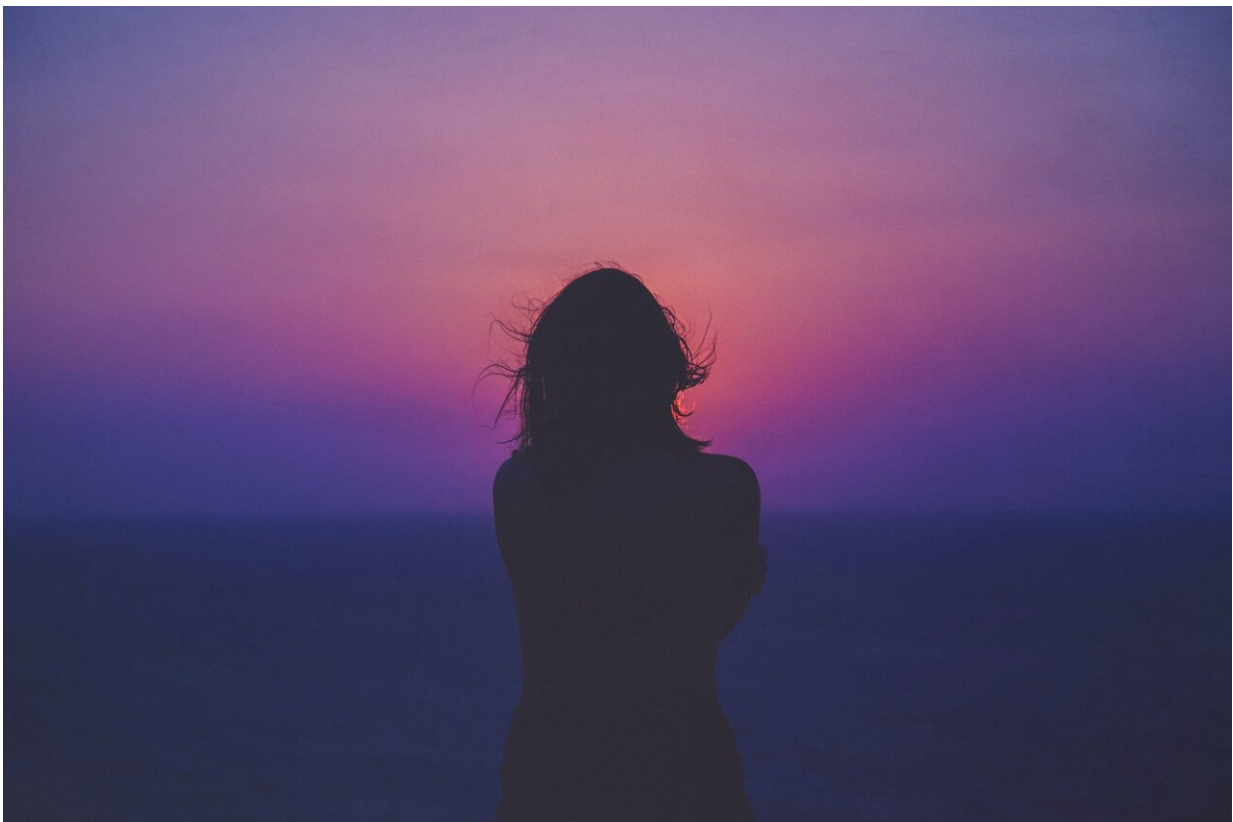


Acid attacks are a form of violence against women—the law needs to treat them as such, researcher says

February 18 2024, by Aisha K. Gill



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

At the end of January, a 31-year-old woman and her daughters suffered [horrific injuries](#) after being assaulted with an alkaline corrosive

substance in London. Sadly, acid attacks like this are not isolated incidents. Over the last 15 years, they have been on the rise across the world, including in the UK.

These attacks involve splashing sulfuric or [nitric acid](#) onto a victim's face or body. Corrosive substances melt the skin tissue, often exposing or dissolving the bones underneath. They can lead to permanent disfigurement, scarring, a narrowing of the nostrils, eyelids and ears, and permanent damage to sight and hearing.

Those who target a victim's face in particular aim to maim and disfigure, but not necessarily kill, [their target](#). This can cause devastating social and psychological difficulties for the victims, including ongoing health problems, [social isolation](#), a loss of social and economic status, poverty and destitution.

Acid attacks as gendered violence

Corrosive substance violence is horrific in any case. But what is often left out of the discussion is that it is a form of gendered violence that mainly targets women. While [acid attacks](#) are perpetrated against both men and women, the vast majority of victims—[80% globally](#)—are women, and the majority of perpetrators are male.

As a [researcher of gender-based violence](#), particularly in minority ethnic communities, I have seen the devastating physical, psychological and social impact these crimes have on victims. As a specialist in criminal justice responses to violence against women and girls, I have provided expert evidence in UK courts on the cultural contexts at play in cases of gender-based violence, including acid attacks. The Crown Prosecution Service drew on my expertise in a 2012 [acid attack case](#).

My research and experience suggests the motivations for launching acid

attacks on women lie in patriarchal notions of shame, loss of "face", and honor. They are often retribution for women's rejection of men's sexual advances, and are related to [domestic violence](#), abuse and other ["honor"-based violence](#).

Acid attacks remain common in India and the rest of South Asia, [despite bans](#) on the sale of acid over the counter. In the Indian sub-continent, where acid is widely available and relatively inexpensive, there remain traditional, patriarchal perceptions of women as subordinate to men. Attacks are increasing as women in India enjoy increasing access to education and economic independence.

Within a patriarchal society, women are often told that they embody their family's respect and honor. Their behavior, thoughts and actions must never bring [shame on the family](#). Divorced or separated women are particularly pressured to meet these expectations.

As a result, men often believe they have power and control over women's beauty and sexuality. When women make their own marriage choices or exit violent relationships to protect their own and their children's safety, men interpret these actions through a patriarchal lens and may respond with coercion or physical violence.

While details are still emerging about the Clapham case, it has been [reported](#) that the suspect and victim had been in a relationship before the attack.

How the law ignores violence against women

In the UK, alleged perpetrators of acid attacks tend to be charged under the [Offensive Weapons Act](#) (2019). If convicted, they may receive a sentence of life imprisonment. Someone carrying acid can also be charged with possession of an offensive weapon under the [Prevention of](#)

[Crime Act](#) (1953), which carries a maximum penalty of four years in prison.

If a victim dies as a result of an acid attack, individuals can also be charged with murder or manslaughter. Although few acid attacks result in death, the intention to disfigure the victim permanently can still lead to a murder charge.

The problem with the current approach is that it largely punishes people for obtaining the corrosive substance, while ignoring the impact on the victim—and the gendered aspect of the crime.

Acid attacks where police are able to identify a gendered motivation should be treated like a racial or religious hate crime, where sentences are increased if a hate crime is identified. This would encourage the issue to be taken more seriously, and recognize victims as being affected by domestic abuse or gender-based discrimination. A number of UK women have [reported](#) not being taken seriously by police when they report threats of acid attacks.

Acid violence against women usually does not happen out of the blue. Survivors of acid attacks [have called](#) for better understanding of the motives behind acid attacks and how they intersect with [other serious crimes](#). As women's rights are eroded in favor of patriarchal narratives that [preserve male "honor"](#) around the world, gender-based acid attacks risk becoming legitimized.

The criminal justice system must do more to support those whose lives have been affected. This starts by acknowledging that these are not just horrific, random attacks—they are very often targeted violence against women.

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