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"MY SCAR IN NO WAY IS MY STIGMA"

Acid attacks against women and girls; motives, means and survivors reclaiming power

A recent spate of assaults using acid as a weapon in London has drawn renewed public attention to this form of violence, which often disfigures the target as well as causing injury. While in the UK, the widely reported increase in acid attacks has taken the form of acid being used as a weapon by gang members against men, worldwide acid violence disproportionately targets the bodies of women and girls. Through the stories of two women this briefing explores why perpetrators use acid violence to target the bodies of women and girls, and what must be done to prevent it.

Violence against women and girls – a global scourge

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is the world's most widespread human rights abuse. Physical and sexual abuse affects one third of women globally, most likely at the hands of an intimate partner.¹ VAWG happens everywhere and takes many forms: intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, rape, sexual assault, denial of resources, psychological or emotional abuse, intimidation, child marriage, FGM – are just some examples. Whatever the form, violence that targets women and girls is rooted in pervasive patriarchal norms, restricting women's and girls' control over their bodies and lives.

To have full control over your body is a fundamental and basic human right. At ActionAid we use the term bodily integrity which we believe encompasses women's and girls' right to live free from violence, the right to freedom of movement, and the right to sexual and reproductive choice.² Unfortunately acid attacks are not a new phenomenon. Corrosive materials have been used to disfigure women and girls for more than two hundred years.³ It is an extreme form of violence and uses an extreme weapon. It is not restricted to one particular group and can affect women and girls regardless of their race, religion, class, sexuality or geographical location.⁴

The increased attention on acid attacks in the UK is welcome given that the recorded number of attacks has more than doubled in the past five years.⁵ In Britain, this rise has been attributed to male gang members, predominantly in London, favouring acid as a weapon because it is more easily available and bound by fewer legislative controls than knives and guns. The global picture however shows that acid violence disproportionately affects women and

girls. This briefing focuses on the global situation. It examines why women and girls are targeted, the perpetrators' motives and what needs to be done to support survivors and bring an end to acid violence.

Our bodies are personal but are shaped by how society views them

Women's identities and roles continue to be defined through their (subordinated) relationship to men.⁶ Societies across the world define various kinds of female bodies as deficient, inferior, unpredictable, dangerous, weak, overly sexual or too powerful and in need of restraint – with violence used as a means to control and enforce women's subordinate position.

In many societies a woman is identified primarily by her bodily functions, seen essentially as a vehicle for male sexual satisfaction and reproduction, childbearing, rearing and nurturing. A woman's identity and status in society are defined by her role as mother, wife or daughter. If she does not fulfill these primary roles she risks carrying the burden of 'honour' or 'shame',⁷ living with the threat of being punished.

In many cases of acid violence it is used specifically as a means to disfigure women and girls in a variety of circumstances, among them property disputes, intimate partner violence, dowry and bride price disputes and child marriage. Acid attacks against women and girls are most prevalent in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Cambodia, Pakistan, Colombia and Uganda (and the UK).⁸

"There are many scars in human life; some are visible and some are not."

Nuran Nahar, ActionAid Bangladesh

Perpetrators use acid to target women's bodies and beauty

Acid violence is used by perpetrators who see women's bodies as commodities that can be controlled and owned. Most attacks are directed at the faces of young women with the aim to negatively and permanently alter their physical appearance.¹⁰ As well as severe physical injuries to the face and body, acid violence also results in the survivor being traumatised psychologically, socially and economically. It has a huge impact on their quality of life.¹¹

Acid thrown on a human body, causes skin tissue to melt, often exposing bones below the flesh, sometimes even dissolving the bones. By throwing acid at the body and face the perpetrator can cause blindness, hearing loss and damage limb functionality, making it difficult for survivors to return to school or find employment.¹² As a further consequence many everyday tasks, such as working and even caring for children become impossible. Survivors can become excluded from society and receive little or no access to public support services. This can expose them to poverty and destitution.¹³

Nurun Nahar's story

Nahar, 37, lives in Bangladesh, which has one of the world's highest incidences of acid violence.¹⁴ She was 15 years old when she was attacked with acid by a boy she refused to enter a relationship with. **"From my friends, I came to know that a boy liked me. But talking to a boy, let alone entering into a relationship, was almost unimaginable in my family... I could not accept his proposal and expressed my unwillingness through my friends."**

"My rejection affected him gravely. He was only 17, and felt embarrassed in front of his friends."



Nurun Nahar outside the ActionAid Bangladesh office in Dhaka.

One night he broke into her house with eleven boys. **"At first my family members thought they were robbers...he threw acid on my body and left without taking anything,"** Nahar says.

