civil society and progress. Peyara’s incident occurred in 1998, but in the years since, she has become a beacon of light and perseverance.

Initially terrified that her family would be scared of her and reject her, to Peyara’s surprise, with their love, acceptance and support, she was able to overcome her anxiety and move forward with her life. Peyara became a community advocate and spokeswoman on behalf of acid survivors, working with ASF as a peer counselor and as a resource for local victims to aid in their legal matters.

Whereas she was once terrified of a future where society would ostracize her for being different, Peyara stands tall. Now she is a responsible mother, community leader and survivor advocate.
Peyara a few days after her attack, at DMCH feeling unclear about her future in a moment of despair.

Peyara stands with her family a few days before her attack.
Peyara sits with a group of women and children to discuss acid violence and raise awareness. Her engagement with the community continues and is a vital and necessary measure to promote compassion for survivors.

Here, Peyara speaks up in a discussion at the survivors’ National Conference. She is in full-force “Change Agent” mode, spreading wisdom and educating her peers.
Peyara, at home, milking the cow provided to her by ASF as a part of an income generating assistance. Peyara sells the milk from her cow for income. The IGA supports are a way for survivors to establish themselves as independent earners.

Peyara’s perpetrator, in cuffs, as he is detained and brought to Gazipur Court for trial—one of the few to actually reach sentencing. All too often, perpetrators escape jail time and are allowed to continue to live in society.
Sonia leans on her mother’s shoulder at DMCH after her attack. Sonia’s perpetrator threw acid on her face after being rejected as a suitor, permanently damaging her eyes.
Sonia’s mother feeds her as she recovers from surgery. Bandages almost cover her entire face and the extent of her injuries is deep. Sonia was sent to Spain for further treatment, however, it was too late to restore her eyesight.

March 1997

December 1998

Sonia sits at home with her family, smiling after a trip abroad for treatment. Her smile is wide and bright behind her thick glass frames.
Sonia and her friends Mukti and Bina share a conspiratorial laugh while painting their fingernails and preparing for Eid celebrations. Moments like this show how important it is for survivors to have a community where they can share their stories and feelings with no fear or judgment.
One important feature of the campaign against acid violence has been the mobilization of survivors as activists and community leaders. Here, survivors congregate at the annual “Survivors’ National Conference” in Manikganj in 2006.

ASF regularly arranges survivors’ conferences at national and local levels to provide a platform for survivors to raise their collective voice to demand justice and allow them a place to share their experiences and be inspired by each other’s stories and courage.
One of the most confounding aspects of acid violence is that often the perpetrators are those who have proposed love or marriage to their victims. What begins as an offer of love soon becomes a heinous act of possession, destruction and retaliation. At the age of 12 years old, in 1998, Monira was offered in marriage to a man under the stipulation that she would move into his household only once she has turned 16. However, soon after Monira’s would-be husband was caught stealing her father’s rickshaw and was beaten for it in punishment. The engagement was called off, for which he took revenge on her by pouring acid on the left side of her face and chest. Since at that time there were no facilities in Bangladesh that could treat the extensive nature of her wounds, ASF flew Monira to Spain for reconstructive surgery.
With most attacks targeting the face, disfigurement is one of the most traumatic effects of acid violence. A survivor will look in to the mirror and never see themselves as they did before. The psychological consequences of the event are immense. Living in a society where disfigurement is stigmatized and a woman’s social currency is her physical beauty, the scars left behind become a huge burden.

Monira’s mother gently tends to her fresh wounds. The corrosive acid left open sores on her face that must be cleaned and moisturized regularly.

In 1998, DMCH only had an 8 bed burn unit and was extremely understaffed. Monira’s mother had to take care of her every day nursing needs.
Here, we see Monira go under the knife one of many times in order for the doctors to help prevent the scarring and contracture that can result from an attack. As scars form, sometimes they develop contracture, which prevents limbs from having full range of motion. Survivors not only require extensive medical and surgical treatment, but need psychological care throughout the process.

