



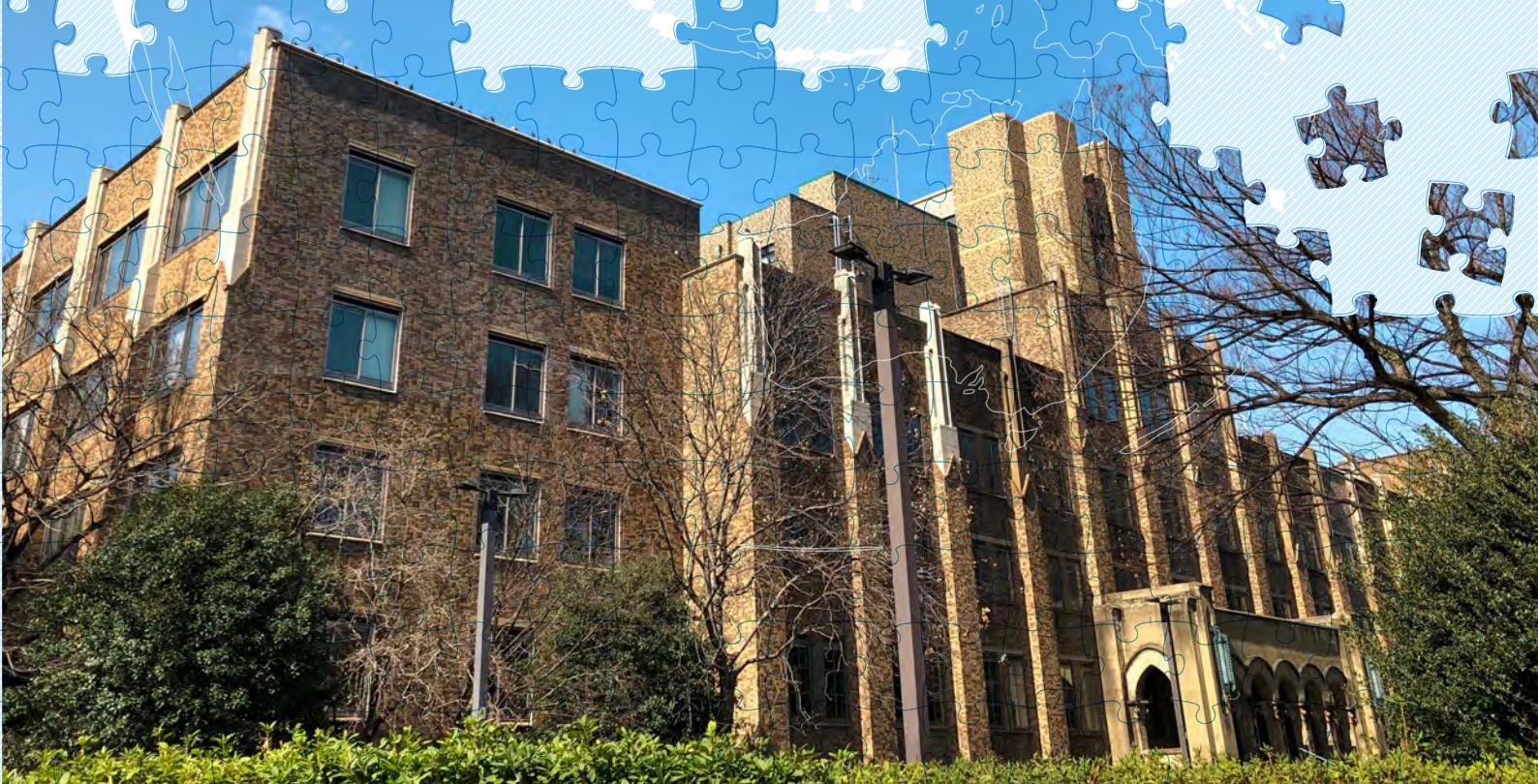
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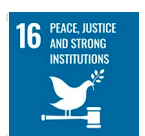
CSRDA Discussion Paper

