

# **The values of this work:**

## **Supporting workers' experience at the Acid Survivors Foundation**

**By Shona Russell, Monira Rahman, Margaret Ryan  
& the workers of the Acid Survivors Foundation**

Shona Russell works as a counsellor and teacher of narrative practice at Dulwich Centre, in Adelaide, South Australia. She can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre Publications.

Monira Rahman is the Executive Director of the Acid Survivors Foundation and is one of the two founders of this organisation. Monira has thirteen years of experience in working with victims of sexual abuse and acid violence. The Acid Survivors Foundation is a unique organisation working for the protection and promotion of the rights of acid victims as well as prevention of this crime against humanity. Monira can be contacted via email: [asf@acidsurvivors.org](mailto:asf@acidsurvivors.org)

Margaret Ryan is working as a counsellor in Bangladesh. She can be contacted c/o Dulwich Centre Publications.

This paper describes a meeting of workers that recently took place at the Acid Survivors Foundation, in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This meeting was structured according to narrative ideas in order to explore ways of dealing with the psychological consequences of working with survivors of acid violence; to provide staff with an opportunity to speak about what is important for them in their work; to explore ways in which staff are already responding to the impact of the work on them; and to consider some new possibilities. A document is included outlining the skills, knowledge, experience and values of workers at the Acid Survivors Foundation.

Keywords: staff experience, trauma, narrative ideas, workers' values

The Acid Survivors Foundation<sup>1</sup> is based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and provides assistance to survivors of acid violence. Bangladesh has the highest world-wide incidence of acid violence. This form of violence is particularly vicious and damaging wherein acid is thrown on people's faces to destroy the beauty of a person. Acid causes serious and lifelong disfigurement which seriously undermines the person's confidence and they often become marginalised due to social ostracism. Acid violence is a criminal offense, but in most cases the perpetrators go unpunished due to inefficiency and reluctance of the police and public prosecutor. The majority of throwers are men and the majority of victim-survivors are women. The Acid Survivors Foundation's research shows that women are attacked for a number of reasons, including: refusing marriage proposals; refusing to develop a relationship; rejecting sexual advances; dowry-related issues; and intra-family disputes over land. The Acid Survivors Foundation provides medical treatment, counselling services, co-ordination of legal services, and support to acid survivors in relation to social reintegration. A second aspect of the organisation's work involves identifying ways to stop acid violence. This involves a wide variety of public education programs and social actions.

The staff at the centre includes nurses, doctors, lawyers, peer counsellors, case managers, counsellors and administrative workers. It is a team that demonstrates considerable dedication. Recently, a staff meeting was held in which Shona Russell and Margaret Ryan facilitated a discussion in relation to the psychological impact on staff on responding to issues of acid violence. Monira Rahman, the Executive Director of the Acid Survivors Foundation, requested this meeting and asked that it attend to four key issues:

- to examine how working in response to acid attacks affects staff;
- to explore ways of dealing with the psychological consequences of working with survivors of acid violence;
- to provide staff with an opportunity to speak about what is important for them in their work; and
- to explore ways in which staff are already responding to the impact of the work and to consider some new possibilities.

Narrative ideas informed how this meeting was structured. We will outline this structure here in the hope that this process may be applicable to other teams of people working in the trauma field.

## ABOUT THE MEETING

Twenty staff gathered together in the Acid Survivors Foundation's hospital building and sat in the customary Bangladeshi way, in a circle on the floor. Monira opened the meeting by introducing Margaret and Shona. She spoke about the importance of acknowledging the experiences and difficulties faced by staff, and emphasised the team's interest in exploring what they could do to care for themselves and each other. As there were both Bengali and English speakers present, the meeting was simultaneously translated.

An opening round then took place in which staff members were invited to introduce themselves and to speak about what was important to them in their work. In speaking about what was important to them, the workers told many beautiful stories. These stories drew attention to the particular values that they hold and the hopes they have in relation to responding to the injustice of acid violence. Workers also spoke about the history of their connection to these hopes and told stories of what it means to them to work at the Acid Survivors Foundation. Notes were taken during this discussion and, after the meeting, a document was created from these notes. We've included this document below.

Many people were touched by the stories they heard from their colleagues. Shona described how interested she would have been to interview each person about the values they bring to their work and the histories of these values. She also spoke about her interest in speaking with staff about who in their life would not be surprised to hear them speaking about their work in these ways. The staff members were then asked to consider the following key questions:

- What stood out for you in the stories told by your fellow workers?
- What do these expressions suggest to you about what is important to all of you who work here at the Acid Survivors Foundation?
- Why do you think it is that these particular aspects of people's stories touch you?
- What might you take away from this? How have you been moved by what you heard?

Margaret and Shona then interviewed each other, in front of the staff members, using the categories of outsider-witness response described by Michael White (1999):

1. They described what particular expressions or aspects of the stories had caught their attention.
2. They described what they had found themselves thinking about in regard to the lives of the staff group, and what this suggested to them about what is important to the workers at the Acid Survivors Foundation.
3. They then spoke about what in their own lives or work accounts for why these particular expressions stood out for them.
4. And finally they conveyed how they had been moved on account of witnessing the stories that the staff had shared.

Following this outsider-witness reflection, a short talk was given by Shona about narrative practice. This focused on two themes of particular relevance for workers attending to the consequences of trauma: the significance of eliciting double-storied accounts when responding to those who have been subjected to trauma (see White 2004); and ways in which staff could re-member those people who had fostered the values which are significant to them in their work<sup>2</sup>.