March 1998

Monira continues to pursue her dreams by resuming her studies and making friends. She remains strong while facing the inevitable reality of a different future than she imagined - she laughs with hope, knowing that there are those there to support her.

Monira found a new lease on life by becoming extremely active in acid violence outreach and development. Having worked with ASF on “Helping Acid Survivors” project and as a peer counselor for local survivors in Gazipur. Currently, Monira’s family is living in poverty in Tongi, just outside Dhaka City, but Monira has plans to continue working with ASF and continue her education. Monira is also a talented embroiderer and hopes to be able to turn her craft into an income generating activity that will allow her to help support her family.
The ‘Silver Banner Award’ conferred on the Acid Survivors Foundation by the Regional Council of Tuscany, Italy. Monira Rahman the then Executive Director of ASF received the award on 30th November, 2006 in Florence, Italy.

Americans for UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) honored Monira Rahman, the Executive Director, Acid Survivors Foundation (2002 - 2013) with the International Award for Health and Dignity of women.

New York, 8th October, 2009.
Durjoy is one of ASF’s most charismatic spokespersons. Eight years old and smart as a whip, he can be found running through the halls of ASF on some unspoken mission to find chocolate or play pranks on the staff. He is an energetic spirit whose very demeanor brightens the mood of the room. Having been a patient and member at ASF since 2004 when he was 15 months old, Durjoy has called ASF home for nearly his entire life. Recently he was able to return to his village and start school.

Durjoy was only one and a half months old when his paternal uncle’s wife fed him acid in an attempt to kill him. She was enraged by the fact that he was the only male born in the joint Hindu family and based on Hindu Inheritance law he would end up inheriting the family wealth.

He suffered for almost one year after his attack, remaining in his rural village without proper treatment before he was taken to DMCH, where he met Dr. Hiles, who brought him and his family to ASF. The corrosive liquid had melted Durjoy’s chin and mouth and amalgamated with his chest. It became difficult for him to breathe and eat on his own. He almost died following a surgery and was in the ICU for two months. Those days ICU support for burn cases and children were limited. To this day doctors marvel at his case and call it a medical miracle. He is one of the few complex cases who required treatment abroad and ASF was able to send him to Prince of Wales Hospital in Hong Kong. Even after multiple surgeries (and more to come), Durjoy still needs much physical and speech therapy in order to be able to lead life as normal as possible.
Durjoy cannot eat solid food and must be fed through a feeding tube. His injuries have also left him unable to speak properly. Despite this, Durjoy is not without the ability to communicate, with his animated eyes and body language. Durjoy's parents have been at his side throughout his ordeal and make great sacrifices every day in order to care for their beloved son.

Durjoy, 2 years old here and can’t be stopped; he claps his hands in delight!
Durjoy has experienced one of the most horrific crimes and has lived with its consequences. Nevertheless he approaches the world with open arms. With his family and supporters offering so much encouragement, Durjoy has been able to overcome enormous adversity.
Durjoy is a creative kid, with a lot of artistic expression and vision. Unfortunately, there are very few facilities in Bangladesh that cater to the needs of children like him, who need continuous medical attention and special education. One can only hope that he will continue to surprise beyond expectation as his name translates - UNBEATABLE.
Survivors take part in a group recreational activity at Thikana, a rehabilitation center established in 1999 with support from the British Women's Association and British High Commission to address the growing need for pre and post operative nursing care by an overloaded DMCH burn ward.

ASF has found that music and other recreational activities really help survivors relax and open up, which is essential in ensuring their psychological health. Survivors gather together with singers, often prominent figures in the arts community, like Tapu, in this photo, who volunteer their time in support of the survivors.
In 2000, when Asma was 13, she became a target of violence for being one of the few girls in her village to seek secondary education. She was harassed and mocked because of her ambitions by a man who would wait for her on her way to school. He attempted to propose marriage to her, but Asma denied him. Asma’s desire for education was unwelcome and perceived as subversive in her community and when it became apparent that her focus was on self-improvement rather than becoming a wife and homemaker, it was too much for the man to handle. Asma’s rejection infuriated him and he retaliated by stopping her from being able to attain the education she desired.

