

surgery to acid burn victims but it may well see foreign surgeons working alongside local doctors. But the government move is drawing a great deal of critical flak.

"The government is promising to build a burn unit but there is only one sanctioned post of a plastic surgeon in the whole of Bangladesh. All other surgeons are working against posts of other departments. The government has declined to create any posts in plastic surgery and yet they say their intentions are positive. This is pure mockery, and the intentions of the government, in tackling the problem are very unclear", a health sector activist told The Daily Star.

Among NGOs, there is a collaborative project for the treatment of 150 patients over three years between Gono Shasthya Kendra and COOPI, an Italian NGO. This GSK-COOPI project will be financed by the Italian government and involve Italian surgeons and nurses who will train local doctors both in Dhaka and at thana levels for emergency primary care. The GSK-COOPI project is likely to get off the ground some time this year, when the Italian government finalises details of its funding.

In the meantime, Monowara Hospital plans to continue its free services to acid victims in three different categories. First, 100 per cent free service, second 100 per cent free hospital, and surgical facilities but not medicines and disposables, and third 100 per cent free hospital facilities excluding cost for surgery, medicine and disposables. The cost would depend on the patient's income level and ability to pay.

At the same time, the hospital is negotiating with the government on possibilities of long-term training on plastic surgery for surgeons and nurses. Jahangir has proposed that surgeons, anesthesiologists and nurses in government services be allowed to work at Monowara on lien for two years. This would allow the hospital to draw on the

THIS was Zannat Ara then. Newly married, she was a religious, independent woman with a career and a good future to look forward to. However, she soon found out that her husband was not exactly the loving husband she wanted. He was often angry and got into frequent squabbles. Yet, she was determined to have a good life with him. In front of her eyes, she saw her husband turn into a monster who tortured her, physically as well as mentally. Her dreams soon turned into a nightmare.

However, nothing prepared her for The Night — the night her world turned up side down and fell apart. Even three years after the event, emotions still ran high as she narrated the story to The Daily Star at the Monowara Hospital in Dhaka.

It was after a day's work that she went to bed. She was sleeping when she suddenly woke up to find the lights switched on. She turned to her husband and asked if it was morning yet, and what time it was.

"No, it's 2:30 in the morning," he replied.

When asked what he was doing at this odd hour he said he had work to do which would require her hands to be tied up. Knowing of his abusive nature, she refused to let him tie her hands. He knew this girl very well; knew that religion would make her do anything.

He took out the Quran and took oath not to harm her after tying her hands. What could be greater than the Quran? Thinking this, Zannat put her hands forward while her husband tied each arm to the bed. Then, he proceeded to tie her mouth. When asked why, he said that he would read out a letter that could make her cry out aloud and that he was not prepared to listen to. When she protested he reminded her of the oath, after which she obliged.

Then he started to read the letter. Zannat listened, unable to utter a single word. Not only because her mouth was tied, but because she felt numb. She couldn't imagine what he was saying. She couldn't imagine she was married to this low-life. Tears flooded her eyes, as she listened while her husband accused her of having an illegitimate relationship with a peer (holy man) who they called father. Zannat could not bring herself to repeat the filthy, ugly words he dished out at her that horrendous night. Towards the ending, the letter read, "I will do something for which I may be hanged or stay in jail for life, none of which I'm prepared for. Therefore, I'll take matters into my hands and take my own life."