Socioeconomic Determinants of Acid Attacks against Women in Bangladesh



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Socioeconomic Determinants of Acid Attacks against Women in Bangladesh*

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Abstract

Acid attacks—a form of violence that involves throwing acid at human bodies—are a serious violation of basic human rights. Given their high prevalence in developing countries, previous studies argue victim characteristics and motives for attacks. However, they rely on nonrepresentative data, and the socioeconomic determinants of attacks are not well understood. Therefore, using media report data on attacks that occurred all over Bangladesh between 2005 and 2023, this study examines the relationships between traditional gender norms and acid availability and the prevalence of acid attacks against women. We identified 836 victims during the study period, 77% of whom were women, and most perpetrators were men. The main motives for attacks include troubles related to love, marriage, and economic disputes. Regression analyses demonstrate that traditional gender norms and acid availability are positively associated with the prevalence of attacks against women. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to uncover the socioeconomic determinants of acid attacks quantitatively using representative data. These findings highlight the importance of policy intervention to change traditional gender norms, such as raising public awareness of gender equality, providing female job opportunities, and increasing the number of female political leaders.

Keywords: Acid attack; Violence against women; Gender norms

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1. Introduction

Acid attacks—a form of violence that involves throwing acid at human bodies—are a serious violation of basic human rights. Victims of such attacks suffer from severe damage to their physical health—such as burns, permanent disfigurement, blindness, and other disabilities—as well as their sociopsychological conditions like trauma, economic hardship, exclusion from the marriage market, and social isolation (Razzaque, 2023; Wesson, 2002). These attacks are a serious social issue prevalent worldwide, particularly in developing countries because of their relatively high prevalence and poor access to proper medical treatment (Hopkins et al., 2021; Waldron et al., 2014).

Given the severity of this issue, previous studies argue who has been victimized and why. They suggest that young women are exposed to greater victimization risk in developing countries. Specifically, in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka, many attacks are often perpetrated by intimate partners for refusing love, sex, and marriage (Das et al., 2013; Faga et al., 2000; Karunadasa et al., 2010; Sharmin et al., 2019; Waldron et al., 2014), whereas in Jamaica, women attack women because of infidelity (Branday et al., 1996).¹

Although insightful, previous studies are subject to two remaining issues. First, representative data on acid attacks are unavailable. Given the lack of official statistics on attacks, many studies rely on limited information from hospitalized victims in urban areas, but this has led to problems including sample selection and a lack of information on perpetrators' characteristics and motives (Nagarajan et al., 2020). While other studies collect more detailed information, they rely on qualitative interviews from a smaller number of victims. Second, previous studies have focused on the basic profile of victims, such as their age and sex (Begum, 2004; Das et al., 2013; Faga et al., 2000; Islam et al., 2014; Mannan et al., 2004; Milton et al., 2010; Sharmin et al., 2019), but the socioeconomic determinants of victimization risk are not well understood. These knowledge gaps are crucial for designing effective policies to eradicate acid attacks. Therefore, the use of representative data in a rigorous analysis of the socioeconomic determinants of victimization risk is needed.

This study bridges the above knowledge gaps in the literature by analyzing unique representative data on victims. Specifically using data collected from media reports in Bangladesh between 2005 and 2023, this study examines (1) variations in the prevalence of

¹ Other motives include financial and domestic disputes (Faga et al., 2000; Karunadasa et al., 2010) and drug and alcohol use (Ho et al., 2001). Acid attacks also occur during a robbery in Uganda (Asaria et al., 2004), and male victims outnumber females in these cases. In the UK, the attacks are closely related to hate crimes and racism (Ahmed et al., 2017).

attacks across regions over time, (2) the characteristics of victims and perpetrators, as well as their motives for attack, and (3) the socioeconomic determinants of attacks against women. In particular, we examine the role of gender norms and acid availability in predicting the risk of acid attacks against women. Studying acid attacks in Bangladesh is important because this country recorded the world's highest number of attacks in 2002 (Acid Survivors Foundation, 2024). Although the government passed two acts to eradicate the attacks in 2002—for example, permitting the carriage and usage of acid only for licensed traders and manufacturers—over 40 attacks are still observed every year.