The trauma that Asma experienced after her attack was enough to make her question her decisions. Her journey to recovery has been painstakingly difficult. She has had numerous surgeries and will likely require more in the future.

On reflecting over her experience, Asma explains, “I had no interest or desire to continue my studies because my dreams were completely shattered.” Despite feeling defeated, Asma was eventually able to find the motivation to continue her studies, knowing that it was the only way to take control of her future. Through ASF, Asma was enrolled in a school and received tuition and educational support; she passed her SSC and HSC exams and was recruited as a peer counselor, providing psychosocial support to fellow survivors at ASF.

Currently, Asma has a job in government service where she is a Family Welfare Assistant, providing advice to underprivileged families and ensuring their treatment. She says about her work, “I am very happy working here, I get a great sense of satisfaction here and am always respected by my peers.”

Though she has become a beacon of hope for fellow survivors, Asma still encounters many social pressures and criticisms: “People mindlessly ask, “Why didn’t you just marry him?”... Sometimes it hurts, people should know that I have the right to say “no”.” These days, Asma has become a respected member of her community; she is invited by local women into their homes for her advice and lends an empathetic ear to their problems.
Asma stands proud, greeting her visitors, who have traveled by boat, with a smile. She lives in a village called Oshtogram in Kishoreganj, a place surrounded by water in the monsoon.

Asma was one of the first acid survivors who was trained to make Pressure Garments at ASF - a material essential for burn treatment. She was also trained as peer counselor and supported survivors at the ASF Hospital.

She worked in ASF for many years before she returned to her village and has steadily become an esteemed community health advisor.
Working as a Family Welfare Assistant in Oshtogram, Asma often visits local families and advises them on health and basic medical practices. Here she is welcomed by women and children while on a community assignment.

Asma sits with a woman in her home to discuss good family planning practices.
Despite the adversity she has faced, Asma and her family share a loving and unbreakable bond. She and her husband adore their two daughters and have channeled all their energy into their daughters’ futures.

Asma lives in a ‘Haor’ area where during the monsoon the only way to travel is by boat. After her attack, Asma was rushed to hospital following a two hour boat journey but nobody poured water to wash her wounds. At the time hardly anyone was aware of the difference pouring water makes in reducing severity of acid burn injury. As a result of the “Pour Water” campaign survivors nowadays require a lot less medical intervention than before.
The German Section of Amnesty International presents Monira Rahman former Executive Director of the Acid Survivors Foundation with the Amnesty International Human Rights Award 2005 in recognition of her resolute commitment to the cause of Human Rights.

Berlin, 19th March, 2006

Fozilatun Nessa, Treasurer and Survivor Representative, Governing Body, Acid Survivors Foundation received the International Human Rights Award in 2011 from the French Republic.

Paris, 10th December, 2011.
After Shima was born, her father was so enraged with her being born a girl child that he denied his marriage to her mother, Mirash. However, when Mirash was successful in proving the marriage legally, he threw acid in an attempt to kill them both. After which, Shima and Mirash came to ASF to receive treatment.

The long-term effects of acid violence are unpredictable and there is usually a need for multiple reconstructive surgeries, not to mention the psychological consequences of growing up ‘different’ for children survivors.

Despite the challenges she has faced all her life, Shima is charming and shy, but hopeful. As she grows to young womanhood, she will learn about the limited utility of outward appearances and how they are inadequate for representing one’s true self. Mirash has enrolled Shima in school with the hope that she will become educated, articulate and with dreams to change the world.
Shima and Mirash, 5 years after the incident. Shima returns to ASF regularly to receive treatment for her scarring, which is complicated by the fact that she is growing so quickly.

Shima plays with a friend at a National Survivors’ Conference in Savar. Little children can be particularly unforgiving when it comes to other children who look different, but fortunately there are still those who only see the beauty in a friend. While photographing Shima asked the photographer, “Ain’t I looking great?”
School can be difficult for young survivors when they are constantly challenged to explain their appearance or made to feel different.

