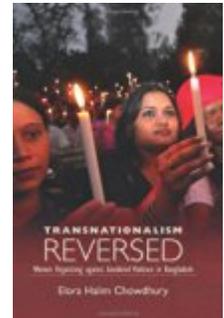


Elora Halim Chowdhury. *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh.* Praxis: Theory in Action Series. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011. xix + 222 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-3751-4.



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According to the Acid Survivors Foundation, the organization working to eliminate acid violence in Bangladesh, the number of attacks in 2000, when the research for this book was begun, was 240; in 2011, when the book was published, there were 92 acid incidences; and the number in 2012 was 72.[1] Despite this decline in incidence in the last decade, between 1999 and 2012, 3,424 people suffered acid attacks in Bangladesh. Women, children, and men were among the victims; women and girls were targeted most often. The predominant reasons for acid throwing include disputes over dowry, family, or marital problems; land, property, or money clashes; and refusal of marriage proposal or invitation to engage in sex.

Nitric or sulfuric acid, usually thrown at the face, causes the skin tissue to melt, often exposing the bones below the flesh. Many acid attack survivors have lost eyesight. In addition to the psychological trauma, some survivors also face social isolation and ostracism; women and girls who have survived acid attacks have great difficulty in finding work and have very little chance of ever

getting married. The trajectory of the Bangladeshi women's campaign against acid violence from the mid-1990s to 2011 is the subject of the ethnographic study that informs the text.

In *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh*, Elora Halim Chowdhury "explores," as the back matter states, "the complicated terrain of women's transnational antiviolence organizing by focusing on the ways in which the state, international agencies, local expatriates, US media, Bangladeshi immigrants in the United States, survivor-activists, and local women's organizations engage the pragmatics and the transnational rhetoric of empowerment, rescue, and rehabilitation." This book promises much and in my view, it delivers. The ethnographic research is engaging and the story of Bina Akhter, who was disfigured in an acid attack at fourteen while protecting her cousin from abduction, is powerful. The author describes how Bina lives the "global progress narrative of victim-survivor-activist" while at the same time offering a nuanced critique of the de-

velopment and use of survivor accounts within global feminism (p. xviii). Chowdhury contests that this dominant narrative erases the agency of the local Bangladeshi women activists whose groundwork made the international human rights campaign against acid violence possible.

The prologue opens with a description of an event at New York's Yale Club in 1999, honoring Connie Chung for her ABC *20/20* report "Faces of Hope," featuring Bina, the survivor-turned-activist as she traveled from Dhaka to Shriner's Hospital in Cincinnati for treatment. Chowdhury's reaction to the event introduces the main themes of the book and reveals her experience with the movement, as a journalist, United Nations consultant, and independent researcher. Her journalistic writing style shines through as she avoids exclusive forms that pervade academic prose. The presentation "decolonizes ways of knowing"[2] because her writing makes the information accessible to undergraduates and activists, as well as her peers. Her ability to analyze institutions involved in social justice and human rights—including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); medical, legal, state, and international institutions; and the media—is manifested in her rejection of the "essentialized rescuer and victim on either side of the North-South divide," which raises provocative questions and provides new insights (p. xix). As a translator of feminist theory to a general audience, she introduces the concept of "transnational feminism" without overwhelming the reader with confusing definitions; instead she weaves scholarly works from a variety of disciplines to support her position and lets the critical analysis do the explanatory work. The book is well written and well argued, and balances theory with real cases and historical circumstances.

The introduction familiarizes the reader with the key debates surrounding transnational feminism, women's organizing, and empowerment in the global South. The story Chowdhury tells is one of women building alliances across borders in the

broadest sense of the word: local, international, and theoretical. Her story also marks a "shift in the discourse of global feminism" of unity (p. xix). In Chowdhury's vision, global sisterhood is acknowledged as fraught with numerous tensions and "multiple layers of power operating in transnational women's movements" (p. 1). The text recognizes that alliances, feminist or otherwise, are built around unequal power relationships and that solidarity for political action is most effective when stakeholders are able to negotiate different agendas. Most important, Chowdhury helps the reader understand that organizers within global feminism need to listen before speaking on behalf of other women or they risk "academic feminist colonization" in the production of knowledge and policy change (p. 13).

Chowdhury's analysis aims "to broaden the discussion of gender violence to a global human rights arena" but acknowledges that research and the policy it informs are fraught with questions of "accountability and responsibility" (p. 10). She asks: what do women in the South stand to gain and lose from transnational feminist exchanges? What are academic feminists from the North willing to risk given that they "work in institutions that reward obedience and status quo, and widely discourage the convergence of action and research?" (p. 13).[3] She then directs the work toward the "colonial framework shaping women's relationship to one another within national and local spaces, particularly as they manifest through the script of global feminism" and away from the well-researched power dynamics between colonizers and natives (p. 17).