2. Hypotheses

Acid attacks in Bangladesh have two important features: high prevalence and gendered victimization risk. First, in Bangladesh, a growing number of people have been victimized by acid attacks since the first instance was reported in 1967 (Acid Survivors Foundation, 2024). Increasing acid usage in various industries, combined with the absence of legal regulations about acid carriage and usage, has enabled people to obtain acid at low costs, even in open markets.

Given the severity of this issue, the government passed two acts in March 2002: the Acid Control Act and the Acid Crime Prevention Act. The former restricts acid availability in the country by permitting only licensed traders and manufacturers to carry and use acid. The latter aims to reduce the frequency of acid attacks; under this law, the death penalty can be imposed on perpetrators depending on the severity of the attack.

However, these laws are not strictly enforced. Acid is still available from illegal sources, and the death penalty is rarely sentenced. In particular, qualitative studies document that perpetrators often obtain acid from textile factories and that the prevalence of attacks is greater in regions with these factories (Calcini, 2022; Wesson, 2002). As a result, nearly 500 cases of acid attacks were recorded in Bangladesh in 2002, the highest number in the world that year (Acid Survivors Foundation, 2024). Although the prevalence of attacks declined after 2002, more than 40 instances are still reported annually, even after these reforms.

The second feature is that most attacks are perpetrated by men against women; that is, acid attacks are gender-based violence. Mass media reports that the main reasons for attacks are personal troubles related to love and marriage, such as refusal of love, marriage, sex, and dowry disputes. In patriarchal cultures such as Bangladesh, women are considered inferior to males in all aspects of their lives (Biswas & Das Chatterjee, 2021), and men are unlikely to accept women's autonomy (Anwary, 2003). Therefore, even these personal troubles could trigger acid attacks. In contrast, attacks against men are observed less frequently than those against women; although they are also mostly perpetrated by men, they occur for different

reasons such as economic disputes between neighbors.

Given these arguments, we test the following hypotheses:

H1: Attacks against women increase with traditional gender norms in the district.

H2: Attacks against men do not increase with traditional gender norms in the district.

H3: Attacks against women and men increase with acid availability in the district.

3. Data

3.1. Acid Attacks

Given the lack of national surveillance systems for acid attacks, this study collects data on acid attacks from the online archives of national newspapers between 2005 and 2023 in Bangladesh.² We conducted an online search using keywords in Bengali (এসিড/অ্যাসিড) and English (acid attack, acid violence, acid assault). In addition, we collected printed versions of acid attack news from the documentation units of two organizations: Ain-o-Salish Kendra and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad. The news collected from these two organizations includes both Bengali (13 newspapers) and English (5 newspapers) dailies.

These databases confirm 836 victims from 625 attack incidences between 2005 and 2023 after excluding duplicated media reports and articles with missing information on the district or location of attack. In these articles, we manually extracted information about victims (age, sex, father/husband name, religion), date and location of attacks, perpetrator characteristics, motives for the attacks, and damage to the victims. The data suggest that 211 out of 625 attacks caused multiple victims, and the average number of victims per attack was 1.33. It also appears that 644 victims (77%) are women.

3.2. Summary Statistics

Figure 1 presents the trend of acid attack victimization by victim gender; this shows that, although attacks occur every year, attacks against women began declining after the peak in 2015. On average, 33.9 women and 10.1 men have been victimized in the country per year.

