

Legal and Institutional Responses to Acid Violence in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the legal and institutional responses to acid violence in Bangladesh through a critical analytical approach. Acid violence has been a serious form of gender-based crime, causing severe physical, psychological, and social harm to victims. Although Bangladesh has introduced special laws and institutions to prevent acid attacks and to ensure justice, the effectiveness of these measures remains a matter of concern. The background of the study highlights the rise of acid violence in the late twentieth century and the state's legal response to address this issue. The research follows a qualitative methodology, relying on doctrinal legal analysis, review of statutes, policy documents, reported cases, and relevant academic literature. The main objectives are to examine existing legal frameworks, evaluate the role of institutions, and identify gaps in enforcement and victim protection. The findings suggest that while the laws are strict and institutions are formally active, weak implementation, delays in justice, and limited victim support reduce their overall impact. The study concludes that stronger coordination, effective enforcement, and sustained social awareness are essential for meaningful prevention of acid violence.

Introduction

Acid violence refers to the deliberate act of throwing or pouring acid on a person with the intention of causing serious harm. In Bangladesh, acid violence has emerged as a grave social and human rights problem, affecting mainly women and girls, although men are also victims in some cases. This form of violence results in severe physical injuries such as permanent disfigurement, loss of eyesight, damage to internal organs, and, in extreme cases, death. Along with physical suffering, survivors experience long-term psychological trauma, social exclusion, and economic hardship. Acid violence in Bangladesh is a complex issue rooted in various social, cultural, and economic factors. Common causes include domestic conflicts, disputes over land or property, rejection of marriage or romantic proposals, dowry-related issues, and acts of personal revenge. Easy access to corrosive substances and deeply entrenched gender inequality further contribute to the persistence of this crime. Although the government has enacted specific laws and several non-governmental organizations have taken initiatives to prevent acid attacks and support survivors, incidents of acid violence continue to occur.

To effectively address acid violence in Bangladesh, it is essential to understand both its causes and consequences. A comprehensive approach is required, combining strict law enforcement, public awareness, social education, and adequate medical, legal, and psychological support for survivors. Only through coordinated efforts can this inhuman practice be reduced and eventually eliminated. Thus, Efforts must also be made to ensure that

perpetrators are held accountable for their actions and that survivors receive the medical, legal, and psychological support they need to rebuild their lives.¹

Conceptual Framework

Acid violence refers to the deliberate use of corrosive substances to cause harm to individuals, typically with the intention of disfiguring or maiming them. This type of violence is particularly prevalent in Bangladesh, where hundreds of cases are reported each year. In Bangladesh, acid violence primarily affects women and is often used as a form of retaliation for refusing sexual advances or rejecting marriage proposals. Acid attacks can cause severe physical and psychological damage, including burns, blindness, and permanent scarring.

The root causes of acid violence in Bangladesh are complex and involve a range of social, cultural, and economic factors. One key factor is the low status of women in society, which leads to a culture of gender-based violence. In addition, the widespread availability and relatively low cost of corrosive substances, such as sulfuric acid, makes it easy for perpetrators to carry out attacks.

In order to address acid violence in Bangladesh, a multi-faceted approach is needed. This must involve both legal and societal changes. On the legal side, Bangladesh has made progress in recent years by increasing the penalties for acid violence and improving the compensation available to victims. However, more needs to be done to ensure that perpetrators are effectively prosecuted and punished.

In terms of societal change, there is a need for education and awareness-raising efforts aimed at reducing gender-based violence and promoting gender equality. This includes working with communities to challenge negative attitudes towards women and promoting greater understanding of the impact of acid violence on victims and their families.²

A. Definition of Acid

Acid refers to a group of highly corrosive chemical substances that can cause severe damage to human skin, tissues, and organs upon contact. In general terms, acids include thick liquids or mixed chemical compounds such as sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4), hydrochloric acid (HCl), nitric acid (HNO_3), phosphoric acid, carbolic acid, chromic acid, aqua regia, and battery fluid, along with other corrosive materials. These substances are widely used in industrial, laboratory, and mechanical settings, which makes them relatively accessible and, therefore, vulnerable to misuse.

Acid violence is one of the most brutal forms of violence in Bangladesh, as it causes permanent physical disfigurement, intense psychological trauma, and long-term social exclusion of victims. Recognizing the gravity of this crime, Bangladeshi law provides a specific legal definition of acid. According to the *Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2002*, section 2, subsection 2, acid includes sulfuric acid, hydrochloric acid, nitric acid, caustic soda (postah), carbolic acid, battery fluid, chromic acid, aqua regia, and other corrosive substances as determined by the government. This broad legal definition aims to prevent offenders from escaping liability by using chemically different but equally harmful substances.