The England cricket team on one of their two visits to the ASF Hospital. Many national and international celebrities have stood beside the survivors and the Foundation over the years to express solidarity in ASF’s fight against acid violence.
In 2008, Neela was a beautiful girl of 15 years, an excellent student and an accomplished dancer and singer. Her talents attracted her to an older man who was determined to make her his wife, but to his chagrin, Neela had other plans for her future. Instead of simply becoming someone’s property, she was interested in pursuing her studies and being an actress some day. She would never get the opportunity, though, as her would-be husband took it upon himself to destroy her beauty and threaten her willpower to succeed.

The mentality behind an attack is such that the perpetrator wants to destroy the beauty of the woman he wishes to possess, so that no one else will want her or find her desirable. This kind of ownership and claim on a woman’s body makes women the target of aggressive courtship behaviors. Prior to her attack, Neela was an independent and studious girl, with serious ambition and focus. After her attack, Neela is that same studious girl, but with an even more hardened determination to succeed in her education. She is currently in her first year of studies, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts Honours in Accounting, hoping to begin a career in banking.

Neela’s life has been drastically and irreversibly changed due to her attack 5 years ago, but she has only become more resolved to get the things she wants out of life. She hopes to fall in love and have children someday, in addition to having a fulfilling career and enriching work as a community leader.
Neela’s incident happened in Sirajganj, but she was brought to ASF in Dhaka within 24 hours. Immediate treatment and surgery was crucial to minimizing the damage.

Neela, like many other survivors who have come to ASF, worries greatly about her livelihood and that of her family’s. It is a traumatic experience to have your appearance which is a part of your identity, damaged beyond repair. Neela takes a moment to wipe away her tears.
Neela has learned to recognize her inner beauty and to cherish life, though it is not easy.
Neela embraces her mother, who was there by her side through every step of her ordeal.

It has been shown that if women feel supported, recovery is speedier with positive effects on mental wellbeing. Building a community of support has been a crucial part of the ASF mission.

Neela gets dressed up at her home in Sirajganj.

For survivors, the act of putting on makeup can be therapeutic and gives them a sense of control over their appearance. It is a feminine ritual that brings comfort.
Perpetrators of acid violence attempt to rob women of their supposedly greatest social currency—their beauty.

But what is “true beauty”?

Acid survivors know that the answer to this question lies in deep inner reflection and cannot be found in magazines or pop culture. Art therapy helps survivors discover that the kind of beauty that exists on the surface cannot compare with inner beauty, i.e. human quality and positive personality.

Survivors perform a play “We Are Not Alone” wearing masks representing the stigma imposed by the society and their stand against it.
Speaking with Hasina, one almost forgets the trauma she has had to overcome. The experience has done so little to dampen her outspoken, vibrant personality and she can be caught speaking to anyone and everyone about everything from fashion to politics to her current government job. Despite her effervescent nature, there is no questioning the devastating impact that one fatal night had on her growth and development.

When she was 17 years old, Hasina was attacked in her home in Raniganj, by a worker in the family household. They had quarreled, and in his anger, he decided to retaliate by throwing acid. The attack left her face and neck badly burned and Hasina lost her left eye. After her treatment and receiving discharge from the hospital she returned home and encountered terrible social isolation and exclusion, and was met with hostility and fear by her community.

Knowing that she would need help and there was no one to help her, Hasina took it upon herself to file a case against her perpetrator and would regularly walk to the police station to ensure that activities were being pursued. ASF called a press conference with a daily newspaper and she told her story. The Inspector General of the Police read the story and issued an order for an arrest to be made within 24 hours. He was literally caught and sent to prison within 24 hours following the order though he was absconded for the last three years.

Hasina is fearless and knows her rights. These days, she is working at the Narayanganj Land Office as a clerk, where she is making strides as a high-achieving employee.
Hasina has undertaken training courses at ASF to develop her computer skills, which she uses in this picture as a member of ASF’s Legal Unit. She has provided legal advice to many survivors during her time at ASF.