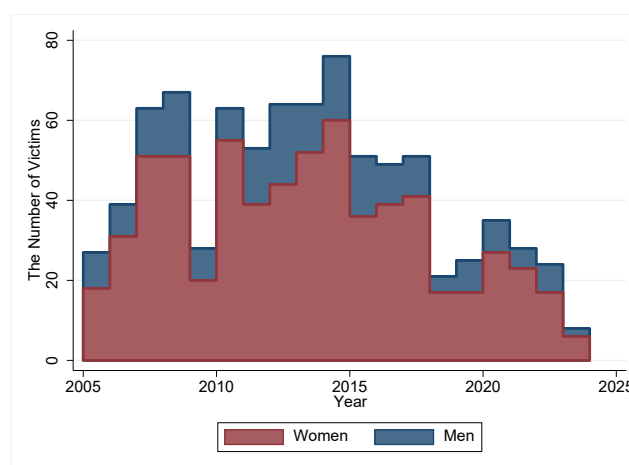
Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the victims and perpetrators. Panel A shows that the mean age of victims is 26.3 years for women and 28.3 years for men. Marital status significantly differs between women and men. For example, 64% of female victims are married,

² The newspapers include online portal of Bengali (Daily Ajker Kagoj, Daily Amader Somoy, bdnews24.com, Daily Bhorer Kagoj, Daily Destiny, Daily Inqilab, Daily Ittefaq, Daily Janakantha, Daily Jugantor, Daily Kaler Kontho, Daily Manabzamin, Daily Nayadiganta, Daily Prothom Alo, Daily Samakal, Daily Songbad) and English dailies (Daily Observer, Dhaka Tribune, Financial Express, New Age, New Nation, The Daily Star, The Independent). Media reports of acid attacks through radio and TV are not common.

whereas the corresponding statistic for male victims is 44%. Approximately 90% of male and female victims are Muslim, which is comparable with the national average. The perpetrators in Panel B are mostly males regardless of the victim's sex, whereas the proportion of attacks against women is greater. Over a quarter of attacks against women are perpetrated by their husbands or ex-husbands. Notably, the involvement of intimate partners may be even greater because the data do not cover cases where friends and other family members commit violence on behalf of the partners, nor the cases committed by unmarried partners. In contrast, nearly 80% of attacks against men are committed by nonfamily members. Panel C suggests that attacks against women mainly occur at home at night. The attacks against men also occur mainly at night, but they also occur outside the home.

Table 2 shows the motives for attacks against women. The most common motive is troubles related to love and marriage, accounting for 38% of total attacks (245 out of 644 cases). In particular, spouses commit violence because of dowry and divorce, whereas nonfamily members attack women because they refuse love, sex, and marriage. With respect to other motives, financial disputes with neighbors, including the troubles of land property, also trigger acid attacks.

Finally, Figure 2 summarizes the injured body parts. Approximately 50% of male victims and 60% of female victims were injured on the front side of their body. Nearly 40% of victims were injured on their faces. The other injured body parts include the back and neck. Injuries to sexual organs were documented for only nine cases, eight of which were female victims.



Note: On average, 33.9 women and 10.1 men have been victimized per year.

Figure 1: Trend of Acid Attack Victimization: 2005-2023

Table 1: Victim and Perpetrator Characteristics

Attacks against:	N	Women Mean	N	Men Mean	Difference
Panel A: Victims' characteristics					
Age	550	26.26 (11.85)	151	28.32 (17.10)	*
Marital status	644		192		***
Married		0.64		0.44	
Unmarried		0.26		0.37	
Divorced		0.07		0.01	
Widow		0.00		0.00	
N/M		0.02		0.18	
Religion	644		192		
Muslim		0.92		0.91	
Hindu		0.07		0.07	
Others		0.00		0.01	
N/M		0.01		0.01	
Panel B: Perpetrators' characteristics					
Sex	644		192		***
Women		0.04		0.07	
Men		0.91		0.81	
N/M		0.05		0.12	
Religion	644		192		***
Muslim		0.85		0.74	
Hindu		0.05		0.04	
Others		0.00		0.01	
N/M		0.09		0.20	
Relationship	644		192		***
Spouse, ex-spouse		0.26		0.04	
Other family member		0.17		0.14	
Partners, neighbors, friends		0.36		0.46	
Strangers, gangs, competitors		0.20		0.33	
Not mentioned		0.01		0.03	
Panel C: Situation of attack					
Location	644		192		***
Home		0.80		0.66	
Outside		0.16		0.28	
N/M		0.04		0.06	
Timing	644		192		
Morning		0.11		0.10	
Afternoon		0.09		0.10	
Evening		0.05		0.02	
Night		0.68		0.69	
N/M		0.07		0.09	

