

Elora Halim Chowdhury

Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh

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Reviewed by Nada Mustafa Ali, 2017

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In *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh*, Elora Halim Chowdhury challenges feminist and human rights discourses that homogenize and "other" women and communities in the global South, and that erase local activism when accounting for organized resistance and activism against gender-based violence. The author draws upon the work of Gayatri Spivak and Makau Mutua (Mutua 2001), among others, to challenge rescue narratives that construct survivors of acid violence as "victims" who lack agency, and that also construct perpetrators of acid violence as savages.

Taking anti-acid violence activism in Bangladesh and feminist advocacy organization Naripokkho as points of reference, Chowdhury argues that although transnational organizing may offer resources and a wider reach for organizations, it can also have a devastating impact on organizations. Chowdhury uses Elizabeth Friedman's concept of "transnationalism reversed" to shed light on less known and unintended consequences of transnational organizing on local women's movements. The book documents the struggles of Naripokkho, a women-led campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh. It examines how the transnational alliances this organization formed have affected the organization, and how international partners eventually erased the voices and role of activists in Naripokkho from the story of resisting acid violence in Bangladesh.

Although the book amplifies the voices, contributions, and experiences of local activists, it does not romanticize these experiences or mobilizations. The author highlights the difference within the anti-acid movement, including socioeconomic differences between the leaders of some of the urban-based women's organizations, on the one hand, and the users of the services of these organizations (often rural, low-income women), on the other. Unacknowledged privilege, based on religion, ethnicity, or social class, argues Chowdhury, often perpetuates clientelism and undermines feminist alliances.

Transnationalism Reversed consists of five essays that revolve around the theme of women's transnational organizing against gender-based violence, and that challenge "homogenizing representations of women's movements and transnational alliances" (8) by shedding light on the

contradictions and complexities of diverse women's organizing. The book starts and ends with a reflection on the story of Bina Akhter, a young Bangladeshi activist who is also a survivor of an acid attack.

In the prologue, the author discusses a celebration of the *Faces of Hope* TV report on acid violence in Bangladesh, to which Akhter invited her. The author uses this event as an entry point to highlight the problematic ways in which media and activist discourses in the global North at times construct crimes of acid violence as "a 'little known' crime that affects low-income women in a patriarchal Muslim country." She asks: "little known to whom?" *Faces of Hope*, and the event she attended, argues the author, have also represented a single actor (in this case Akhter), not as an organizer of an anti-violence campaign, but as the only representative of women affected by acid attacks. The same discourse, argues Chowdhury, overlooked the vital roles and contributions of local actors, such as Naripokkho, a feminist advocacy organization that started an anti-acid campaign in 1983, as a labor of "creativity and imagination" (xiii). Instead, argues Chowdhury, *Faces of Hope* essentialized "rescuers and victims on either side of the North-South divide" (xix).

In a quest to restore the voices of local activists to narratives on acid violence, the author devotes chapter 1 to a discussion of the campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh, which includes documentation of the history of Naripokkho and the transnational alliances this organization built with diverse actors. These alliances, argues Chowdhury, resulted, among other things, in the creation of a donor-funded umbrella organization that was able to offer comprehensive care to a larger number of survivors of acid violence compared to Naripokkho. Nonetheless, this engagement resulted in diminishing Naripokkho's involvement in the campaign. The resultant partnership, argues the author, involved a co-optation of Naripokkho's survivor-centered feminist strategies while estranging key activists from the work of the umbrella organization. In addition, the new campaign consolidated an individualistic, neoliberal agenda that ignored the need for systemic change to end acid violence. The author finds ignoring the structural root causes of violence problematic, given that acid violence is the product of systemic inequality, on the one hand, and the forces of neoliberal globalization and socioeconomic inequality in South Asia, on the other.

Chapter 2, which discusses the local realities of acid violence in Bangladesh, starts with the stories of Nurun Nahar and Bina Akhter. The experiences of these two survivors of acid violence, argues the author, reveal the failure of the Bangladeshi state and its medical and legal institutions in responding to gender-based violence. Nongovernmental organizations and movements such as Naripokkho that step in to address the needs of survivors often face multiple challenges. These include a rising demand for their services, a lack of adequate resources, and a funding culture that intensifies unhealthy competition and that consequently undermines collaboration between organizations. For example, the book shows how a partnership between local organizations and activists with one of the United Nations agencies to establish the Acid Survivors Foundation disrupted the anti-acid campaign's initial focus on advocacy, community mobilization, and local women's leadership; instead, it focused on charity, and on developing survivors' embroidery skills. This resulted in internal struggles within Naripokkho.

In chapter 3, the author looks closely at transnational feminist practices of "trauma, victimization, and survival" by tracing the journeys and experiences of two survivors of acid violence who traveled from Dhaka to Cincinnati, Ohio to undergo surgeries and treatment for

their injuries. Through examining the experiences of these two young women in the US, the author also discusses and challenges global structural inequalities that inform the choices of survivors of acid violence, but that also limit the agency of survivors. She further challenges the tendency to construct survivors in binary terms as "bad victims" and "good victims," based on the choices they make.