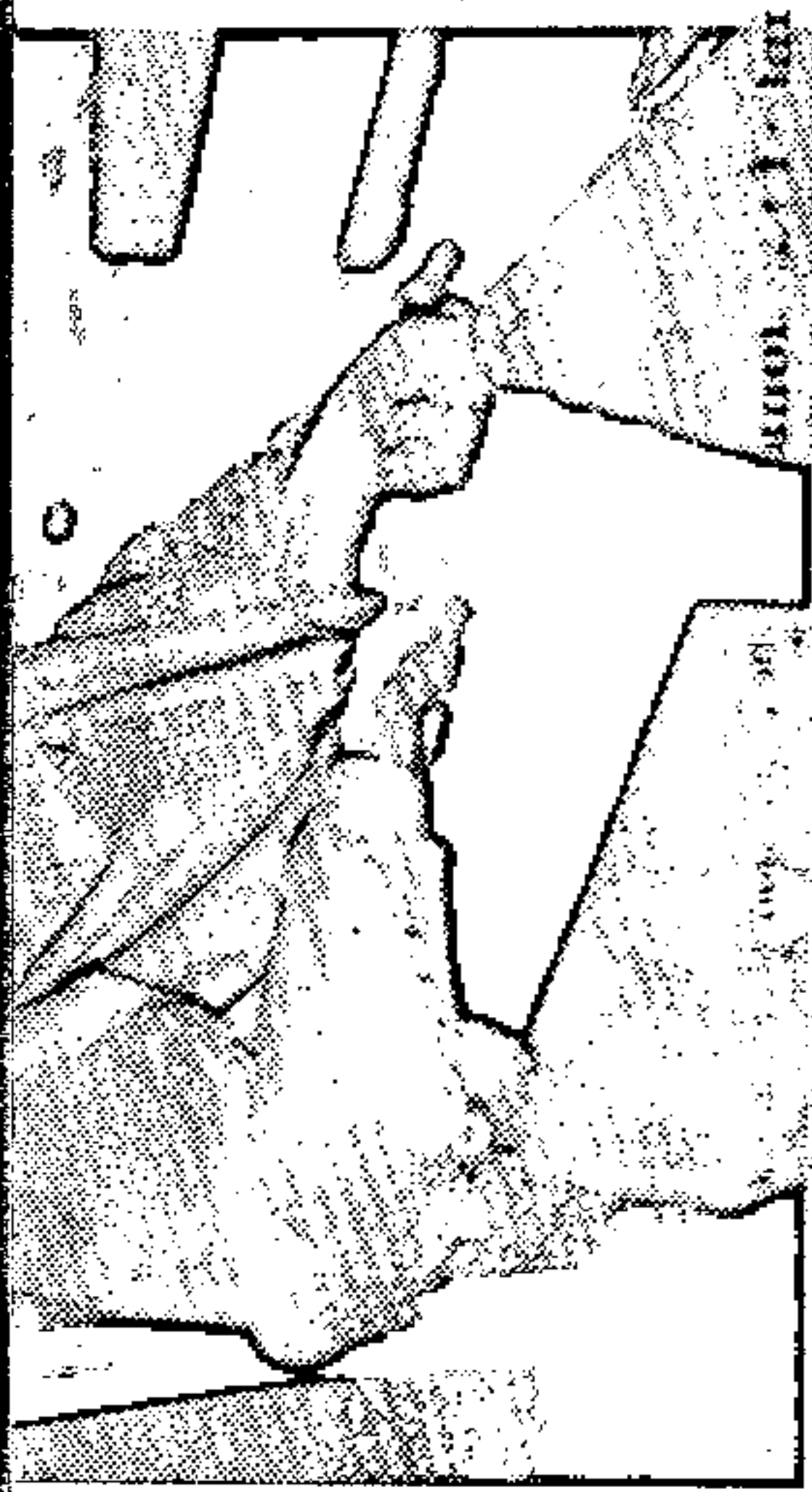
Through tears she watched as the monster produced two bottles, of what, she did not know. She watched as he came forward, opened the bottle and poured on her face something that immediately scorched and burnt her skin.

"Acid," she murmured.

That night she realized the intensity of death. She un-gagged herself with her teeth. She thought she was dying and so cried out aloud, *Innallahi Wa Innallaihe Raziun*.

As the acid was having its effect, her husband took out a bottle of poison and started to drink it. In spite of the unbearable, unthinkable pain, noticing this Zannat screamed out, "Don't commit suicide. God will never forgive you." He turned a deaf ear.

He finished the poison, lit a cigarette and sat down by his wife, watching the effect of on his wife's skin. By this time, Zannat realised that she was alive. She cried out to God for help



Zannat Ara: Fighting back

silently.

"The Kalamas, Sura Yunus and Darud Sharif were my only salvation," she recalled.

This young woman showed great courage even in the midst of the nightmare. She was able to think beyond the trauma she was going through. She knew she had to get through this. For this she is grateful to God, because she believes without Him, such quick thinking would have been impossible. She loosened her left hand.

"My left hand was tied with the cloth I used for my prayers. It was also a little old and soft. I maneuvered my hand so as to undo the knot and tear the cloth using my forefinger and thumb. After I tore most of it, I left a portion as it was, so that he wouldn't realize that my hand was loose."

The poison had started to take its action in the husband's body. As she lay in pain, he took out another bottle of acid aimed at Zannat's body. Just as he threw it at her, she jerked her left hand and rolled over. Some of the acid fell on her side and left leg while the rest split over. He fell on the bed and the next time he moved was when his dead body was taken to the hospital for autopsy.

She moved slowly. Pain made her numb. She untied her right hand and got down. It was morning by then. Horrified, she looked at the mirror to see a person she hardly knew. This was like a nightmare.

"No one, but a victim would understand or begin to feel the pain I was in," she said.

People had swarmed around, smelling the awkward, seething smell. She opened the door to their land lady and told her to take her to her office. She knew not what they thought, what they felt, who they blamed, but they took her to her office from where she was taken to the local hospital. Her boss made arrangements for her to be taken to Rajshahi where her parents and brothers and sisters lived. They were shocked beyond words. It was their greatest grief to see their youngest child be a victim of such circumstances.

"How can one imagine the agony of parents who see their child attacked upon like this?" she asked.

She is thankful to all her colleagues at Grameen Bank, who had helped her through this nightmare.

It was in 1997 that she came to Dhaka for better treatment. She got admitted to a hostel in Mirpur, called 'Batikrami Mahila Hostel'. She was there for a while when good luck befell

Rasheda K Choudhury of CAMPE talks to Sabir Mustafa

Campaigning for Quality Education

THE DAILY STAR

4 FEB 10 1999