

Surma Begum with unusual resilience and recovery

Surma's case is unique in the case files at ASF for her unusual resilience and tenacity in the face of extreme adversity. While many acid survivors come from poor socioeconomic conditions, Surma faced extreme poverty and neglect as a child. Her father left her and her mother when Surma was born, and two months later, after her mother remarried, Surma was mostly neglected and forced to survive off the charity of others. Attacked when she was only 15 years old in 2001, when she refused the romantic advances of a neighborhood boy, Surma's prospects were even bleaker. Her chances to use marriage as a way to a better life were greatly diminished, as it was uncertain whether or not she would be able to find a husband who would be willing to overlook her disfigurement.

Surma's attacker left her with severe burns on the right side of her face, eye, and body, blinding her right eye. Due to the extreme nature of her burns, no one could anticipate how her life would commence, with untold numbers of surgeries in her future and extreme financial constraints—the most optimistic prognosis would be a life where Surma is able to scrape by and survive on a meager income and the generosity of strangers and the local community. The attack left wounds so severe that she required an extensive stay at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, after which she was brought to ASF for further treatment and rehabilitation.

At ASF, Surma began employment training and is currently working in a school for disabled people in Bhola. Financial independence is a crucial step in the rehabilitation process for survivors, who often lose their means of subsistence due to the attack. However, due in part to her work with ASF, Surma was able to turn her life around in significant ways. In 2005, four years after the incident, Surma got married, and she and her husband are now the proud parents of a six-year-old boy. Surma's life had been on a proscribed downward spiral after her attack, but just a few years later, she was quickly on track to becoming one of ASF's success stories—Surma has gone from living on the extreme margins of Bangladeshi society as an abandoned and family-less girl, to becoming a self-sufficient mother with bright dreams for her son. Managing to become financially viable, and married with a family, Surma was able to overcome two of the most obstinate hurdles that face acid victims after their attacks.

Surma's story is representative of many other survivors', but her case is also special for the unusual resilience and recovery that Surma has managed to attain despite the enormous setbacks and consequences of the violence she has suffered. An empowered figure for survivors everywhere, Surma is a beacon of hope for those who have been egregiously abused and seek to overcome trauma in their lives. Despite her seemingly idyllic ending to a tragic event, Surma does continue to struggle with the ramifications of her disfigurement and disability. Though married to a man who was willing to overlook her appearance, Surma struggles with maintaining a happy marriage and relationship with her in-laws, fearing that they do not like her and judge her for the attack. Furthermore,

Surma's husband took it upon himself to marry a second wife, who soon left the house and abandoned the family. Surma's husband blamed her for his second wife's escape, and this issue has created enormous tension and anxiety in the domestic unit. Left to ponder how she could have caused such misfortune, Surma now faces the complex consequences of the long-term effects of her status as 'survivor'; the questions and issues that arise from this status reach far beyond treatment and rehabilitation, and beg to be understood as a phenomenon that will forever alter a woman's life and her prospects for happiness.

Despite marital turmoil, these days, Surma's life is occupied with the happy tasks of educating her son, who she hopes will one day use his talent for math to become an accountant, and working as an advocate for marginalized women's groups. In 2006, Surma was granted a parcel of land from Daily Prothom Alo, one of Bangladesh's daily newspapers, from a fund specifically set up to help enfranchise women who have been attacked with acid. Surma's plan for this land includes constructing a center where she can aid other survivors of violence in their recovery, and be an example of hope to all who have all who have experienced adversity.