

ACID THROWING ON WOMEN IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings to light the issue of acid throwing on women and its existence in Pakistan. To begin with, a definition of acid throwing has been laid out followed by its prevalence in Pakistan, which is discussed with the help of statistics available from Aurat Foundation. After that, the issue has been critically analyzed by examining its causes and dreadful effects in the light of the case studies of Fakhra Yunus and Zaib Aslam which reflect the torment that the victims of acid throwing cases undergo. Then, the recommendations have been set forth which involve treatment procedures alongside preventive measures. There is an immediate need to eradicate this menace from the country so that women could live in a safe and peaceful environment.

INTRODUCTION

Acid Throwing, also referred to as vitriolage or acid assault, is a cruel form of attack. Krishnan (2003) describes Acid Throwing as an act of throwing acid on the body of an individual with the purpose of providing harm and damaging the face mainly out of envy or vengeance. The victims of acid attacks are mostly females, hence acid throwing on women is becoming a major form of abuse around the world. However, acid attacks are more widespread in South Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Cambodia (Acid Survivors' Trust International, 2012).

Acid is thrown by the perpetrators at the victims, mainly on the faces in order to injure or disfigure them. This often results in the burning of face, damaging of skin alongside exposure and even dissolution of bones. In the long run, acid attacks can lead to blindness or everlasting disfigurement of the face and the body. In Pakistan, acid throwing is one of the several forms of domestic

violence against women. In 2011, 44 cases of acid throwing on women were reported which is a 37.5% increase compared to the year 2010.

PREVALENCE IN PAKISTAN

In Pakistan, domestic violence against women has been occurring over the years and the number of cases has been continuously in the same range. Pakistan, being a South Asian developing country, has always been in the limelight so far as domestic violence incidents and social discrepancies are concerned. Statistics have never been available at the government level; subsequently, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations have been on the forefront in recording and maintaining statistics. The statistics of incidents of violence against women are compiled by Aurat Foundation, which does it with the help of its media partners and private agencies. Aurat Foundation is a civil society based organization which diligently makes efforts for empowering women and upholding their rights by working together with citizens and other organizations, in this manner, creating awareness, building capability and taking up support for the problems that women face in Pakistan.

The fourth annual report of Aurat Foundation shows that there has been an overall increase of 6.74% in reported cases of violence against women in the year 2011 as 8539 women became victims of assault and violence during the year compared to 8000 in the year 2010. Incidents of violence against women were 8548 in 2009 and 7571 in 2008. Hence, on the whole, the reported cases of violence against women have been more or less in the same range with slight increases and decreases taking place every year. In this manner, the country has not experienced any noteworthy fall in the occurrence of these criminal incidents against women.

Considering the acid throwing cases on women, 44 cases were reported in 2011, which is a 37.5% increase from the 32 cases reported in 2010. In 2009, 53 reported incidents of acid throwing took place while in 2008, 29 such cases occurred. Consequently, the trend of acid throwing cases has been similar to the trend of overall violence cases against women, as the numbers have

remained in the same range during the last four years with around 40 acid throwing incidents occurring on average every year. Taking into account bi-annual statistics, 22 acid throwing cases took place in the 1st Bi-annual (Jan-Jun 2011) and 24 such cases occurred in the 2nd Bi-annual (July-Dec 2011), which makes it a 9.09% increase during bi-annual periods. Province-wise division shows that 32 acid throwing cases took place in the largest province of Pakistan, Punjab, while 4 in Balochistan, 6 in Sindh, 2 in Islamabad and 0 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It is important to know that this data is based only on the incidents which were reported. There occur several acid throwing cases in the country which are not reported at all and hence no information is available regarding them (Incidents of Violence against Women in Pakistan Reported during 2011, 2012).

ANALYSIS

Causes

Acid Throwing on Women is one of the most atrocious crimes that take place on the soil of Pakistan. It can be said that it is the most disturbing and horrendous form of violence against women. Many of the victims are girls below the age of 18 years. It is an alarming issue which results from a variety of factors.