¹ <https://www.lawyersnjurists.com/article/acid-attacks-in-bangladesh/>

² Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF). (2017). Acid Violence in Bangladesh: An Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.acidsurvivors.org/downloads/publications/Acid-Violence-in-Bangladesh-An-Overview-2017.pdf>

B. Causes of Acid Violence

Acid violence is one of the most brutal and inhuman forms of violence, and it continues to affect many people in Bangladesh every year. This crime involves the deliberate throwing of corrosive substances, such as acid, with the intention of causing severe injury, permanent disfigurement, or even death. Victims of acid attacks suffer not only intense physical pain but also long-term psychological trauma, social isolation, and economic hardship. The consequences often last a lifetime, affecting education, employment, family life, and mental well-being.

Several interconnected factors contribute to the persistence of acid violence in Bangladesh. One of the most significant causes is gender-based violence. Women, in particular, are frequent targets due to deep-rooted gender inequality and discrimination. Acid attacks are often used as a means of punishment or revenge when women reject marriage proposals, refuse sexual advances, or assert their independence. Such attacks reflect the broader problem of patriarchal attitudes that seek to control women's choices and bodies. Economic motives also play a role in some cases. Acid attacks have been used to settle personal disputes, including conflicts over land, property, or business interests. In these situations, acid is used as a weapon to intimidate, harm, or permanently disable the victim.

Another major factor is the easy availability of acid. Corrosive substances are relatively inexpensive and widely accessible in Bangladesh, making it easier for perpetrators to obtain and misuse them. Weak regulation and monitoring further increase this risk. Additionally, ineffective law enforcement contributes to the continuation of acid violence. Delays in investigation, poor prosecution, and low conviction rates reduce accountability and discourage victims from seeking justice. Finally, harmful societal attitudes, including victim-blaming and lack of awareness about the severe impact of acid violence, allow this crime to persist. Addressing acid violence therefore requires legal reform, strict enforcement, and meaningful social change.

To address acid violence in Bangladesh in a sustainable and effective manner, it is necessary to move beyond punishment and focus on prevention. This requires identifying and tackling the social, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to such violence. Strengthening gender equality is central to this effort, as many acid attacks are rooted in discrimination, power imbalance, and control over women. At the same time, the criminal justice system must be made more efficient through better investigation, faster trials, and consistent enforcement of existing laws to ensure accountability. Controlling the production, sale, and use of corrosive substances is also crucial to reduce opportunities for misuse. Moreover, long-term change depends on education and public awareness. Community-based programs, media campaigns, and school education can help challenge harmful social attitudes, promote respect for women's rights, and increase understanding of the severe physical and psychological consequences of acid violence.

Present Status of Acid Violence: Bangladesh Context

This research is very closely related to the status of women in Bangladesh society. Acid violence continues to be a persistent problem in Bangladesh, with hundreds of cases reported each year. Despite efforts to address this issue, acid attacks continue to occur, leaving victims with physical and psychological scars that can last a lifetime. The present status of acid violence in Bangladesh is characterized by a number of factors, including:

High incidence of attacks: Despite efforts to reduce the incidence of acid violence, hundreds of cases are reported each year in Bangladesh. A study by the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) (2017) found that between 1999 and 2016, there were over 3,000 recorded cases of acid violence in the country.

Lack of effective law enforcement: The criminal justice system in Bangladesh often fails to effectively prosecute and punish those responsible for acid attacks, which contributes to the perpetuation of this form of violence. HRW (2010) highlights that this is due to a lack of resources, corruption, and insufficient training for law enforcement officials.

Limited access to support and services: Acid violence victims in Bangladesh often face significant barriers in accessing medical care, rehabilitation services, and compensation. A report by the Bangladesh Centre for Development Journalism and Communication (BCDJC) (2015) found that many acid violence victims are unable to afford the cost of medical treatment, and face discrimination and stigmatization in their communities.

Insufficient political will: Despite widespread recognition of the problem of acid violence in Bangladesh, the issue has not received sufficient political attention. A report by ASF (2017) highlights that there is a lack of political will to effectively address acid violence and ensure that victims receive the support and services they need.

To effectively address the present status of acid violence in Bangladesh, it is essential to prioritize the issue and ensure that those responsible are held accountable. This requires increased investment in the criminal justice system, as well as efforts to reduce the availability of corrosive substances and promote gender equality. In addition, it is important to ensure that acid violence victims have access to medical care, rehabilitation services, and compensation, and that they are not subjected to discrimination and stigmatization.

The fundamental rights granted under part three of the Constitution specifically deal with women. Article 28 states:

- (1) The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- (2) Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and public life.
- (3) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution.
- (4) Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provisions in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.

