

Submission to the Parliament of Australia, Inquiry into the Rights of Women and Children

Submitted by Jaf Shah, Executive Director of Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI), a UK based international human rights not-for-profit that seeks to end acid violence (acid attacks).

1. Background to ASTI

ASTI is a registered UK charity (charity number: 1154961) established in 2002. It seeks to end a form of gender-based violence commonly known as acid violence or acid attacks.

We were founded in 2002 and helped create local foundations in Bangladesh, Uganda, Cambodia, India, Nepal and Pakistan. ASTI has partnered with the United Nations and the British Government on projects in Pakistan, Uganda, Nepal, and Cambodia. ASTI has worked with the UK Governments Home Office.

Achievements including helping to change laws in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia and the UK. Each of these countries have seen a significant reduction of reported attacks. ASTI was awarded an Impact Award by the Thomson Reuters Foundation in 2019 for helping to change UK law.

2. Background to Acid Violence

The proliferation of acid attacks occurred during the birth of the industrial revolution in the mid 1700's. Corrosive and dangerous substances such as sulphuric acid was mass produced for multiple industrial sectors such textiles and metals. This led to the easy availability of these highly concentrated substances.

The spread of industrialisation and the mass production of corrosives, led to the easy access of corrosives, leading to other regions reporting acid attacks, including Europe, the US, Asia, Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. There are multiple factors that contribute to acid violence including:

- Gender discrimination
- Easy accessibility of corrosives
- Poverty

At a conservative estimate there are at least 10,000 attacks a year globally.

3. Impact of an Acid Attack on Victim

Every year thousands of people across the world are subjected to deliberate attacks with acid. The root causes of attacks are often extremely complex, however a common factor in the vast majority of acid violence cases across the world is gender. Women and girls are overwhelmingly the targets of attacks and men are most commonly the perpetrators.

When a person is attacked with acid the effects are immediately visible, prompting instant and excruciating pain. Injuries are usually directed at the face causing life altering disabilities including disfigurement and blindness. This premeditated act is designed to disfigure, maim and blind, but not to kill. Not only will a survivor need extended specialist medical treatment, sanctuary, reconstructive surgery and follow up physiotherapy but also crucial expert psychological support. Due to their disfigurement, survivors will often face social isolation further exacerbating mental trauma.



Treatment requires specialist skills that are frequently lacking in the many countries where acid violence is prevalent. The recovery is a long and difficult road but one to which every survivor should have access.

4. Economic Impact of an Acid Attack

In partnership with Frontier Economics, ASTI has produced an economic impact assessment on the costs of acid attacks to UK society. The analysis is the first of its kind, taking wider societal costs into consideration, including costs to the criminal justice system, medical system and the victims themselves as a result of an acid attack. Acid violence does not happen in isolation, it effects a survivor's family, children and wider community.

- The estimated cost to UK society per attack is at least £63,000 - this is a very conservative estimation.
- The total cost of acid attacks to society in 2017 was therefore approximately £60m (£30m in London alone) based on 949 attacks.
- ASTI estimates 3000 acid attacks occur in Europe each year and economic costs could be as high as £190,000,000 a year
- We estimate at least 10,000 attacks globally and the annual global costs will exceed £630,000,000

As well as making a moral case for government intervention and the prevention of acid violence, this assessment allows ASTI to evidence an economic argument for ending of acid attacks. This assessment is available on request.

5. Case study: Acid Violence in the UK

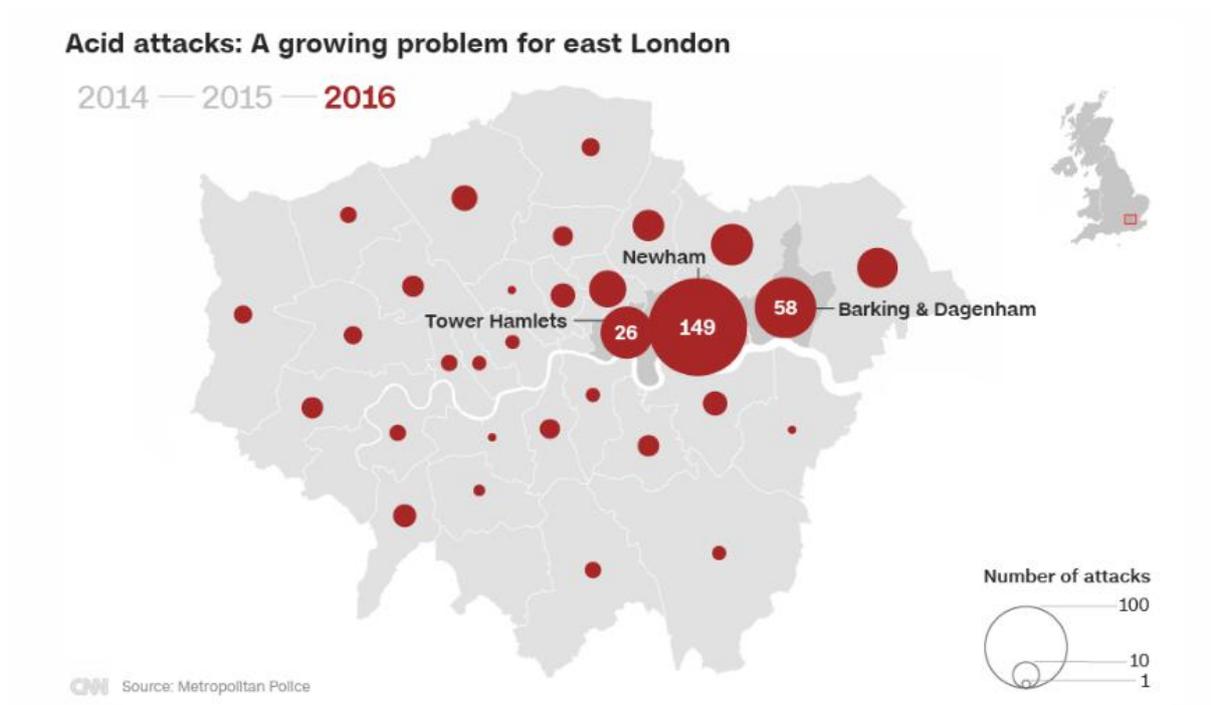
Acid violence is not a new phenomenon in the UK, there have documented attacks since at least the 1700's. However, the number of reported attacks peaked in 2016 when there were close to 1000 attacks in a single year.