- **Refusal of Sexual Advances or Marriage Proposal** – Refusal of sexual advances, relationships, or marriage proposals tend to be very significant factors in acid throwing cases. In Pakistan's society, which is a male dominated one with low literacy; a girl's rejection to a male's sexual advances or relationship and marriage proposals is received quite poorly by the man. Particularly, in rural areas, where implementation of law and order is poor, the rejected men avenge by tossing acid on the faces and bodies of the women who rejected their proposals. The victims, in most cases, are from poor or low middle class families where their protection is weak. Adolescent girls are at risk to acid assaults at most times, particularly, during their journey to school, markets, water wells, etc. (Adelman, 2012).

- **Lack of Security** - Many cases occur during the night when the victims and their families are asleep. Those who are with the victims at the time of attack, that is, siblings or relatives, may also get injured. Thus the dearth of security of the underprivileged young girls has also contributed to the increase in the number of acid throwing cases (Khan, 2005).

- **Dowry (Jahez)** – Dowry, which is a well known reason for domestic violence against women, is also a prominent cause of acid attacks. Dowry, which has become a tradition in Pakistan, is a colossal social illness, which though a part of Muslim culture in several countries including Pakistan; has never been endorsed by Islam, neither is there any room for it in the religion (Mahmud, 2010). The growing culture of Dowry has resulted in wife's father paying heavy amounts of money and material to the husband. Those women who are unable to meet the demands of their husbands suffer their agony and torture. On several occasions, failure to pay dowry has led to acid throwing incidents, in which husbands have brutally destroyed the faces and bodies of their wives with acid.

- **Cheap and Easy Availability of Acid** – In Pakistan, cheap and easy accessibility of acid is another reason for increasing incidents of acid throwing cases. While nitric acid is often made use of by the jewelers, sulphuric acid is frequently employed in the batteries of cars. Cotton seeds are treated with dilute types of acids, which results in the easy availability of acids in the rural areas. On the other hand, kitchens as well washrooms are sterilized with the help of concentrated acids. Hence, poisonous acids are readily available in shops and it has become common for people to buy such acids without any fear of suspicion. It is in fact a weapon bought with a few pennies that can destroy another human being's life in a matter of seconds (PWHRO, 2010).

- **Family and Marital Disputes** – It is not unusual for husband and wife to have disputes or quarrels over certain issues. However, in Pakistan, where the literacy rates tend to be low, the small quarrels and marital disputes often culminate into atrocious

life changing instances such as acid attacks, murders, rapes, etc. This mainly occurs due to lack of understanding and tolerance on the part of the male counterparts, who in order to protect their ego and to stamp their dominance, do not hesitate in undertaking aggressive brutal actions which can ruin the lives of the female counterparts. Family disputes are also common in Pakistan in which the husband's relatives – mother, sister, brother or other relatives, spur the husband against his wife for certain reasons, thereby enticing anger in the husband to take aggressive measures against his wife, such as throwing of acid (Khan, 2005).

- **Land Disputes and Political Rivalries** – In South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh; disputes over land can trigger violent and forceful measures from either of the parties involved. Those fighting over a piece of land in the rural areas of Pakistan, never shy away from demonstrating their power and defaming their rival. This often leads to murders, abductions, defaming of rival's family through acid throwing on their women, rapes, etc. The purpose of throwing acid on the rival party's females is to leave a mark of dominance and authority, in that way, denigrating the rival party and making it succumb the land. Similarly, political rivalries among affluent families of the rural areas can also generate hostile events, one of which is acid throwing. In order to stamp their authority over the rival, political families have been using the violent tool of acid throwing, by means of which, they aim at bringing about humiliation and disgrace on to the rival (Khan, 2005).

