



CERESAV
Unveiling the Scars

A POSITION PAPER ON ACID AND BURN VIOLENCE IN UGANDA



Centre for Rehabilitation of Survivors of Acid and Burns Violence (CERESAV)

25th November, 2024
Kampala, Uganda

25th November, 2024

Kampala, Uganda

Background

Acid and burn attacks are a sadistic and cruel form of violence, involving the throwing, pouring or spraying of corrosive or flammable liquid onto another person with the intention of deformation. Globally, there are approximately 1,500 acid attacks per year (Actionaid, 2024), with the highest prevalence being in low-income and emerging economies (ASTI, n.d.), (Mannan, et al., 2007). However, this form of violence is widely under-reported due to fear of reprisal (UNWOMEN, 2021). Throwing acid on the human skin causes its dissolution and a broad range of physical reactions, from deep lesions and abrasions to the corrosion of bones and parts of the body. When acid meets the face, it can corrode the nose, mouth, ears, and even blind the victim. Consequently, the attack has extreme psychological consequences due to the injuries severity and the social dogma related to deformation (Mannan, et al., 2006).

In Uganda, acid attack represents a substantial yet widely neglected portion of burn injuries. (Asaria, et al., 2004) reported that 17% of adult burns admitted at New Mulago hospital over an 18-month period resulted from acid assault. The report further highlighted that 86.7% of the attacks targeted the face with 33% of patients suffering partial or complete blindness. Majority of the cases are related to romantic conflicts with the biggest victims being women (ASFU, 2011; UniversityofCincinnati, 2024; ENDSLAVERYNOW, n.d.).

Acid and burn violence have greatly affected the livelihood and well-being of survivors and is a serious threat to many homes. As a result, several issues need to be addressed.

Purpose of the position paper

The purpose of the position paper is to highlight key issues affecting victims and survivors of acid and burn attacks in Uganda, together with recommendations as a tool for policy advocacy.

Key issues

Poor enforcement of current laws

Uganda has several acts and regulations related to the control of chemicals and protection of its citizens from acid violence.

Under the **penal code (cap 120)**, acid violence is regarded as a criminal offence, with a clear description of the penalties for perpetrators. In fact, section 216 (g) of the code provides that any person who unlawfully casts or throws any corrosive fluid or substance at any person commits a felony and is liable to imprisonment for life. However, prosecutions seldom entail charges of murder or attempted murder due to actual or perceived difficulties in proving intent. Due to this, perpetrators usually receive light or no sentences at all. These light sentences are also assisted by the lack of awareness by survivors about their legal rights and resources available to them (ASFU, 2011).

The **National Drug Policy and Authority Act (cap 206)** also lists several chemicals in class C (group II), including sulphuric acid, nitric acid, hydrochloric acid, etc. The act provides several regulations including obtaining importation approval from the National Drug Authority (NDA) for

all persons involved in the importation of these chemicals, the requirement for all premises within which the business of storage, sale and distribution of these chemicals to be licensed by NDA and for the requirement for all these premises to maintain an accurate record of persons/entities to which these chemicals have been supplied. However, despite this, concentrated sulphuric acid, the primary agent used in assaults, can still easily be obtained from fuel stations, mechanics or battery suppliers, usually intended for use in car batteries. On average, it costs as little as 4000 Ugandan shillings a litre and can be supplied in any container provided by the buyer (BTSI, 2024).

Lack of public awareness

The physical effects of an acid attack are usually the first to be noticed and treated, however, survivors also experience deep-rooted social, psychological, and economic impacts. Socially, survivors are sometimes rejected by family and friends due to their disfigurement. Psychologically, survivors often experience post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder and other mental health conditions. Economically, survivors have complained about decreased productivity and income given they cannot carry out tasks as they used to prior to attack (ASFU, 2011). All these prevent them from living fulfilling lives and reintegrating back in their communities. CERESAV and other like-minded organizations have tried to fill this gap through various community engagement and public education campaigns. Still, a lot needs to be done.

Limited support for survivors

Acid attack survivors are often from poor communities and do not have the finances to pay for surgery and other treatments required to attain functional and aesthetic improvements. They also almost always fall behind in their schooling and lose their jobs (Peck, et al., 2009). Furthermore, they lack even the finances to fight the case through the police system and then the courts. A situation analysis carried out by (BTSI, 2024) indicated that the average monthly income of survivors dropped from \$110 before the attack to \$59 after the attack, while unemployment rate increased from 1.7% before the attack to 15% after the attack.

Recommendations

Enforce laws and regulations on corrosive substances

The United Kingdom passed the Offensive Weapons Act in 2019, which among others, legislated on the sale, delivery and possession of corrosive substances. This resulted in a steady decline in acid attacks from a peak of 941 recorded cases in 2017 to 421 reported cases in 2021 (CBNW, n.d.). Bangladesh has also reported a steady decrease in number of acid attacks by between 15% and 20% a year since 2002 (ASFU, 2011). This followed the introduction of legislation to restrict the sale and distribution of acid and increase in penalties for attacks. The government of Uganda therefore needs to follow suit by enforcing the existing acts, regulations, requirements and procedures which relate to the control of chemicals and the protection of the public from acid violence. These include the penal code cap 120 and the National Drug Policy and Authority Act (cap 206).