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter demystifies acid throwing as an "aberrant cultural practice" and situates it within broader systems of inequality and the intersecting force of globalization (p. 19). It outlines three phases of the national and international development of the anti-acid violence campaign: providing aid for victims in weak states that fail to do so;

acting as agents of neoliberal development; and negotiating between states, donors, and clients in contexts framed by globalization, neoliberalism, and patriarchy. In so doing, Chowdhury highlights the challenges of women's organizing within a transnational political framework. Using examples from *Naripokkho*, the women's advocacy group, she tells the story of success and failure along with some unintended consequences.

Chapter 2 addresses the story of survivor Nurun Nahar to show how the state denies women protection, like medical and legal assistance, even though they are guaranteed by law. Here, she describes instances where international NGOs have worked to mitigate these failings and shares her frustrations with the contradiction of high demand and scarce resources. Yet, even faced with what can feel like insurmountable challenges, local activists, Chowdhury notes, develop alternative strategies for victimized women's recovery within local contexts, including patriarchal and intransigent social and cultural systems.

The third chapter delves into the story of Bina, whose decision to remain in the United States after reconstructive surgery violated the contract that allowed her to enter for treatment, as well as her image as a "good victim." Chowdhury uses this chapter to discuss the power of words like "victim" and "survivor," saying that neither offers narrative agency, nor suggests a more "liberatory epistemology" (p. 20). This section helps to analyze the controversy and, by placing it within global structural inequality, reveals the actions and reactions of organizers in the transnational feminist movement.

Chapter 4, "Feminism and Its Other: Representing the 'New Woman' of Bangladesh," provides a narrative analysis of a film about a fictitious acid violence survivor and a human rights lawyer. The author does this to illustrate the emergence of "new womanhood" and the larger progressive narrative within Bangladeshi women's consciousness. Chowdhury critiques how the

victim-savior trope replicates colonial feminism and advances individualism, neoliberalism, and globalization. Examining the film's representation of development and women's empowerment in the film, and contrasting it with the lived experience of the subjects of her study, she juxtaposes multiple accounts instead of a single hegemonic narrative. In this chapter, she provides a window into contemporary shifts in the representation of ideal womanhood in Bangladesh, analyzing the sociocultural changes around notions of gender oppression within a transitioning society.

In the fifth chapter, Chowdhury explores violence against women within Bangladesh, the third largest Muslim majority nation. She analyzes how the rise of religious extremism articulates with local feminist organizing that is secular and opposed to Islamist politics—a position that is entwined with the donor-driven state and neoliberal development agenda. She challenges a global feminism primed to promote a colonial, neo-imperialist agenda to "rescue" Muslim women, subverting the wider agenda. Consistent with earlier arguments, the author criticizes the secular stance as too limiting and calls for a more nuanced examination of the proliferation of Islamist ideologies and their influence on the shape of feminist politics in Bangladesh.

Chowdhury does not address humanitarian law or the prosecution processes directly in this text, and considering the violence against women during the 1971 war and the ongoing controversy around the International Criminal Tribunal (2009) established to try war criminals, this could be perceived as a lacuna. However, her theoretical analysis on human rights applications is embedded in chapter 5 and its excellent description of the intersections of gender and religion, and the adversarial relationship between nationalist and civil society advocates within humanitarian politics. She also deals with human rights in her conclusion, which critiques the universalizing rhetoric of human rights from a transnational feminist

perspective. For those interested in gender and human rights, these final two chapters offer a great deal in the way of challenging assumptions and point to some new ways of conceptualizing alliances and shaping feminist politics around human rights.

Chowdhury wrote this book to provide an alternative view by highlighting “the complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes of diverse women’s organizing that are often left out of homogenizing representations of women’s movements and transnational alliances” (p. 8). By exploring how transnational praxis of gender violence advocacy interacts with local feminist organizing, she weaves theory and action together to expose “capitalist development, globalization, imperialism, and patriarchy” as they operate in Bangladesh and influence transnational movements for gender justice (p. 9). It is a welcome addition to women’s and gender studies, international studies, and international law and policy. Readers will be moved by the storytelling; students will be informed by the theoretical framework, methodology, and critical analysis; and scholars and activists will be inspired as they continue to practice responsible transnational feminist work. After reading Chowdhury’s text, it is clear why it was published by the SUNY press’s Praxis: Theory in Action series as it is one of the best monographs on feminist transnational praxis I have recently read.

Notes

[1]. Acid Survivors Foundation, <http://www.acidsurvivors.org/index.html>.

[2]. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

[3]. Quoting Linda Peake and Karen De Souza, “Feminist Academic and Activist Praxis in Service of the Transnational,” in *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, ed. Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 212.

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