Standard deviations are in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2: Motives for Attacks against Women

	Family members		Others		Not mentioned	Total
	Spouse, ex-spouse	Other family members	Partners, neighbors, friends	Strangers, gangs, competitors		
Love and marriage	94	28	72	49	2	245
Family disputes	61	34	10	5	0	110
Financial disputes	7	38	93	4	0	142
Others	1	7	43	10	2	63
Not mentioned	3	2	15	59	5	84
Total	166	109	233	127	9	644

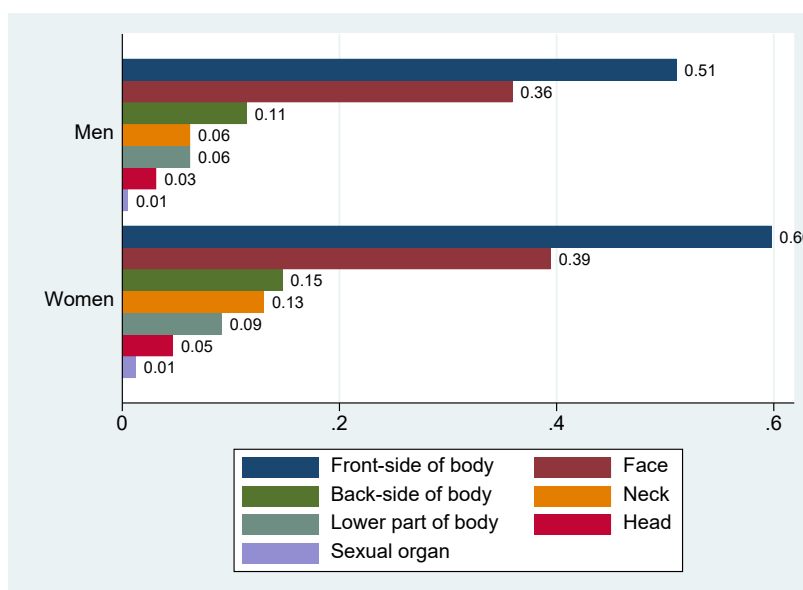


Figure 2: Injured Body Parts

3.3. Proxies for Gender Norms and Acid Availability

To approximate the traditional gender norms in the district, we use four variables: the prevalence of child marriage, female labor force participation, women’s participation in intrahousehold decision making, and the number of garment factories. The first three variables are collected from the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) in the 2000, 2004, and 2007 waves. The DHS is a nationally representative survey that collects detailed information on women’s health and social status. It has three questions about whether respondents have the final say on making large household purchases, utilizing healthcare facilities, and visiting family or relatives. A total of 32,817 women participated in these survey waves. We aggregated the individual-level data at the district level. The three measures are defined as (1) the proportion of women who married at age 17 or younger, (2) the proportion of working women,

and (3) the amount of behavior women can decide on their own. Finally, previous studies have demonstrated that the development of the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh has positive impacts on women's empowerment, such as female labor force participation and education (Heath & Mobarak, 2015; Molina & Tanaka, 2023). Therefore, as the fourth proxy for gender norms, we use (4) the number of garment factories in the district, which is available from the 2011 District Statistics.