Thus, while providing equal rights for women in several respects, although only in the public sphere and not in the private sphere, the legislature could affect the typical stereotyped image depicting women as the weaker sex in need of protection.³ While providing for equality of opportunity for women, the Constitution under Article 29(3) (c) has explicitly given the right to the state to reserve certain employment and offices to men alone, if they are seen as unsuited to women. This urge of the legislature can also be seen in other provisions of the Constitution.

³*Ibid.*, Art, 8 (2).

A. The Penal Code, 1860

In Bangladesh, acid violence is addressed by the Penal Code of 1860. Section 326A of the code criminalizes the use of acid or similar substances with the intent to cause harm, and mandates a minimum sentence of ten years' imprisonment, increasing to life imprisonment or death in certain circumstances. Additionally, the Acid Control Act of 2002 regulates the sale and distribution of acid, and provides for compensation to victims of acid violence.⁴

B. The Acid Crime Control Act, 2002

The Acid Crime Control Act 2002 is particularly pertinent to this research. It is intended to robustly control acid crimes. It is one of the measures against acid violence in Bangladesh context. Through this act the government wants to ensure the legal justice for victims. According to this act, the government is also committed to eradicate this form of violence. The main components of this act are:

Definition of this act: - Unless otherwise described by sentences, in the Act.

- a. "Crime" will mean as any offense punishable by this act;
- b. "Acid" will mean any corrosive, burning or poisonous chemical;
- c. "Tribunal" will mean a Tribunal set up under this act;
- d. "Criminal Procedure" will mean the Code of Criminal Procedure 1898 (Act v of 1898);
- e. "High Court Division" will mean High Court Division of Bangladesh Article 3. Priority of the Act: - This act will supersede all other current acts.

Article 23. Acid Crime Control Tribunal,

(1) To judge crimes under this Act, the government can set up one or more Acid Crime Control Tribunals by notification in the Government Gazette.,

(2) In cases where more than one Tribunal is set up, the catchments area of each Tribunal must be publicized in the Government Gazette mentioned in sub-clause

(3) The tribunal will include one judge appointed from District Judges and Sessions Judges.

(4) The government, if necessary, may assign the responsibilities of being the judge of the Tribunal to a District Judge or Sessions Judge in addition to their regular responsibilities.

(5) To fulfill the aims of this act, the meaning of District Judge or Sessions Judge may include Additional District Judges or in some cases Additional Sessions Judges.

This act also provides that: The maximum sentence for acid throwing is the death penalty;

- All crimes under this act will be cognizable, non-compoundable and non-bail able;
- A tribunal has to complete the whole trial within ninety days of receiving the first written instruction;
- Once a Tribunal starts hearing a case, the hearing will continue every working day until it finishes. Investigation of any crime under this act must be completed by a police officer within thirty days of being informed or being ordered by a magistrate. The defendant can appeal against a decision or order or punishment given by the Tribunal to the High Court Division within sixty days of the date on which it is given; If someone assists/helps to commit the crime of acid throwing, he/she will receive the same punishment/ penalty as the perpetrators. All these types of case must comply with

⁴A. A. Am Moniruzzaman Khan, (2011), *The Penal Code*, 3rd ed., Dhaka: Samas Publication, p.482.

Criminal Procedures. The whole procedure should comply with the Criminal Justice System. It also had been cited that the person representing the plaintiff at the trial would be considered as a public prosecutor. Acid violence cases are also prosecuted under the criminal judiciary. There are Special Courts established under the Acid Crime Control Act 2002. The act provides for setting up of a special court in each district. Actually these courts can be compared with courts of special jurisdiction under the Special Power Act 1974. In 1983 there was another ordinance as mentioned before, to control oppression and violence against women called "Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance". Special tribunal courts established under the Acid Crime Control Act 2002 must follow a similar procedure to those governed by the Special Power Act 1974. This court has the power to hand down death sentences which must be confirmed by the High Court Division of the Supreme Court.⁵

C. The Acid Control Act, 2002

This Act was passed in order to prevent the misuse of acid as a corrosive substance and to provide legal support for acid victims. Therefore, it was intended to provide acid victims with access to legal assistance.

Article 8 of this act, mentions its purpose,

(c) To implement policies regarding treatment and rehabilitation of acid victims and provide legal support and take necessary steps in implementing and monitoring these policies.

Article 15 provides legal aid for acid victims,

(1) Any acid victim or someone on his behalf can apply to the District Committee for Legal aid.

(2) After considering application submitted under sub section (1), or perusing some other information or considering own assessment, District Committee can decide to provide legal aid to any acid victim, either by appointing a solicitor, or in an appropriate case, by paying cash.⁶

Procedure in Acid Violence Cases

The procedure in acid violence cases in Bangladesh typically involves the following steps:

Reporting the crime: The victim or a witness should immediately report the incident to the police.

Medical treatment: The victim should receive medical treatment as soon as possible. The hospital should preserve evidence, such as clothing and samples of the acid used, for later use in the investigation and trial.