In bringing the meeting to a close, a discussion took place about the rich possibilities that arise when workers have the chance to acknowledge each other's values and what is precious to them in the work. The significant skills and knowledge that is demonstrated by survivors of acid violence was also spoken about, as were the contributions that survivors make to workers and to the workplace.

In Bangladesh, at the conclusion of an important meeting, there is always singing and dancing. This meeting concluded with a song, with dancing, with laughter, and the joining of hands.

We hope the structure outlined here, and the document included below, may be of relevance for other teams working in areas in which they are responding to stories of trauma.

## **A DOCUMENT OF THE SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE & VALUES OF WORKERS AT THE ACID SURVIVORS FOUNDATION**

This document has been created from conversations shared at the Acid Survivors Foundation, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on the 27th September 2005. As staff, we came together to speak about what is important to us in working with those who have suffered acid attacks. The following people were present: Dr Rebeka, Mehruba Mukti, Ruksana Begum, Rikta Roy, Gulshan-Ara-Beauty, Monwara Sultana, Ferdousi Huq Lovely, Minu Baroi, Mukti Bala, Tahmina Islam, Shamsul Islam, Fatema Parveen Putul, Arjumand Banu Mili, Runa Laila, Shufala Biswas, Mahmudur Rahman, Salma Parveen, Kakali Adhikari, Margaret Ryan and Shona Russell.

## **OUR WORK - RESPONDING TO THOSE WHO HAVE SUFFERED FROM VIOLENCE**

In working at the Acid Survivors Foundation, we have come to learn about the effects of acid violence on people's lives. We have learnt about the distress and sorrow that acid violence causes, and we have learned about our own wishes to respond in some way to those who go through these experiences. We seek to bring help to those who have experienced violence and to stand beside them. We seek to provide some relief to those who are in distress. We aim to assist people to make changes to their lives, even if these changes seem small at first. Some of our work involves assisting survivors to find ways to respond to mental stress. Other aspects of our work help to reduce physical disfigurement. For those of us who have survived acid attacks ourselves, it means a lot to us to be able to express our love and feelings for others who have also survived such attacks. We feel as if we are in this together. Importantly, our work involves the promotion of human rights. This is significant to us. It is something we care deeply about.

## **THE SPECIAL SKILLS OF THOSE OF US WHO HAVE SURVIVED ACID VIOLENCE OURSELVES**

Those of us who have experienced acid violence and have joined the staff of ASF, bring with us special understandings. We understand the

effects that an acid attack can have. We understand that, after an attack, people come here feeling very confused. We understand that survivors will sometimes struggle with severe mental health problems. We also understand the treatments and what they involve because we have been through them. Some of us have had up to seven operations since being attacked. We can explain to survivors how the treatment can help them. We also bring with us other special skills. These skills include knowing how to share our experiences with other survivors in ways that are helpful. We have skills in knowing how to support people in finding their next steps, and in how to help survivors have less mental stress. Importantly, we know from our own experiences what a difference it can make to receive loving care after the attack. For some of us, the loving care we received from our families, or from one or two people, made a big difference to us after we were attacked. This support we received inspires us to work with others. While we cannot give back a previous life, we know that expressions of love and care can make a big difference.

## **LONG HISTORIES OF COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE**

Our commitments to justice have long histories. For some of us, we have cared about these issues from childhood. Many of us have worked for many years in different organisations to support and stand alongside women who have been subjected to acts of violence and abuse. Our efforts are linked to those who have come before us. Women's organisations such as Naripoko have contributed to an awareness of women's experiences of violence and have linked people together in their determination to do something about this. Much of our work is inspired by women who have come before us. They tirelessly raised awareness of the issue of violence against women in Bangladesh and the societal context within which such acts of violence occur, and initiated services in response to this violence. Our work would not be possible without those who came before us.

## **STANDING BESIDE PEOPLE**

We know how important it is for us to be able to stand beside survivors. If someone is standing beside you, then you are not alone. Standing side-by-side with survivors enables us to express love and care for the people with whom we work. We have developed skills in standing beside survivors. This is something we can do and something that makes a difference.

## **LEARNING FROM SURVIVORS AND SHARING THEIR SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGES**

People who have been subjected to acid violence have a great deal of knowledge about what is helpful to them. We have learnt that hearing from survivors about their experiences and ideas is important in our work. Once survivors experience being listened to and respected they are also more able to trust us and explore different treatment possibilities.

## **THE HEALING SIGNIFICANCE OF TOUCH**

Acid attacks affect people's mouths, hands and other parts of their bodies that they rely on to live their daily lives. This means that people often have to learn to use their bodies in new ways and to cope with extreme discomfort and pain. In these situations we have learned about the healing significance of touch. Gentle physical touch can give a lot. It helps in creating relationships of trust and comfort.

## **ACKNOWLEDGING THE CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES OF DOING THIS WORK**

There are many challenges that we face in this work. There is sadness and sometimes we notice our own tears. This is because we care about the people with whom we work. Other times we may become angry about the effects of acid violence, because we have a strong sense of justice. Sometimes we are not sure what to do when people are distressed and confused. We wish to support them because we care about their lives. Sometimes we struggle to find ways to see past the physical disfigurement and to see the person. What is more, when we hear so many stories about violence it can sometimes be overwhelming.