Regarding the proxy for acid availability, we use the number of textile factories in the district because the textile industry is the main user of sulfuric acid. Qualitative studies document that perpetrators often obtain acid from these factories (Calcini, 2022; Wesson, 2002). The data are collected from the 2011 District Statistics.

4. Empirical Analysis

We estimate the following ordinary least square model (OLS) via district-level cross-sectional data (N=64). The main dependent variable is the average number of female victims per year. The independent variables include four measures of gender norms, acid availability, and variables to control for basic district characteristics, namely population density, the number of bus stations and police stations, and the literacy rates of men and women. Robust standard errors are used.

Column (1) of Table 3 presents the estimation results for the attacks against women, demonstrating evidence in line with Hypothesis 1. An increase in the number of activities that women can decide alone is negatively associated with the number of female victims in the district by 0.76 per year. This effect size is remarkably large, given that the average district has 0.53 female victims annually. In addition, a one percentage point increase in child marriage in the district is associated with an increase in the number of annual female victims by 0.013. The number of garment factories is also negatively associated with the number of female victims. The coefficient of female labor force participation is negative, as expected, but statistically insignificant.

In Column (2), we test Hypothesis (2) about the association between gender norms and male victims. Since the number of male victims is censored at zero (21 out of 64 districts have no male victim), the dependent variable is a binary indicator that takes unity if there was at least one victim between 2005 and 2023 and zero otherwise. We estimate the model via OLS, which requires fewer assumptions in the specification than alternative models like logistic regression. The results show that the coefficients of intrahousehold decision making, garment

factories, and female labor force participation exhibit the opposite signs to the results of female victims and become statistically insignificant, although the coefficient of child marriage is counterintuitively positive and significant. Overall, these results suggest that traditional gender norms do not predict male victimization, supporting Hypothesis 2.

With respect to Hypothesis 3, we find that the number of textile factories is positively associated with the victimization of both women and men (Columns (1) and (2)). A 1000 increase in the number of textile factories in the district increases the number of female victims by 0.15 and the number of male victims by 0.17. These findings are consistent with our hypothesis. Among the other covariates, we find that victimization risk is greater in urban districts with higher population density and a greater number of bus stations. The number of police stations and the literacy ratio have insignificant coefficients in both columns.

Finally, Column (3) regresses the incidences of any type of crime—such as property or violent crime—on the same independent variables to test whether the observed patterns in Columns (1) and (2) are specific to acid attacks or common in any type of crime; this is important because acid availability and gender norms should not necessarily predict other types of crimes, such as robberies and thefts. Therefore, statistically significant coefficients in this model suggest that our proxies for gender norms and acid availability may actually capture the effects of unobserved confounders. Since official crime statistics at the district level are not available in Bangladesh, we use data collected from newspapers by Faruk & Khatun (Faruk & Khatun, 2008) in 2007. The results show that the coefficients are insignificant, ruling out this issue.

Table 3: Socioeconomic Determinants of Acid Victimization

	Female victims per year (1)	1[Male victims per year >0] (2)	Crime rate per 100,000 citizens (3)
Intrahousehold decision-making	-0.763** (0.379)	0.282 (0.680)	18.248 (109.455)
Child marriage	1.320** (0.573)	2.176*** (0.811)	23.559 (90.286)
Garment factories (x1000)	-0.069*** (0.019)	0.021 (0.021)	-0.607 (1.880)
Labor force participation	-0.556 (0.483)	0.144 (0.785)	-86.985 (89.278)
Textile factories (x1000)	0.148*** (0.034)	0.170*** (0.055)	-16.502* (8.302)
Population density (1000/km ²)	0.295*** (0.043)	0.025 (0.039)	3.631 (5.358)

Bus stations	0.004** (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)	0.105 (0.301)
Police stations	0.006 (0.004)	0.003 (0.005)	0.648 (0.434)
Literacy ratio (males)	0.005 (0.015)	0.011 (0.022)	-0.353 (2.747)
Literacy ratio (females)	-0.003 (0.013)	-0.021 (0.021)	3.892 (2.957)
Constant	-0.771 (0.691)	-1.237 (1.026)	17.288 (129.498)
Observations	64	64	64
R-squared	0.668	0.207	0.338