At first she didn't realise it was acid. **"My neighbour came to my house and saw that my face was turning black. They didn't know what had happened and took me to the doctor who also didn't know what had happened. The doctor didn't have any medicine for me and so I had to go to the Divisional Hospital the following day. I was in a lot of pain. The doctors there were also not familiar with acid burns and so they referred me to a Hospital in Dhaka where there was a plastic surgeon who could help me."**

Nahar suffered severe scarring to her face. **"After the incident, I was isolated from society. Mostly I stayed inside home, I used to cover my face always when I went out."**

Acid attacks are often referred to as a 'crime of passion', when in fact they are an extreme form of violence and the result of rage directed at a woman who dares to refuse the advances of a man – and breach social norm.¹⁵ By physically scarring the body, the perpetrators shame the survivor into social isolation, which also causes long-term psychosocial wounds. Often blamed for the violence, survivors are shunned or ostracised from their community, limiting access to public life, including cutting short the survivor's education or work opportunities.

Nahar's life changed when she was introduced to a prominent Bangladeshi women's rights activist Nasreen Pervin Huq who encouraged her to finish her studies and provided her with counselling. **"She taught me that there are many scars in human life; some are visible and some are not. My scar in no way is my stigma."** Nasreen was the country director of ActionAid Bangladesh and, in 2004, the organisation began lobbying the government on the issue of acid violence. Sadly, two years later Nasreen passed away. But Nahar was determined to keep her work going.

Nahar wanted to develop a network for acid attack survivors. She monitored daily news reports of acid attacks and wrote to survivors, proposing her idea to establish a network. In 2007, Nahar's efforts resulted in ActionAid Bangladesh organising the Acid Survivors Network. More than 200 people took part in the first convention. The network has helped survivors to regain their confidence, get training so they can earn a living and access legal support to help prosecute the perpetrators.

The counselling support Nahar received was life changing. However, survivors like Nahar need greater support from the government such as immediate medical care, access to long-term medical support, rehabilitation and psychological support. These are services which governments too often rely on civil society and local organisations to provide.¹⁶ Governments need to play a greater role in the prevention of attacks. The gradual increase of acid attacks suggests that legal provisions and their enforcement are not adequate or effective. Social awareness, economic and psychosocial support and strict enforcement of laws are all needed to address acid violence in Bangladesh.¹⁷

When asked about the future of the Acid Survivors Network Nahar says, **"My dream is to see the Network as a development organisation. I hope it will work so that we can stop this practice of throwing acid on women.**

"We want to see all survivors with jobs in the future, earning money for themselves. We also want to make sure that survivors get proper justice. I hope the survivors can move easily through Bangladesh and that society will accept them as normal people – not just acid victims. I also want to see survivors in government positions; I want to see them in Parliament. That is my dream."

Nahar's experience is all too common. In Bangladesh perpetrators are almost always men, with the majority of attacks targeted at women and girls.¹⁸ Despite having one of the highest incidence rate of attacks in the world, in 2016 the number of *recorded* attacks were under 50,¹⁹ with only a low number of cases going to court and an even smaller proportion of perpetrators convicted.²⁰ Attacks will continue to go unreported if survivors lack access to legal advice or support, including within customary and religious laws. To ensure survivors' access justice national governments need to build legal and institutional capacity to prevent and respond to all forms of VAWG, including acid violence.

Acid violence is not new

Acid violence has been used as a means to disfigure since the 18th century when it became easily available after being produced on industrial scales across Europe and the United States. Throwing acid at someone was often used as a means to settle labour and domestic disputes, as a way of causing someone pain and also rendering him or her visually 'unattractive'.²¹

The use of acid as a means to disfigure fell in the United States and Western Europe by the mid-20th century due to a combination of legislative action and social norm change. However, reports of acid violence in South Asia, South East Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa have increased since the 1960s. This increase in acid violence is correlated with gender inequality, acid's cheapness and accessibility, and weak legal systems which mean that perpetrators often avoid justice.²² Most attacks since the mid-20th century are perpetrated by men.

Too often acid violence is not reported

Although acid violence, as with other forms of violence against women and girls, is prohibited under international law,²³ many acts go unreported. Survivors stay silent out of fear of retaliation against themselves or their family; shame; stigma; and because they do not know their rights. The scale of acid attacks is therefore likely to be much higher than we know.²⁴

In Pakistan, it is estimated that up to 400 acid attacks against women are perpetrated by their husbands or in-laws each year, but due to underreporting only 1,500 cases have been documented over the past 10 years. Attacks are often an escalation of intimate partner violence and rooted in gender inequality, manifesting as land disputes, suspicions of infidelity, family and 'honour' disputes and rivalry.²⁵

In Colombia, again perpetrators are overwhelmingly men, whilst survivors are mostly women. It has approximately 100 recorded attacks a year. With a population of around 48 million people, this makes acid attacks in Colombia one of the highest per capita in the world.²⁶ Attacks continue despite laws in place to restrict the sale of acid and despite increased punishment of perpetrators. To ensure survivors access justice Colombia needs to invest in policing and legal capacity to ensure cases reach court.