- **Gender Biasness** – Though acid attacks also impact boys and men, it is necessary to comprehend that acid throwing is a type of gender-oriented violence since the majority of the sufferers are women. Around the world, females account for nearly 80% of the victims while 40% are reported to be below the age of 18 (Chinoy & Junge, 2012). It would be immature to state that acid attacks are random or natural occurrences. In fact, the roots of acid attacks are profoundly implanted in gender order which has been prevailing in the universe over centuries, giving men the control and power to exercise aggression and violence in order to “keep women in their places.” In Pakistan, women often become the victims of this

gruesome phenomenon because they are supposedly or in reality, found to go astray the gender rules, roles and customs that have been established ever since the world took its shape. These norms and cultural customs have by and large, discriminated women and have confined them in secondary positions. Hence, gender biased attitude and cultural fanaticism have been strong causes of acid throwing incidents in Pakistan (Goonesekere, 2004).

Effects

The effects of acid throwing on women can be quite devastating. If the victim is able to survive the attack, then the consequences can be life changing. Physically, acid can be extremely destructive for the victim's body. It can lead to blindness, tissue damage, permanent scars as well as bone fusion. As far as psychological effects are concerned, acid attacks can emotionally hamper the lives of the victims, leading to anxiety, despair and disgrace.

- **Physical Effects** – Sulphuric Acid and Nitric Acid tend to liquefy the tissues of the skin, exposing the bones which lie below the flesh, while on occasions, even dissolving the bone. If the acid gets in touch with the eye, then the victims can become permanently blinded by losing one or even both their eyes completely. The use of hands can also be lost in some cases. Limbs and other vital organs of the body may get eaten away or destroyed. Infections such as septicemia or gangrene may also be contracted. Skin tissues get thoroughly damaged resulting in permanent disfigurement. The bones dissolve and fuse with each other, resulting in jawbones getting sealed tight, chins locking to chests, hands being left everlastingly bent in the position they were at the time the acid splash hit them. Daily itching and stiffness of the skin are other physical consequences which may bar the survivor from eating and drinking. Physical effects of acid attack inhibit the survivor's ability to work, perform daily household chores, or look after the children. Being incapable of working, a woman will not be able to fulfill her responsibilities towards the house or put in financial contributions. On the other hand, if the acid attack survivor is unmarried, her chances of marriage will significantly trim down, primarily due to the appearance deforming

consequences of the acid, leading to severe and inescapable poverty (Manderson & Bennett, 2003).

- **Psychological Effects** – Though psychological scars may not be as apparent as physical scars, yet they are just as existent and distressing. Acid attack survivors face stern seclusion as they are sidelined from the society and ignored by majority. Losing the ability to make a living aggravates their psychological woes. Moreover, the fact that they become dependent on others and lose their own independence tends to be very disturbing for them. Accepting the reality and getting accustomed with the pain of the attack, body marks and disfigurement tend to be some of the biggest concerns of the survivors alongside losing acceptance in the society and community. Besides, these survivors are more vulnerable towards further attacks in the future (Adelman, 2012).

CASE STUDIES

In Pakistan, there have been numerous acid throwing incidents on women, over the years, which have severely affected the lives of the victims while the attackers have managed to escape with not much difficulty. A couple of such cases have been discussed in this section.

The Plight of Fakhra Yunus

In 1998, Fakhra Yunus, an 18 year old inhabitant of Bulbul Bazar at Napier Road, in Karachi's not-so-famous red light district, came in contact with Bilal Khar, the former Punjab Assembly MPA from Muzaffargarh. Fakhra, at that time, was already a mother of a three year old boy Nauman. According to Fakhra, Bilal Khar told her that he was an officer from the customs. After being in relationship for six months, the couple got married. While Bilal Khar's father, Ghulam Mustafa Khar, the feudal lord and former governor of Punjab, was not in favour of the marriage, it was nevertheless a significant moment in Fakhra's life. The couple then moved to Lahore, where Fakhra came to know that Bilal had already been married thrice earlier. It was the start of a terrible journey for the young woman as she began suffering abuses at the hands of Bilal, who regularly fought with her followed by apologies to make her stay at his place. After a turbulent period of

three years, Fakhra finally drew together enough spirit to go away from Bilal's house to her mother's home. Only a week after, Bilal Khar wreaked upon her the most shocking and disastrous punishment that can be conceived, for leaving him. Fakhra reported that it was 14th May, 2000 and she was asleep in her mother's house when Bilal entered her room, held her by the hair and after some resistance from her, managed to throw something on her. She could not grasp what had happened to her in the first instance, so she started to run after him, while he was leaving. In a few moments, she realized that she could not see. She instantly claimed that the acid assault was carried out by her husband, Bilal Khar (Flatt, 2012).

Though Fakhra managed to survive the attack, it brought upon severe injuries on her, almost thawing her face completely, destroying her one eye, fastening her lips, shrinking her face skin and her chest alongside smoldering her hair. She remained in coma for around half a year while she recovered during the next six months at Karachi's Civil Hospital where she also learnt about her pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage. An FIR was launched against Bilal Khar, who with his political influence managed to escape police arrest. Tehmina Durrani, former stepmother of Bilal Khar, also a social activist and author supported Fakhra Younus in her times of despair by hiding her at her own house, while risking her own life. She then contacted the Italian government and charity firms. After successful negotiations with the Italian as well as Pakistani Government, she sent Fakhra to Italy where her further reconstructive treatment was carried out. While Fakhra left, her case came out in the media primarily due to the efforts of Tehmina Durrani. In October, 2002, Bilal Khar was arrested in Muzaffargarh and indicted with attempt to murder charge (Saifuddin, 2012). However, another twist had taken place in the case as the earlier witnesses of the case, including Fakhra's sister, brother in law and mother in law had begun to declare that Bilal Khar was not the perpetrator; instead the attacker was someone else with a different appearance. Since the witnesses of the case had changed sides and the main witness, Fakhra, had left the country; hence Fakhra's case became weak and Bilal's lawyer, ceased the opportunity to stamp that it was a case of political

victimization and that Bilal Khar, was being falsely dragged into it. In December 2003, Bilal Khar was exonerated by the District and Sessions Court South chaired by Judge Bin Yamin (Adamjee, 2011).

Meanwhile, Fakhra, with 39 reconstructive surgeries, managed to survive up till 2012. On March 17, Fakhra, emotionally tormented lost any hope of justice and gave up her life by jumping from her sixth floor residence. During her stay in Italy, Fakhra used to receive a monthly allowance from the Italian government while Pakistani embassy, despite her requests, backed away from any kind of financial support. She also wrote her autobiography *Volto Cancellato*, which translates as ‘The Erased face’. It was published in 2005 in German, Italian as well as Spanish. While Fakhra has died, Bilal Khar today resides in Multan with his fifth wife (Adamjee, 2011).

Thus, Fakhra Younus’ story is an ideal depiction of the anguish and suffering that victims of acid attacks face. And with lack of law enforcement and security coupled with gender discrimination, women in different parts of the country continue to suffer from the perils of acid throwing.

Zaib Aslam Case

Another tragic case is of Zaib Aslam, the ten year old girl. On November 25, 2011, she was standing with her mother at a bus station when two motorcyclists came towards them with two jugs. Zaib’s mother recognized that one of the attackers was her elder daughter’s ex-fiance. The jugs contained sulphuric acid which was bought in the local market for a few rupees. Without any second thoughts, the motorcyclists threw the acid at Zaib Aslam and her mother Parveen Akhtar. Akhtar says that it seemed as if fire had been flung onto her. On the other hand, Zaib’s face got parched away with her eyelids sticking down together. In that dreadful moment, acid also splattered into Zaib’s mouth, heavily damaging her throat. Ever since then, Zaib covers her face and head with a pink shawl as she does not want anyone to see her destroyed face. She has lost her eyes while her throat has got badly distended. Consequently, she is confined to eating just soup or bread

immersed in milk or tea. On occasions Zaib tells her family that she does not want to live anymore while at times, she weeps and pleads to return time. Akhtar too has got her arm, chest and neck corroded in the assault. Though the Acid Throwing Bill, which passed in the National Assembly 17 days after attack on Zaib, closed the provision of out of court settlements in the case of acid attacks; the law remains far from implementation and Zaib has received no benefit from the new law. In March 2012, a settlement took place between Zaib's family and Ghulam Dastagir, the man who was behind the attack. The cost of Zaib's face was settled at 350,000 rupees while that of Akhtar was set at 500,000 rupees. Hence, the case was settled out of court for just around 850,000 rupees. Is this a fair compensation for the lifelong torture inflicted upon Zaib and Akhtar? Will this payment serve as a punishment for the perpetrators? The answers to these questions can be deduced from Akhtar's thoughts after the settlement. She says that she is not content with this agreement as the perpetrators are free and could come anytime again to abuse anyone else in her family (Rodriguez, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Treatment

The magnitude of the damage inflicted during acid throwing depends on two factors: concentration of the acid, and the time period before the acid is completely washed away with water. If the concentration is high or there is a delay in washing the acid with water, then the acid can ruthlessly corrode the skin in a few seconds, the coating of fat under the skin, and the fundamental bone as well in few cases. Lips and eyelids can get thoroughly destructed while ears and nose can get severely injured (Bollineni). Acid attack survivors cannot be healed completely. Their everyday life tends to become quite different from a common person as they need to remain within the limitations prescribed to them by the doctors in order to keep away from further physical difficulties and hindrances (Khan, 2005).

The Acid Survivor's Foundation in Pakistan states that the acid attack victims tend to exhibit a high survival rate if treated at the right time in the appropriate manner with the necessary

resources. As explained in the previous sections, the victims are affected physically as well as psychologically. Physical challenges entail long term treatment with multiple surgeries. First of all, the survivors require highly complicated medical services for a sophisticated plastic surgery. Then, several operations are carried out which tend to be very expensive. In order to reconstruct the spoiled faces of the survivors, extensive surgeries are required which cost several US dollars. On the other hand, psychological challenges require profound involvement of psychologists as well as counselors during each phase of the physical curing. Such psychological treatment is necessary in order to help the victims come out from the dreadfulness and suffering they had undergone (Saeed, 2012).

In Pakistan, acid attack victims often suffer due to lack of transport facilities which are needed to reach hospitals in time for live-saving treatment. In order to smooth the progress of transport facilities, an Ambulance of Hope was handed over to the Acid Survivors Foundation of Pakistan by French Ambassador Philippe Thiebaud in May 2012. Professor Hamid Hasan, who is a representative of the surgical unit of Benazir Bhutto Hospital in Rawalpindi, said that most of the cases related to acid throwing occur in distant areas where public transport services are not readily available to the people. The movement of acid throwing victims requires air-conditioned transport, which not many people can pay for. Moreover, even availing this transport service requires the victims to travel long distances on foot. This aggravates the issue as victims arrive at the hospitals up to 9 hours late, which delays and set hurdles in the treatment ('Acid Crimes: For Victims, an Ambulance of Hope', 2012).

Prevention

The nuisance of acid throwing can be prevented if the society in conjunction with the government demonstrates willingness alongside taking strong measures in various spheres to curb down this hazardous crime.

A few measures that can be employed to prevent acid throwing are:

- **Public Awareness** – The curse of acid throwing on women can only be subsided if adequate awareness is created about it among the masses. Extensive public awareness programs need to be initiated and propagated, which clearly explain to the people, the dreadful effects of acid throwing not only on the individual but on the society as well as the nation. Nowadays, print and electronic media is quite vibrant in Pakistan and easily accessible to common people. Hence, the tool of media can be employed to communicate the message to the masses (Chinoy & Junge, 2012). However, public awareness programs need to be developed with great care and precautionary measures considering the sensitivity of the issue involved. Distorted and damaged faces of the acid attack victims should not be made use of in public awareness campaigns, as they in a way, act as a source of encouragement for criminal-minded people, to carry out acid assaults. The victim's name and identification should be kept concealed and every safety measure should be taken to prevent the disclosure of the victim's identity in the media. This is necessary in order to avert any further social or communal disgrace and seclusion for the acid attack survivors (Khan, 2005).

- **Control over Sale of Acids** – As mentioned earlier, acids such as sulphuric acid and nitric acid, including their concentrated forms are easily and cheaply available in the markets of Pakistan. Hence, the perpetrators do not face much difficulty in procuring these life threatening materials as they are accessible in most of the areas. Though the use of acid is necessary in sterilization, making car batteries, etc; yet the negative consequences of their open sale are much more alarming. Hence, the selling of acids and their types alongside other corrosive materials should be rigorously monitored and controlled. The passing of legal acts only accomplishes formality, whereas actual control over the sale of acids can only be established if a powerful and authoritative body is formed which strictly oversees the sale of acids and corrosive substances. Medical shops operating illegally and selling poisonous substances such as acids without any appropriate check and balance should be ceased and their operations should be banned in the first instance.

- **Strong Legislation and Law Enforcement** – Not many countries around the world have been able to pass laws which permit direct prosecution of acid throwing incidents. In a few countries where legislation exists, enforcement has been a major obstacle. Prior to December 2011, no direct laws existed in Pakistan against the heinous crime of acid attack. Over the years, lack of interest shown by the government, in addition to corruption, poor police training and insufficient resources; have collectively resulted in weak legislation against acid throwing on women besides weak law implementation as well. It was as late as December 12, 2011, that the ‘Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill’ was passed by Pakistan’s National Assembly. The law stipulates that the person responsible for throwing acid will suffer punishment in the form of life detention or no less than fourteen years behind the bars besides maximum fine of Rs.1 million (Chinoy & Junge, 2012). The passing of this bill in the National Assembly is a positive sign considering the fact that this issue was never given due importance during the 65 years of independence. However, it needs to be understood that prevention of acid throwing on women not just depends upon the passing of bills and laws, rather strict and immediate implementation is also required. As far as law implementation is concerned, not only should the police be empowered to take stern actions to enforce law, but a national commission or a special judicial panel should also be composed to keep an eye on whether laws pertaining to acid throwing are being enforced or not. Hence, in order to combat the issue of acid throwing on women and to eradicate it from the society, it is necessary that not only stringent laws and regulations are passed pertaining to it but also strict enforcement is carried out by the responsible authorities.

- **Government and Societal Support** – As discussed earlier, acid throwing in Pakistan as well as around the world, is a gender biased form of violence as the majority of attacks have been on females. This gender biased phenomenon is reflective of the historical views held about females in several cultures, considering them to be weak and a symbol of shame. It shows that women have always been held unequal in many parts of the world compared to men. In order to wipe out the hazard of acid throwing on women,

government as well as society needs to tackle the primary cause of the issue, that is discrimination against women. The rights which Islam and the Constitution of Pakistan grant to women must be upheld. Efforts should be made by the government in collaboration with the society to root out discriminatory attitude and policies towards women. Women should be given the respect which they deserve; and the government should launch programs as well as support the existing ones, that aim at empowering women to boost their self-confidence and enhance their capacity to earn individually. In addition, the government and the society need to punish the perpetrators in a manner which sets a trend and inhibits others from performing this odious act.

CONCLUSION

Acid Throwing on women is one of the most horrible and perilous crimes that take place in Pakistan. The number of acid throwing cases reported has been in the same range during the last few years, indicating that there has been little attention given towards this heinous crime by government and law enforcing authorities. The causes of this act are various including rejection of advances and proposals, lack of security, dowry demands, land disputes, political rivalry, easy availability of acid as well as marital and family disputes. The effects of this act, physical and psychological, are quite awful on the victim. Though treatment exists, yet the victims never tend to recover completely from the consequences of acid throwing as acid not only damages the skin of the face but also melts bones and causes blindness. The crime can be prevented if government as well as the society takes collective measures to enforce laws, create public awareness and ban the sale of acids openly. The tragic stories of Fakhra Yunus and Zaib Aslam are enough to raise the emotions of any normal human being. They are also an eye opener not only for the government but the society as well.

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