Countries, businesses must act to combat acid attacks on women, report asserts

By Lauren Gold

The photographs are horrific; the experience is unthinkable. But disfiguring and deadly acid attacks on women are on the rise in some parts of the world, according to a new comprehensive report released today (Jan. 27). And while international human rights law requires countries to take action against them, much more needs to be done.

Sital Kalantry, Cornell Law School associate clinical professor of law, faculty director of the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice and lead author of the report, "Combating Acid Violence in Bangladesh, India and Cambodia," discussed the findings at a media breakfast Jan. 27 at the Cornell Club in New York.

The report, a collaborative effort by the Avon Center, the New York City Bar Association, the Cornell International Human Rights Clinic and the Virtue Foundation, is the first to demonstrate that acid violence is a form of gender-based violence prohibited by the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Parties to CEDAW, including Bangladesh, India and Cambodia, are obligated under international law to make efforts to prevent attacks, bring perpetrators to justice and compensate victims.

The study examines the causes and effects of acid violence, compares legislation and statistics in the three countries, and makes recommendations for governments, NGOs and businesses toward curbing the attacks. Among its key findings, the report documents a strong connection between acid availability and violence, and calls on governments to adopt effective regulations on acid production, distribution, use and sale.

It also highlights the role of businesses, many of which use acid in manufacturing. "Evidence suggests that acid attacks occur at higher rates near areas where industries that use acid are located, such as cotton industries in Pakistan and rubber industries in Cambodia," Kalantry said. Companies that produce and distribute acid should ensure appropriate licensing, safe handling, storage, labeling, transfer and disposal procedures, the report states.

Collecting data from newspapers and NGOs, the authors found that at least 153 acid attacks occurred in India between 2002 and 2010; 3,000 occurred in Bangladesh between 1999 and 2010; and 271 occurred in Cambodia between 1985 and 2010. Many attacks are never reported, however, and countries themselves do not keep records; so the authors note that actual numbers are likely much higher.

Bangladesh is the only country that has enacted specific legislation and launched awareness campaigns around the issue. Attacks there are on the decline, according to the research, while they seem to be increasing in India and Cambodia.

Reasons behind acid attacks can vary, Kalantry said in a Jan. 26 interview. "But in India and Bangladesh, the major motive for attacks is tied to the notion that women are possessions -- once a man has decided that a woman is his but she rejects his marriage or sex proposal, the man disfigures her to prevent her from being with anyone else."
For victims, finding adequate medical care is a major challenge. "Acid violence has devastating health consequences for victims, including immense physical pain, blindness and other loss of physical functioning, loss of facial features and severe mental suffering," said Dr. Ebby Elahi, director of global health and international programming at Virtue Foundation and associate clinical professor of ophthalmology at Mount Sinai.

The report recommends that governments require licensing and safe handling procedures by producers, distributors and other businesses that use acid; require labels cautioning users about the dangers of acid and about penalties for misuse; and ban household use of concentrated forms of acid.

Meanwhile, other entities have key roles to play as well, Kalantry said. "We hope to engage foreign and local businesses in a dialogue to identify ways they can contribute to ensuring that the products they produce, distribute and use in their manufacturing processes are not used as weapons," she said.

The media event was hosted by the Cornell Law School.