Acid throwing is not very common in Nepal, however it does have a high number of burns cases. Despite no reliable nationwide statistics regarding the number of acid and burns violence, or VAWG and intimate partner violence, individual studies show violence against women remains widespread. A study by Nepal's Department of Health Services found intimate partner violence one of the most common causes of burns violence (involving kerosene), and harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and the dowry system directly connected in the continuing problem of acid and burns attacks.²⁷

Nur Banu's story

Nur Banu, 28, married her husband, 40, about 15 years ago when she was a young girl. At the time of their marriage, her husband's parents didn't ask for a dowry from Nur Banu's family. The couple now have three children, two teenage sons and an



Photo: Nicola Bailey/ActionAid

Nur Banu outside her home in southern Bangladesh.

11 year old daughter. Within a few years of being married however, her husband started pressuring Nur Banu for a dowry and when her family could not provide one he started to regularly abuse her.

After Nur Banu discovered her husband was having an affair she moved to a relative's house and filed for divorce. Within eight days though, Nur Banu's husband turned up at her parent's home while she was cooking and in retaliation threw acid at her; severely burning her. Her husband was punished with just one year's prison sentence. In Bangladesh, as with other countries, legal reform is necessary but unless legislation is adequately implemented it is insufficient for preventing attacks.²⁸

Nur Banu was in a non-government hospital run by volunteers and international medical staff²⁹ for two months before returning home. Her husband's attack left her blinded in both eyes, and caused damage to her arms, chest and nose

resulting in breathing problems. She was meant to have an operation on her nose to help her breathe but now she cannot afford to travel to the hospital to have the treatment. While the non-governmental organisation provides enough money for one person to travel to Dhaka for treatment, Nur Banu cannot afford for a second person to accompany her to help guide her on the seven hour bus journey from her home in southern Bangladesh.

The urgent care Nur Banu received often is not available in public run hospitals. All countries, including Bangladesh, need government funding to increase the provision and distribution of medical training and services across the whole country to ensure survivors of acid violence have access to affordable and appropriate treatment they urgently need.

“After the attack I didn’t feel anger as much as I felt worry. Five years ago my children were even younger than they are now and I was really concerned about what would happen to them”, Nur Banu recalls.

When asked about the consequences of the attack on her life she explains that it has had significant repercussions on her ability to earn an income. **“I used to be able to work and make a living but now I can’t work at all and it pains me that I have to rely on my sons to earn the livelihood for our family”.** Nur Banu now lives with her in-laws and her three children in a small village where her daughter goes to school but her two sons work making bricks to earn an income for the family.

ActionAid provided Nur Banu with psychosocial care after the attack to help her to deal with the trauma and provided her with access to information. **“It was very hard initially but I started to get my confidence back once I joined the [Acid Survivors] Network and met other survivors. Everyone talked about their own situations and what they were doing to change their lives. I now don’t need to worry about peoples’ comments and remarks and I feel more independent”.**

Nur Banu also feels strongly that there needs to be much greater justice for those who have suffered attacks so that similar things do not happen in the future. **“If laws were implemented properly and criminals of these types of attacks were brought to justice, then there would be much fewer cases like this ...**

Society should be supportive of survivors so that we can lead a life of dignity.”

Some perpetrators mean to punish or burden the whole family by disfiguring the female family member, with the intention for the survivor to be considered unmarriageable, resulting in them being considered a financial burden and bringing shame on the family.

“Changing the woman's face, the attacker seeks to save or restore his own”

Bangladeshi journalist ³⁰

Cheap and easy availability of acid makes it an affordable and vicious weapon. Limiting the availability of acid, and increasing punitive measures may see some reductions in attacks, however there is an urgent need to address the social norms which enable this kind of attack to happen in the first place.

What needs to be done?

Acid violence is one of the most extreme forms of repression and violation against women's bodily integrity. As we can see from Nahar and Nur Banu's experiences survivors are often left with limited access to medical or psychological assistance, can be left without the means to support themselves and often receive no legal recourse.

As with all forms of violence against women and girls, national governments are responsible for preventing attacks and supporting survivors.³¹

National governments should:

- **Ensure women and girls safely access justice.** Build effective gender sensitive and accessible legal systems and institutional capacity to support survivors of acid violence.
 - **Change social attitudes.** Education is critical in prevention of acid attacks and other forms of VAWG. Build capacity of media to report on VAWG, engage local leaders and educate young boys and girls promoting respectful relationships and gender equality in school curricular.
 - **Provide specialist public care.** Ensure survivors have safe access to affordable and appropriate care. Train staff, provide medical equipment and increase provision of public services to ensure survivors have access to urgent and long term physical and psychosocial support.
- **Fund and support women's rights organisations** to deliver programmes and campaign work to end all forms of VAWG, including those who work with survivors of acid attacks; raising awareness of their rights, providing legal information and support, assistance in psychological, social rehabilitation and livelihood support.
 - **Enforce measures to control the sale of acid and other corrosive substances,** to stop the cheap and easy availability of acid as a weapon.
 - **Eliminate all forms of VAWG in private and public spaces.** Develop, implement and fund national laws and policies to tackle all forms of VAWG, including discriminatory social norms that underpin it.

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