The OLS coefficients are reported. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

5. Discussion

Using unique data collected from media reports between 2005 and 2023, we investigated the prevalence and socioeconomic determinants of acid attacks against women in Bangladesh. The data suggest that 836 people were victimized due to 625 attacks during the period (44 victims per year). The data also suggest that 77% of victims are women, while perpetrators are mostly men. In particular, a large proportion of attacks against women are perpetrated by intimate partners because of personal troubles related to love and marriage. In contrast, male victims are attacked by nonfamily members. These results confirm that, in Bangladesh, acid attacks are still a serious social issue violating women's basic human rights despite how prevalence has declined since the 2002 legal reforms.

Furthermore, we examined the socioeconomic determinants of acid attacks and demonstrated that attacks against women are more prevalent in districts with higher traditional gender norms and acid availability. In contrast, attacks against men are related to acid availability but not to gender norms. These attacks are also prevalent in urban areas. These patterns are specific to acid attacks. Gender norms or acid availability do not predict other types of crimes.

This study contributes to the literature as follows. First, to the best of our knowledge, our dataset is one of the largest and most representative datasets on acid attacks. This feature enables us to reveal the characteristics of victims and perpetrators and the situations of attacks in the whole country. For example, the data suggest that the proportion of female victims and the average age of victims are greater than those reported in previous studies, which relied on small-sample or qualitative data (Das et al., 2013; Faga et al., 2000; Islam et al., 2014). In

addition, the majority of victims and assailants are Muslim, suggesting that religious tension between Muslims and non-Muslims is not a driver of acid attacks in Bangladesh; this is intriguing, given that acid attacks are a form of hate crime in England (Nagarajan et al., 2020).

Second, this is the first study to examine the socioeconomic determinants of acid attacks using a quantitative approach. Previous qualitative studies have investigated the role of acid availability (i.e., proximity to acid-using factories), and our analyses confirm this conjecture. In addition, this is the first study to highlight the role of gender norms in neighborhoods, suggesting the importance of additional policy interventions to eradicate attacks.

However, we should exercise caution in interpreting our results. First, despite the use of our data, it is still difficult to draw a definitive conclusion, given the possibility of attacks not reported in any mass media. Second, our regression analyses are subject to the issues of omitted variables and measurement errors. Therefore, our results should be interpreted as correlations between socioeconomic characteristics and acid attacks rather than causal impacts.

6. Conclusion

Our findings suggest the following policy implications. Although the prevalence of attacks in Bangladesh decreased remarkably after the legal reforms in 2002, the government is still unable to eradicate this violence. This study revealed that the prevalence is still relatively high in regions with relatively high acid availability, suggesting that the control of acid carriage, trade, and usage under the license system is poorly enforced and that people can easily obtain acid from illegal sources. Therefore, it is urgent to strictly enforce the law.

Furthermore, we also demonstrate the significant relationship between traditional gender norms and acid attacks against women. Therefore, policy interventions to change such norms may also be effective. Such interventions may include raising public awareness of gender equality, providing female job opportunities, and increasing female political leaders. Specifically, the literature suggests that males who were exposed to a TV drama series against domestic violence are less likely to justify gender violence in Nigeria (Banerjee et al., 2019). The establishment of ready-made garment factories in neighborhoods increased female labor force participation, delaying marriage and childbirth while increasing girls' education (Heath & Mobarak, 2015; Molina & Tanaka, 2023). In India, female political leaders implement policies that better reflect the policy preferences of women. The increase in female leaders also changes citizens' attitudes toward accepting women as leaders, long-term human capital

investments in daughters, and parents' aspirations for daughters' educational attainment (Beaman et al., 2012).

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