Hasina loves to dress-up and present herself instead of hiding away. She is an achiever and does not let anyone tell her any differently. Her courage and success was recently acknowledged by the Government of Bangladesh through the ‘Joyita’ award.
Fashion modeling is just one of the activities that Hasina participates in. She doesn’t back down from any challenge—even runway modeling!

Hasina’s arm shows a long, rolled scar, a constant reminder of her struggle and the bravery she has commanded in overcoming it.
At her new job, Hasina maintains the databases at the Land Office in Narayanganj. Hasina has been well-praised by her superiors as an excellent worker.
Survivors perform a play at the ‘Shahid Minar’ written and organized by ASF called ‘Ayna’ (In English: Mirror). In it one of the main characters shatters a mirror, representing her freedom from its oppressive reflection; she turns to the audience and asks, “I’ve shattered this mirror, but who will destroy the mirror in the eyes of the society?”
Jahanara holds a brochure of a National Conference held in 2006 featuring her along with another survivor Rupali. The original photo was taken at a picnic, one of the many recreational activities ASF arranges for the survivors.

Over the years, survivors have had the opportunity to take various training courses helping them gain valuable workplace skills.
ASF helps link survivors to various workplaces where they are trained in employable skills. One such program trained and employed survivors in assembling light bulbs.
Though the number of acid attacks has reduced, still faces like Moni’s are destroyed.
Moni came to ASF for treatment at an early stage following her attack. Though ASF was able to provide her with the best possible treatment available, ASF is still fighting to save her sight.

Moni, at her school after returning from treatment, speaking to classmates about the punishment her perpetrator deserves.
Nowadays, ASF prepares the community and family when a survivor returns for the first time. Survivors had to face difficulty returning home especially those with visual disfigurement.
When we talk about acid violence, the focus is often on the facts; there is invariably a mention of the extreme physical trauma that scars most survivors, always a salacious description of the attack, a mention of the number of incidents (in 2002, a peak year, over 490 attacks were recorded in Bangladesh alone) and why (refusals of marriage proposals and property disputes account for 55% of attacks). While this information is important to help us understand and address acid violence, it represents a macro-view of what is a deeply personal crime. What most people never hear about is the aftermath—what happens to the women, men, girls and boys whose lives are forever changed by a single vial of acid, after treatment and rehab is over? Where do they go, what do they do? At ASF, we have seen the evolution of many survivors, from patients in the hospital ward to full-time employees, integral to our team. We created this book to change the conversation from numbers and statistics to shed light on the amazing progress that many of our survivors have achieved when given the proper nurturing and support. Photographer Shafiqul Alam Kiron, 1st prize winner of the World Press Photo contest of 1998 has through his lens' shown us the inspiring nature of their stories and has reminded us that the human spirit is capable of great things when given the chance to flourish.

I am proud to be a part of the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), which has helped these amazing individuals in their quest to become empowered. Coming to terms with such violence seems overwhelming enough, but the survivors here have not only overcome enormous obstacles and unrelenting adversity, but some have engaged themselves into their studies and jobs with fierce determination, and others have become active change agents, pillars of strength for their communities. Their strength, their resilience, their sheer force of will makes these survivors—there’s only one word for it—unstoppable. I invite you to share in their journeys with us.

As proud and honoured I am for my association with ASF, I am inspired and amazed by the resilience and strength shown by young and older survivors alike. Their determination and fortitude are extraordinary examples of how every challenge can be converted into opportunity.

This book shows many facets of courage, commitment and passion of survivors to overcome adversities and catalyze social change. The profiles in "Unstoppable" are of women and children who have experienced one of the most heinous crimes of our time, but who have defeated violence, victimization, depression and despair by courage to step into new roles as change agents and role models for others.