Police investigation: The police will collect evidence, interview witnesses, and identify suspects.

Filing a case: The victim or a representative can file a case in a court of law. The police should also file a case based on their investigation.

⁵Ibrahim Sarkar, (2003) *Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Daman Ain.2002*, 2nd ed., Dhaka: University Publication, p.9.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 45.

Trial: The court will hear the case, examine evidence and witnesses, and make a judgment. If the accused is found guilty, they may be sentenced to imprisonment, and may also be ordered to pay compensation to the victim.

Compensation: The victim may be entitled to compensation from the government or the accused, as provided for under the Acid Control Act of 2002.

It's important to note that the procedure may vary depending on the specific circumstances of each case, and it's advisable to seek legal counsel for guidance.

Social Life of Acid Victims

Acid violence can have a profound impact on the social life of victims. Here are some of the common challenges that victims face:

Physical scars: Acid burns can cause severe disfigurement, which can lead to social stigma and discrimination.

Isolation: Acid violence often leads to social isolation, as victims may feel embarrassed or ashamed of their appearance.

Economic hardship: Acid violence can cause the victim to lose their livelihood, as they may be unable to work or provide for their families.

Psychological trauma: Acid violence can cause severe psychological trauma, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Lack of support: Acid violence victims may lack support from their families, communities, and the government, further exacerbating their suffering.

Despite these challenges, many acid violence victims have shown remarkable resilience and strength. Many organizations, both in Bangladesh and internationally, work to support and empower acid violence survivors, and to raise awareness about this issue. These organizations provide legal, medical, and psychological support, as well as economic empowerment opportunities, to help survivors rebuild their lives and reclaim their dignity.

Recommendations

1. Addressing acid violence requires a comprehensive and sustained approach that combines legal reform, institutional efficiency, and social change. First, existing laws related to acid violence must not only remain strict but also be enforced more effectively. Weak enforcement and inconsistency in punishment reduce the deterrent effect of legislation. Therefore, law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies should be strengthened through training, monitoring, and accountability to ensure that perpetrators are punished promptly and proportionately.
2. Second, access to justice for victims must be improved. Survivors of acid violence often face legal delays, financial barriers, and social pressure that prevent them from pursuing cases. A victim-centered justice system should ensure speedy trials, legal assistance, and adequate compensation so that survivors can regain dignity and security. Special tribunals and legal aid services can play a significant role in this process.

3. Third, public education and awareness are essential for long-term prevention. Many acid attacks are rooted in deeply embedded social norms, lack of awareness, and tolerance of violence. Nationwide awareness campaigns, inclusion of gender sensitivity education in curricula, and media engagement can help challenge harmful attitudes and promote respect for human rights.
4. Fourth, comprehensive support services for victims must be prioritized. Survivors require long-term medical treatment, psychological counseling, and rehabilitation opportunities, including education and employment support. Without such care, victims remain socially and economically marginalized.
5. Additionally, addressing the root causes of acid violence is crucial. Gender inequality, poverty, and patriarchal cultural attitudes often contribute to such crimes. Social policies aimed at empowering women and reducing economic vulnerability can help prevent violence.
6. Finally, strong partnerships among government institutions, civil society organizations, and international agencies are necessary. Coordinated efforts can enhance prevention, improve victim services, and ensure effective implementation of laws. Together, these measures can significantly reduce acid violence and support survivors in rebuilding their lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, acid violence remains a grave human rights concern in Bangladesh as well as in many other parts of the world. This form of violence causes severe physical injuries, permanent disfigurement, psychological trauma, and long-lasting social exclusion for survivors. Its impact extends beyond the individual victim, affecting families and communities and reinforcing patterns of gender-based discrimination and fear. Bangladesh has taken important legal steps to address this crime through the Penal Code of 1860 and the Acid Control Act of 2002, which introduce strict punishments and regulatory mechanisms. However, legal provisions alone are not sufficient to fully prevent acid attacks or to ensure justice and rehabilitation for survivors. A critical challenge lies in weak enforcement of laws, delays in judicial processes, and limited access to medical, legal, and psychological support for victims. Moreover, acid violence is deeply connected to broader social problems such as patriarchal attitudes, misuse of power, economic dependency, and lack of effective deterrence. Without addressing these underlying causes, legal measures risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. Preventing acid violence therefore requires a comprehensive approach that combines strong legal enforcement with social reform. Public awareness campaigns, education on gender equality, and community-based prevention programs are essential to challenge harmful norms and reduce tolerance for such crimes. At the same time, survivors must be provided with adequate healthcare, legal aid, financial assistance, and social reintegration opportunities. Only through coordinated efforts by the state, civil society, and the wider community can acid violence be effectively reduced and survivors supported in rebuilding their lives with dignity and justice.

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