

Colombian surgeon rebuilds acid victims' lives

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Angeles Borda ignored the cat calls as she walked past the building site. But she couldn't ignore the nitric acid that her tormentor then threw in her face.

A decade on she is still disfigured. But help is at hand.

In Colombia, said by authorities to be one of the countries worst affected by [acid](#) attacks, a campaigning plastic surgeon is helping—for free—to rebuild victims' faces and lives.

Borda, a 32-year-old mother of three, has had the ninth operation on her face at Alan Gonzalez's pristine surgical clinic.

"I know that in a few months I will look better," she says.

She has never been sure who was behind the attack, though an ex-boyfriend has been suspected.

Rebuilding faces

Previously used to treating soldiers wounded in conflict, Gonzalez, 46, has since 2010 specialized in helping women disfigured by acid.

"Plastic surgery is not the surgery of vanity, but of life. The challenge is to give them back their hopes and dreams—and above all, their smiles,"

he says.

"We don't just rebuild faces, we rebuild lives."

Official figures indicate that about 100 women get disfigured in acid attacks every year in Colombia, most of them in romantic disputes.

The country last year passed a law specifically targeting such crimes.

Struck by the "ignorance and intolerance" of such violence, Gonzalez helped set up Rebuilding Faces, an organization to help victims.

Since late 2010 he has rebuilt the faces of 15 women in some 300 separate operations.

Reason to live

Victims typically contemplate suicide, Gonzalez says.

On top of the trauma of the attack, they suffer discrimination and struggle to find work.

Borda works selling sweets on buses.

"I had two choices: sit there crying or go out and be seen the way I am," she says.

"What happened to me is very sad, but it is possible to live with the consequences. I have dreams, I have goals, and I have the strength to move forward."

Another patient, Luz Nidia Mendoza, 37, says she has not worked since suffering an acid attack in 2011.

She was blinded and is missing seeing her children grow up.

"I hear them, I feel them, I touch them. But I cannot see them," she says.

Like Borda she says she would have killed herself if it had not been for her children.

"It is because of them that I am here."

She has had 25 operations, with more yet to come, to rebuild her cheeks, forehead, mouth and nose.

She is also hoping for a [corneal transplant](#) to be able to see again.

"Doctor Alan is an angel for us. We owe him a lot," says Luz. "He gives us courage. He gives us joy."

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