These women and men are unforgettable. I will always remember meeting Moni, only 15 at the time of her attack in 2012, who is still dancing and singing despite having lost her eyesight to acid attack. Her talent has neither been compromised nor diminished by her injury, but made even more beautiful for her perseverance.

Durjoy, too, is extraordinary—truly invincible as his name is. Eight years old and smart as a whip, he is one of ASF’s most familiar faces and a storehouse of wit and humour, unperturbed by his speech impediment caused by the brutal acid attack. There’s Peyara, a veteran survivor, whose story is one of heartwarming love and support from a family that helped nurture her into a community leader who works with other survivors to fight for more awareness around violence against women in Bangladesh society.

These survivors and many more are beacons of hope and strength, not just for other acid survivors, but for every woman, child and man. ASF, I am proud to say, has been the cradle of such amazing stories of success since it began its modest journey in 1999. Whatever little we have done in ASF is about the indomitable human spirit. ASF is a story of a little spark to ignite the great potentials of victims of inhuman brutality.

Please join us in celebrating their unstoppable dignity, ingenuity, fortitude, power and pride.

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman
Chairperson
Acid Survivors Foundation

Selina Ahmed
Executive Director
Acid Survivors Foundation
It was the summer of 1997, when I first gave some thought to social documentation; inspired by my fellow photographers at MAP. At this point I had no idea or any intention of documenting the lives of acid victims. I began to become interested in the stories about violence I saw pop up with more frequency in the newspapers. This was how I first learned about acid victims and learned that they were treated at the small burn ward at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. I visited the ward to learn more but what I didn’t realize is that often, reality is more horrifying than fiction. The ward contained burn victims in such pain and agony that I couldn’t stand still. Amidst all the blood and horror I felt compelled to do something. I made contacts with Naripokkho, a women’s advocacy agency in Dhaka, and they connected me with the women that would become my first subjects. As a photographer, my most fluent medium of expression is the camera; I decided to do a photo story about acid victims in part to understand the pain before me, so that I may explain it to others that were not yet aware. Immediately, I knew the photos had to be sensitive to the women in them, and to the public, though I was baffled about how I could overcome all my feelings and proceed. I decided that my work would be in black and white. As I considered how to approach this delicate project, I couldn’t help but feel guilty of my gender, especially when I heard that some of the victims were afraid of men as a result of the attack. I didn’t want to add to their terror though I was anxious to tell their stories. I felt nauseated and often questioned my ability to carry out the task before me. But despite the many worries I had, I couldn’t look away; I knew that I had to try.

Even after my first photos were completed, I did not know how best to present them. UNICEF offered to host my photos in an exhibition to raise awareness for acid violence. When I showed these photos to my friends and colleagues, their reactions often confused me. Too many people were focusing on the photographs as art, without recognizing the individual whose experiences were documented. The whole point of my project was to bring insight into their lives, but so many people seemed more interested in the photos as objets d’art instead. This was very puzzling and I felt increasingly guilty as more people reacted this way. I asked myself almost all the time if what I was doing was right; I doubted if I could truly raise any awareness at all. When I got the World Press Photo Award in 1999, I was even more disheartened. I was very confused as to why I was being awarded for something so terrible. By the time I arrived in Amsterdam for the ceremony, however, I realized that there was a whole international community interested in my work for what it represents: awareness of acid violence. This was encouraging and helped fuel the years-long project that has become my mission. That same year, 1999, ASF was established, an institution that I would become very familiar and friendly with, which provided holistic care to the acid victims, who had previously had little recourse post-attack.

After ASF was started, I was able to establish and maintain contact with many of my subjects, getting to know them and their families. Through the years I have become very close to many of the survivors and their families; they are more than friends. Although I can never understand their pain, I like to think that my desire and willingness to listen to their stories and share them with others has provided some solace. These women are my heroes, courageous and with such spirit. Many of them have surpassed what anybody in society would have expected from them, attaining new heights professionally, personally, and socially. Through my work and through their own endeavors, these survivors have become instrumental participants in the fight against violence against women, and I am proud to be a part of their campaign to inspire change in others.