In chapter 4, Chowdhury turns her analysis of the politics of representation inward, and offers a rich critical analysis of *Ayna* (the mirror), an advocacy film that engages the interrelated themes of marriage, acid attacks, and local feminist advocacy in Bangladesh, and the ways neoliberal globalization shapes the lives of women workers in garment factories dealing with acid violence. Despite some limitations, argues the author, *Ayna* offers an alternative narrative both to nationalist and postcolonial filmic constructions of Bangladeshi women as the epitomes of authenticity, and to simplistic constructions of Bangladeshi women as oppressed victims battling oppression by "Brown men" in some of the global media narratives.

In chapter 5, which engages the themes of religion, development, and women's organizing in Bangladesh, the author further examines the pitfalls of transnational collaborations and activism. Chowdhury argues that although global feminist organizing has succeeded in placing gender-based violence and violence against women on the global policy agenda, transnational alliances at times construct physical violence as rooted in patriarchy and as detached from other structures of inequality, such as global neoliberal capitalism, racism, and other social circumstances that hinder women's abilities to lead secure lives.

Without abandoning the biting political and social critique of "progress" and "rescue" narratives, the author concludes the book on a positive note, where she also sheds more light on the intellectual and political partnership that informed the research and writing of *Transnationalism Reversed*. First, Chowdhury reflects on her participation in Bina's graduation from high school in Cincinnati. Then, she transports the reader to Dhaka, where the late Nasreen Huq, a lead activist of the anti-acid violence campaign, who read and critiqued earlier chapters of the book, started a singing group for young women survivors of acid attacks.

[T]hese young women meet every Saturday afternoon in Huq's apartment. . . . With the cool breeze wafting into the living room through the open verandah overlooking the Dhanmondi Lake, and over mugs of tea, and plates of *mishti* (sweets) and *shingara* (flour pastry stuffed with peas), I spent many afternoons filled with laughter, stories, and songs with this group in the early to mid 2000s. The support and healing these women found in one another can be hardly described in words. (180)

Building on this display of a refreshing local politics of solidarity and healing, the author offers important theoretical and political insights, exploring possibilities for feminist solidarities and struggles (in the North and the South), that do not mimic the "vertical power relationships" that characterize certain development discourses and practices. Such solidarities, argues the author, should pay attention to unequal power relationships and to class and nationality-based privilege.

Not only is *Transnationalism Reversed* an engaging, beautifully written book that makes a significant contribution to women's, gender, and feminist studies, it is also a careful, reflexive ethnography that is based on what the author describes as an intellectual and political partnership with Bangladeshi feminist activists. Throughout the book, Chowdhury succeeds in positioning herself on the same critical plane as the subjects of her research: as an insider/outsider activist,

journalist, and later a member of the Northern academy. She highlights the competing and at times contradictory narratives of anti-acid violence campaigns in 1990s and 2000s Bangladesh, using discursive and narrative analysis that recognizes the role of different actors in self-consciously constructing meaning (15).

The book has deservedly garnered high praise since its publication in 2011. It won the prestigious National Women's Studies Association's Gloria E. Anzaldua book prize. On the back cover of the book, Lila Abu-Lughod describes Chowdhury's analysis as "sharp and eye-opening," and the book as "groundbreaking." Azza Basarudin praised Chowdhury's sensitive methodology and her "thoughtful, engaging, and sharp analysis" (Basarudin 2012). I warmly echo these observations, but I want to conclude this review with one cautionary note, and by highlighting the value of the book as a teaching resource.

The cautionary note is that although it is important to challenge feminist and human rights discourses and practices that reduce women and communities in the global South into "victims and savages," and although it is crucial to always be cognizant of the politics of representation and of unequal power relationships between and within different institutions and civil society actors, some of these critiques might play into the hands of social and political forces that aim to discredit and to reject local feminist organizing, or to undermine agendas seeking gender equality and the transformation of oppressive social, economic, and political structures, institutions, and social relations (see Najmabadi 1991; Narayan 1997; Ali 2015). Such attempts could at times be driven by concerns that are antithetical to the author's feminist critical perspective, including a desire to avoid scrutiny for perpetrating violations or for the failure of state actors to protect civilians, or a fear of social change and transformation.

The second point I want to emphasize is that *Transnationalism Reversed* is also an excellent and accessible teaching resource. I have taught the book in a gender, development, and globalization course that focuses primarily on South Asia, and my students loved it. They appreciated the way the author documented women's experiences of acid violence and women's resistance to such violence. Some of the students also appreciated learning about the complexity of feminist struggles in a global South setting, and in the context of neoliberal globalization.

I believe the book can work equally well in gender, globalization, and development courses that have a broader regional focus, or that focus on other regions, given the comparative value of the analysis. The book would also work well in courses that focus on human rights discourses and practices and in advanced feminist methodology courses. It is best to assign the whole text, but it is also possible to assign solo chapters of the book. Chapter 4, for example, would work well in media and film studies courses.

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