Establish a law regulating corrosive chemicals (acid) in all quantities

The National Drug Policy and Authority Act (cap 206) provides regulations for the various acids used in attacks, however, it focusses mainly on large-scale manufacturers and distributors, instead of any persons who can have access to acid, even in small quantities (BTSI, 2024). Government

therefore needs to come up with explicit, detailed and specific laws and regulations targeting acid usage in all quantities. This law should provide measures for safeguarding people from acid attacks and remedies for survivors of acid attacks after the incident has happened.

Increase public awareness

Although (ASTI, n.d.) attributed the reduction in cases of acid attacks in the United Kingdom to the passing of the Offensive Weapons Act, (Howell, 2024; Osborne, 2023) reported that there has been a steady rise in recorded offences (710 in 2022 and 1,244 in 2023). As such, (ASFU, 2011; Osborne, 2023; Peck, et al., 2009) have emphasized the need to launch prevention initiatives such as public awareness programmes to educate people on the appalling risks and consequences to those subject to such attacks, their families and the perpetrators themselves. These prevention initiatives are cost effective and reach greater numbers of people.

Provide more support for survivors

The Indian government provides survivors of acid attack with financial assistance of up to 4,380,000 Ugandan shillings depending on the scale of injuries and other criterion (PMNRF, n.d.). The government of Uganda can come up with similar initiatives to support survivors of acid attacks, enabling them to live meaningful lives and to support their beneficiaries. Government should also assist survivors in covering medical and legal fees ensuring they get proper and full treatment and bring their perpetrators to justice.

Conclusion

To reduce the number of corrosive substance attacks, government of Uganda needs to adopt multiple strategies; including enforcing current laws and regulations on corrosive substances, establishing a law regulating corrosive chemicals (acid) in all quantities, increasing public awareness on the impacts of acid and burn attacks to both survivors and perpetrators and providing survivors with more support medically, financially and in terms of legal fees.

References

- Actionaid, 2024. *Actionaid*. [Online]
Available at: https://www.actionaid.org.uk/our-work/vawg/acid-attacks#footnote1_s1cdf1b
[Accessed 02 October 2024].
- Asaria, J. et al., 2004. Acid burns from personal assault in Uganda. *Burns*, pp. 78-81.
- ASFU, 2011. *Acid Violence in Uganda: A Situation Analysis*, Kampala: s.n.
- ASTI, n.d. *Acid Survivors Trust International*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.asti.org.uk/learn/a-worldwide-problem>
[Accessed 02 October 2024].
- BeyondTheScarsInitiative, 2024. *ACID VIOLENCE IN UGANDA: SITUATION ANALYSIS 2024*, Kampala: s.n.
- CBNW, n.d. [Online]
Available at: <https://nct-cbnw.com/london-burning-corrosive-substance-attacks-in-the-u-k/>
[Accessed 03 October 2024].

ENDSLAVERYNOW, n.d. *endslaverynow.org*. [Online]
Available at: <http://www.endslaverynow.org/act/action-library/support-acid-attack-survivors-in-uganda>

[Accessed 02 October 2024].

Mannan, A. et al., 2006. Psychosocial outcomes derived from an acid burned population in Bangladesh, and comparison with Western norms. *Burns*, 32(2), pp. 235-241.

Mannan, A., Ghani, S., Clarke, A. & Butler, P. E., 2007. Cases of chemical assault worldwide: A literature review. *Journal of the International Society for Burn Injuries*, Volume 33, pp. 149-154.

Osborne, S., n.d. *Story*. [Online]

Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/acid-attacks-increase-by-69-in-a-year-in-england-and-wales-charity-warns-12987581>

[Accessed 03 October 2024].

Peck, M., Molnar, J. & Swart, D., 2009. A global plan for burn prevention and care. *Bull World Health Organ*, Volume 87, pp. 802-803.

R, H., n.d. *Medium*. [Online]

Available at: <https://medium.com/@russellhowell86/acid-attacks-in-the-uk-e274e534b486>

[Accessed 03 October 2024].

UBOS, 2020. *STATISTICAL ABSTRACT*, Kampala: UBOS.

UniversityofCincinnati, 2024. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.uc.edu/news/articles/2024/02/uc-law-event-to-spotlight-violence-acid-attacks-in-uganda.html#:~:text=Currently%2C%20there%20are%20no%20laws,than%20specifically%20fo cusing%20on%20acid.>

UNWOMEN, 2021. *UNWOMEN*. [Online]

Available at: <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/12/un-women-uganda-and-partners-call-for-ending-acid-attack-violence-in-uganda>

[Accessed 02 October 2024].