

# **Prevention of Burns Violence Against Women and Girls in Cambodia, Nepal and Uganda**

Script for PowerPoint Updated December 2010

## **Slide 1**

At the 2010 Zonta International Convention in San Antonio, Texas (USA), members overwhelmingly voted to pledge \$430,000 to fund the program. This United Nations-supported project, which falls under the Zonta International Strategies to End Violence Against Women (ZISVAW) program, seeks to reduce the incidence of violence against women and girls by changing personal and/or political knowledge, attitudes and behaviors contributing to violence against women. ZISVAW projects are focused on preventing and ending violence against women.

The objectives of the ZISVAW Fund, UN Women and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women are identical.

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Acid violence and other forms of burning involve throwing corrosive acid at victims – usually at their faces – burning them and damaging skin tissue, often exposing and sometimes dissolving the bones. The consequences of these attacks can include blindness and permanent scarring of the face and body.

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There is a high survival rate among victims of acid attacks. Consequently the victim is faced with physical challenges, which require long-term surgical treatment as well as psychological challenges requiring in-depth intervention from psychologists and counselors at each stage of physical recovery.

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In-depth research about burns violence is required to determine common issues that can be resolved by concerted action to change or introduce legislation and implementation of international conventions, such as CEDAW, to give women effective protection against discrimination and all forms of violence.

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The horrific aspect of acid burns is the long-lasting period of tissue destruction that continues until all the acid is either inactivated or neutralized, for instance by water. In Nila's case, she was left to suffer locked in the house for up to five hours before anyone responded to her cries of agony.

"I woke up around midnight and found my husband sitting on a chair with his eyes bloodshot out of anger (sic). I asked him what had happened, but no response. He just walked up to me with a glassful of liquid and poured it down over my head," Nila said remembering that dreadful night.

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Bushra was the youngest of her siblings and her father was a day laborer. Javed, who lived in her neighborhood, wanted to marry her when she was only 13 and often psychologically harassed her. When Bushra and her family refused his marriage proposal, Javed threw acid on Bushra's face. Her right eye and the right side of her face was burned. She was treated at different local hospitals near her village after which her eyesight returned. Her family reported the case to the village elders and Javed was reprimanded.

The following year, Javed once again threw acid on Bushra's face. This time her right eye was badly damaged and the right side of her face was completely burnt. Bushra's family was extremely poor and could only gather enough money for her medical treatment at the nearest hospital. Her family did not file a law suit against Javed, instead opting to resort to an out of court monetary settlement as ordered by the village elders. The village leader also asked Javed and his family to leave the village.

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Haseena Hussain was an attractive, upwardly mobile woman in Bangalore, India, with everything going for her. But it all changed in 1999, when she turned down her former boss' marriage proposal and he sought revenge by pouring two liters of concentrated hydrochloric acid over her body resulting in burns over most of her body and loss of her nose and eyesight.

Since 1999 Haseen's group has documented 61 such attacks. In one case, a 22-year-old mother of four children was doused with acid and forced to drink a deadly concoction of a corrosive chemical and alcohol by her abusive husband in the city of Mysore.

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Available statistics only reflect the number of registered incidents, yet many cases are not reported to the authorities, medical agencies, or to the media due to fear of reprisals and abuse. An estimated 100 cases of acid-related burns violence cases occur per year.

While cities such as Phnom Pen and Siem Riep have a high incidence of attacks, the Cambodian Acid Survivors Charity's (CASC) findings indicate a higher incidence of attacks in rural communities; especially among people who work in the rubber trade (where acid is in common use).

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A new government committee has been established in response to growing public outrage about acid attacks. Its mandate is to draft a legal framework to regulate the sale and distribution of acid, and to make acts of acid violence a criminal offense. It is hoped that the committee's findings and proposals will be used to guide the Cambodian government's response.

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Despite having ratified international and regional conventions, including CEDAW, the government has not introduced national or local measures to protect women from violence, and no specific law criminalizes perpetrators. The National Civil Code (Muluki Ain) addresses the issue directly but being subject to interpretation, has proven to be insufficient to convict perpetrators in most cases.

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A study of 150 suicide burns cases at Kathmandu Hospital (2004-08) found that 83% were women of low socio-economic status; 50% just literate, and 96% had suffered kerosene burns.

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Although acid violence is a criminal offense and the penal code is clear on punishment for perpetrators, the law is not applied consistently by judges or by police.

The judiciary, police and lawyers in Uganda need training in the laws relating to acid violence to ensure that perpetrators are punished. Research as to the underlying causes of relationship conflicts is needed; some evidence indicates that women also instigate the crime. Systems are needed to prevent women from committing the crime, as well as rehabilitation systems to reduce the effect of attacks.

### **Slide 16**

Acid attacks form a substantial and neglected proportion of burn injuries in Uganda.

Acid Survivors Foundation-Uganda (ASFU) registered 35 new acid attacks annually, 57% affecting women. Of those victims, 16% died, 52.3% had severe injuries, and the rest had either considerable or mild injuries. Recent data indicates that many cases are not reported.

### **Slide 17**

Through its network of international professionals, Acid Survivors Trust International is well-positioned to enhance knowledge and capacity of Acid Survivors Foundations, as well as of other national and local stakeholders in Cambodia, Nepal and Uganda, thus enabling each country to manage and provide its own responses to acid and other forms of burns violence against women and girls.

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Empowering the victims includes fostering cooperation among those involved. These individuals include: NGOs; police, judiciary, health officials, elected officials, women counselors and local women leaders; and community members including survivors, victims' neighbors, community-based organizations, acid vendors, and journalists.

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The proposed intervention will commence with a comprehensive situational analysis to verify the occurrence of burns related to gender-based violence and to identify potential partners in up to nine communities.

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In order to achieve awareness and understanding, new methods must be used in model village neighborhoods, with high numbers of burns violence, to sample of 3,000 villagers for each country. Key personnel in ministries, police, judiciary, and media must be exposed to awareness training. The media must be encouraged to spread awareness of incidence, causes and repercussions of burns violence, and to publicize successful prosecutions of perpetrators. And women and girls must be made aware of their rights and the ways to obtain to justice

## **Slide 24**

The lack of government programs and limited access to media inhibit effective prevention programs. Victims are often blamed for the incident, thus there is a need to help the media understand the issue given the major role they play in public education and policy direction.

The project will explore how mandatory reporting of burn injuries can be developed as tools for evaluating strategies and prevention programs.

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As the project raises awareness, more women who have been attacked may come forward to demand legal support, medical and psychosocial rehabilitation services

It is important that survivors receive all aspects of care available, including legal services.

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Peyara was attacked with sulphuric acid after refusing to have an illicit relationship with a man who was tutoring her young son. The incident left Peyara permanently blind in one eye and with extensive burn injuries to her head, face, shoulders, chest and back. Her six-year old son was nearby during the attack and was also severely burned on the chest and arms. Peyara was released from the hospital before her wounds had healed and she had nowhere to go. She felt helpless and often thought about suicide. A very kind man took her to a place where she and her son received treatment.

## **Slide 28**

Peyara now advocates for ASF and tracks incidences of acid violence in Bangladesh.