5.1 Corrosives easily obtainable – limited or no controls on sales

Dangerous corrosives were easily obtainable, even those at a high concentration level. Anyone of any age was able to purchase corrosives with few checks or controls. Almost half of the attacks were committed in London, mostly in boroughs in the east of London, such as Newham, Tower Hamlets, Barking & Dagenham. The majority of perpetrators and victims were young men – men attacking women is the global pattern.

5.2 Poverty and Inequality

A review of London Metropolitan Police data shows that areas most impacted by acid violence are in east London. These east London boroughs rank high on a suite of poverty and inequality indicators.



5.3 Latest Data on Number of Attacks in UK

Latest data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) showed that 619 offences were recorded for the year ending March 2020. This shows a drop of approximately 40% from the peak of almost 1000 attacks in 2016.

5.4 Actions Taken by UK Government

Offensive Weapons Act 2019

The UK Government has strengthened the law on corrosives through the Offensive Weapons Act 2019. This contains measures prohibiting the sale and delivery of corrosive products to under 18s and on delivery to residential premises or lockers and making it an offence to possess corrosive substances in a public place. The corrosive measures were commenced on 6 April 2022.

Data

There is the annual data requirement on all police forces in England and Wales to report actual and attempted acid/corrosive attacks. This has been in place since 2019/20. The headline figure for offences is published annually by the Office for National Statistics in the Crime in England and Wales.

Policing and Sentencing

National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) has developed training for officers dealing with these attacks including first responder training and advice, which includes important information on how to respond and treat a victim at the scene. In addition, a tri service agreement has been developed with the police, fire and rescue service, and ambulance service on responding to an attack. Specialist investigative guidance has also been developed to help officers understand how to safely recover and handle any evidence at the scene and the evidence required to build a case for prosecution.

The Crown Prosecution Service has refreshed and issued their offensive weapons guidance to prosecutors which includes references to the carrying and use of acid and other corrosives in violent attacks.

The Sentencing Council also issued an important clarifying note on their website in July 2017 which makes it clear that the use of a corrosive substance is a factor that shows high culpability on the part of the offender and would indicate a greater level of offence seriousness which should be reflected in sentencing.

6. Key Recommendations from ASTI

In addition to the aforementioned actions undertaken by the UK Government. ASTI strongly recommends the following:

- Survivor support: Appropriate support mechanisms and resources available to victims of attacks such as medical care, addressing on-going psychological trauma and counselling services and an effective criminal justice system response to ensure justice is achieved for survivors.
- Public health approach: Recognising a complex set of factors contribute to acid violence, a multi-stakeholder approach is required, and the role of government is crucial to introduce policy to address underlying socio-economic factors, effective implementation of law and commissioning research to obtain data and evidence to inform any preventative actions.
- Research: Undertake the necessary research to better understand scale of the problem and identify solutions.
- Education: Educate at risk groups, including those most at risk of committing an attack; many perpetrators are young men. Recognising the gender element is key and as such programmes educating on underlying factors such as gender discrimination and violence is critical.

ASTI is presently trialling an educational prevention pilot project in specific boroughs of London that are most impacted by acid violence. Project partners include local government, Metropolitan Police and an international law firm.

More information on this pilot is available on request.

- Legislation: Law on sale and possession of corrosives including licensing system for purchase of corrosives by consumers.
- Corporate legislation: Prevent easy access to corrosives at source, introduce mandatory acid specific human rights due diligence requirements for medium and

large companies. Germany has introduced a Supply Chain Act that comes into enforcement in 2023. EU is likely to introduce something similar in the near future.

ASTI recommends following actions.

SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CORPORATES IN THE ACID VALUE CHAIN	
Recommendation ONE	Conduct risk and impact assessments of your direct operations and the operations of others in your Acid Value Chain.
Recommendation TWO	Implement measures to mitigate risks in your own operations.
Recommendation THREE	Conduct due diligence of business partners in the Acid Value Chain.
Recommendation FOUR	Respond appropriately to risks and incidents that arise throughout the Acid Value Chain.
Recommendation FIVE	Report effectively on risks inherent to your Acid Value Chain and the steps taken to mitigate them.
Recommendation SIX	Inform and educate staff on acid violence across your value chain.

Please see ASTI’s attached report, ‘Obligations and Supply Chain Considerations for the Supply of Acids: A Comparative Analysis’, this report focuses on corporates involved in the manufacturing, use, sale, distribution, storage, transport or disposal of acid (the “Acid Value Chain”) and makes recommendations on tackling and reporting on local and global supply chain due diligence with respect to acid harm-related issues.

This report can be downloaded from: <https://www.asti.org.uk/tear-couture.html>

7. Further useful links

- Understand more about acid violence by visiting ASTI website: <https://www.asti.org.uk/index.html>
- The legislative changes made in the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 to close any legislative gaps, notably on sale and delivery and possession – <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/17/contents/enacted> ([Offensive Weapons Act 2019 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk))
- Statutory guidance on the corrosive provisions – see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-offensive-weapons-act-2019> ([The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk))