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Acid Violence in Pakistan: A Study on Women Victims of Acid Attacks in Karachi

Abstract *Acid violence is a horrible act of gender violence in orthodox societies. A study was conducted to know the reasons for the acid violence against women in Pakistani society. For this purpose, female acid attack survivors were recruited from Karachi city of Sindh province in Pakistan. We found personal conflicts and rejection of marriage proposals as major reasons for acid attacks on women. The majority of the victims are being humiliated due to disfiguring of body parts and forced to live in isolation. This study recommends strong legal framework preparation by government authorities to curb such incidents and rehabilitate acid victims.*

Key Words: Acid Violence, Gender Violence, Women Victims, Pakistan

Introduction

Acid attacks are caused by different reasons such as inheritance issues, family disagreement, dowry demand, refused marriage proposals or land disputes. In all such cases, mostly women and children become the easy target of the perpetrator's wrath (Zia, 2013). Throwing acid at the face of women rarely kills them, but it disfigures their face, burn the tissues of their body or dissolve their bones. The facial disfigurement reduces their chances of marriage. Consequently, they become worthless and afraid because of their modified appearance and feel hopeless about their future (Murthy & Smith, 2009). The physical consequences could be termed as the immediate causes of the violence, while the long-term consequences of these attacks are social, psychological and economic difficulties associated with the victims (Gowda, 2016). Most of the acid victims face poor economic situation and usually live in complete poverty with no access to justice; they are illiterate and poor and don't have sufficient basic health care facilities, clean drinking water and quality education to become effective member of society (Griebeler, 2014). Acid has a devastating effect on the human body, along with tissues and bones; it melts away skin and flesh touched with the acids. The burnt body or disfigure face persistently caused physical, psychological, social and economic problems in victim's lives. Consequently, they become dependent on others for daily tasks, feel worthless and become a social outcast for their appearance (Agarwal, 2008). Hence, most of the victims belong to poor family and acid burn carries long-lasting medical complications. They required physical surgery, rehabilitation and long-term psychological support, especially from their family, to move forward from the trauma (Anand, 2016).

Acid violence considers as an international act of violence that has been noticed in different parts of the world, but the highest recorded nations are Colombia, Uganda, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal with the South Asian countries (Beiger, 2014). Violence against women is a common social problem in Pakistan. Most acid crimes took place in agricultural areas of Pakistan, where acid is readily available in local markets. Punjab has reported the highest number of cases. It is generally observed that most acid attack cases are not properly reported (Khan, 2020). In this scenario, there is an essential need to analyze the dynamics of gender violence and highlight the key components associated with acid throwing incidents in Pakistan. This study has investigated acid violence and its long-lasting effects on survivor's life. The findings of this study will be helpful in understanding the nature of the problem and devise possible solutions for the rehabilitation of acid survivors.

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Literature Review

The first acid attack was recorded in the 17th century, which extended across Europe at the end of the 19th century, but the Second World War brought the end of those acid attacks in the region. These attacks were generally reported by women against women as 'crimes of passion' fueled by jealousy, insanity, disappointment or vengeance (Bhatti, 2011). Currently, acid attacks are habitually reported worldwide, such as in India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Hong Kong, China, The United Kingdom, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Ethiopia, and especially in Bangladesh, which is making up 9 percent of all stated cases throughout the world (Begum, 2004).

Countries have reported an increase in these attacks due to physical availability. Other than a rejection of sex and marriages, the cultural, social, situational and personal factors are also convoluted in acid throwing (Patel, 2014). Therefore, acid attack considers as a global issue that is not restricted to any age, caste and creed or geographical location. These attacks are totally based on gender violence aimed at controlling women (Critelli, 2010).

Gender inequality and discrimination refers to the prejudicial or unequal treatment of persons against another person, especially women. The discrimination shows the cultural, social, traditional and religious norms of any society, which leads to domestic violence (Bhati, 2011). Unfortunately, Pakistan is a dominating male society where women have given very low status. Over the past few decades' acid violence has cited as the most frequent and worst form of domestic violence against women, followed by relationship conflicts, business or property matters. These attacks in Pakistan involve interpersonal acts of violence in which perpetrators carried out the assaults to permanently disfigure the victims. Further, the collected evidence from multiple cases shows that the highest ratio of reported cases is in the areas where acid is widely used for industrial or other business purposes and is readily available (Naqwi, 2014).

It is estimated that more than a thousand women are being victimized per year all over the country, but unfortunately, the lack of a database system missed a chance to reflect real statistics at the local or national level (Aga & Ahmed, 2018). The published data of "Acid Survivors Foundation" include a comparison of cases reported during the years 2007 till 2013 and stated that 949 cases of acid attacks were reported respectively in the given time frame (ASFP, 2015).

The most common types of chemicals used for criminal purposes are sulfuric, hydrochloric and nitric acid. All these acids have a catastrophic effect on human flesh. They can easily melt the skin tissues in just a few seconds and often exposed the bones below the flesh. Sometimes it also causes in dissolving the bone, and when acid directly attacks the eyes, it damages the vital organs permanently. As a result, many acid attack survivors have lost the use of one or both eyes forever (Steffen, 2013).

There are several effects of this heinous crime which can mainly classify in Physical or Medical, Psychological, Socioeconomic and Social-isolation. Acid has a devastating effect on the human body, but it mainly depends on the types of acid and duration that how long it stayed on their body (Nair, 2014). The severity of the injury can only be exposed on the basis of the strength of the acid thrown to the victim and timing acid touched the skin. It further decides the severity of burn into the second or third degree as the acid can easily deform the skull, and the majority of the victims may permanently lose all or some of their hair (Taylor, 2000) as acid is directly thrown to the victim's face, which results in a variety of hilarious injuries that include melting of lips and nose, burning of eyelids, closing of nostrils, permanent blindness or vision loss, shrivelling of the ears and hands. In most cases, hands are usually damaged as victims try to hide their face and block the substance bouncing at their face (Patel 2014). This is also noticed that during the attack, most of the victims inhale the acid vapours, which caused complete breathing failures or problems. In addition to these above-mentioned medical effects, acid attack victims face the possibility of septicemia, renal failure, skin depigmentation and even death in severe acid burn cases (Molloy, 2017).

Victims of acid attacks also suffered from psychological issues. In spite of less visibility of psychological scars, their effects are also long-lasting. A psychologist has noticed the conditions of acid survivors and shared that psychological trauma results in extremely stressful forms of depression, nightmares, insomnia, and a sense of insecurity or fear that perpetrators might attack or harm again. The physical disability also doubles the economic expenses of their family who were already living in

extreme poverty. As a result, they do not get any chance to get back the same job or position after the incident and spend their lives in miserable conditions (Begum, 2004). Consequently, survivors of acid attacks walk into a long road of recovery and face a number of difficulties not only from the economic point of view but also from the sarcastic societal response to their disfigurement (Humphries, 2009). The acid survivors commonly suffered from social isolation. It is the condition of loneliness, depression, feelings of low self-worth, shame, and other mental health concerns experienced by the victims, which are mostly directed by psychological effects. This mistreatment and negative societal attitudes attributed to a lack of confidence in the survivors. It also discourages social engagement and mental stimulation activities which are necessary to keep the brain in good condition and useful to reduce the risk of helplessness and hopelessness amongst these victims (Gortner, 1997).

The literature on the subject compels us to study the dynamics of acid violence in Pakistan. In this context, the study has been designed to assess the factors associated with acid attacks and analyze the physical and psychological effects of such incidents on the lives of affected victims in the study area.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study that was conducted on the acid victims at Karachi city of Sindh province in Pakistan. The five case studies of acid victim-survivors selected from different organizations and government hospitals in Karachi city of Sindh province in Pakistan. A 'Critical Sampling Method' was used for the selection of participants. All victims were females. These targeted victims were included in the study after their consent and permission from the concerned organization where they were registered as acid victim-survivor. The personal identities of participants are hidden in this study in order to safeguard the security of victimized women. The study aimed to know the reasons for the acid violence against women and analyze the effects of acid attacks on the life of affected women. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (UPA) was used to get the study objective through the utilization of semi-structured interviews from participants. The questions were asked on the themes of the research study and later transcribed for analysis and presentation in the final results.

Results and Discussion

In this study, five acid survivors 22–55-year age were included in the study. Table 1 provided the demographic characteristics of the participants. The mean age of survivors was noted 35.8 years. There were 02 married, 02 widowed and 01 single women in the study. The number of mean children was 1.4. Among affected survivors, 02 were employed, 02 were housewives, and one was a single woman. The Results of the study are showing the devastating effects of acid attacks on the lives of these affected women. The majority of victims lost their facial beauty as the face of 02 women completely burnt, 02 got injuries on face and hand while 02 got affected their face and arms during an incident of violence. The majority lost both or one eye vision after the acid attack. Most of them were attacked by their close relative at the mean age of 30.4 years (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Acid Victims in Study Area

Age	Range=22-55	M= 38.5
Marital Status	Single: (N=01) Married: (N=02) Widowed (N=02)	
No. of children	Range=1-3	M=1.4
Profession	Employed (N=2) House wife (N=2) Unemployed 01	
Length of time in a relationship	Range=1-3	M=1.8
A major part of the body affected	Only Face (N=2) Face, Hand and Arm (N=2) Face/Chest (N=1)	
The estimated age when the accident happened	Range=17-48	M=30.4

As for as psychological issues are concerned, all victims are feeling fear and lose interest in their lives. These women were interviewed by the principal investigator through questions on the main themes of the research (Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of Themes

Main Themes	Sub Themes
Physical Effects	Disfiguring of body parts Loss of vision Loss of hearing
Social Exclusion	How to survive Feeling helplessness Delay justice
Psychological Effects	Fear in life and facing anxiety Losing interest Thinking for suicide

Furthermore, the details of each interview are provided in the following case studies of each affected women

Case Study 1: Anita Khatoon

The first participant of our research study was a 22 years old divorced mother who was assaulted in the Sarjani town area of Karachi city for refusing a marriage proposal from a local vendor who used to chase her regularly on the way to the factory from her home. This lady was married to an addicted person at the very young age of fifteen, where she spent three years in extremely miserable conditions with her husband and finally decided to abandon him. After getting separation from the court, she took her 3 years old son and started living with her mother and other siblings. Later she got a job in a local garment factory where she worked for 8,000 rupees per month salary. During the job, she was chased by a young local vendor, and he continuously forced her to marry him. She rejected his marriage proposal several times, but one day, she was forcefully stopped in the way and insisted on the final decision. This time the guy was very much aggressive and showed a bottle of acid to threaten her. Unfortunately, the guy was completely failed to convince the girl and threw acid to her face in a state of anger.

Consequently, the acid completely disfigured her half face. Skin became dark and shrunk after this brutal attack. Although she had undergone several reconstructive surgeries and referred to private hospitals for other face surgeries, no significant improvement was observed. These surgeries were very much expensive and beyond the income of the victim. When was she asked how to survive after the acid attack? She replied that after the incident, she lost her job immediately. She was feeling helpless and said: During tragic years, I got my financial support from my father and sisters. In reply to the psychological effects, she said that: I am very lonely and feeling myself in acute depression. Though the horrible incident happened in the past, still she is facing lengthy court trials to reach a final disposition.

Case Study 2: Jamila Begum

Jamila Begum is a 55 years old woman. She got married at a very young age and has four children. Unfortunately, her first husband passed away when her youngest son was only three months old. After the death of his husband, she did not think about the second marriage for fifteen years and stayed with her parents. After the death of their parents, she started to face the calamities of life but continued to work to fulfil the necessities of their life and to educate her children. At the difficult time, her brother-in-law moved forward and took the responsibility to run the house until he retired from the job. Before retirement, he suggested the victim marry again and started to look for a suitable person for her marriage. But unfortunately, the decision of second marriage became disastrous in her life. She started to live with her new husband with her two children and also took care of her second husband's children. Later she noticed that her second husband has started to take an interest in her younger daughter, who also felt uncomfortable around him. In this situation, she decided on the marriage of

her daughter with one boy through her relatives. His second husband was not in favor of this decision because of his mala fide intentions. His husband became angry and threatened to change this decision. Anyway, she did not surrender and finalized the marriage of her daughter. After a couple of days, her husband took her to another home in Orangi and poured bottles of acid on her to take revenge for his step-daughter's marriage.

As a result, acid completely disfigured the face and affected other parts of the body, including permanent loss of her left eye vision. Later she registered an FIR against her husband, but unfortunately, he died after 10 days of the incident. She had gone for several reconstructive surgeries, but more operations are required to repair the damage. In response to the question of her survival after the incident, she said, I am earning my livelihood through the help of my close relatives. She often thinks of suicide and said, life is meaningless for her except for the presence of her children.

Case Study 3: Gul Khatoon

Gul Khatoon is a 40 years old woman who was attacked in 2009. This time the attacker was her son-in-law. After a few years of marriage, her son-in-law started beating her daughter and forced her to get a share in the property left by her late husband in the Sarjani town area of Karachi. One morning, when she was washing the clothes, her son-in-law visited her and threw acid on her face. She remained in hospital for several months and had undergone four reconstructive facial surgeries. Her arms and hands were burnt completely because she tried to hide her face during the attack and lost her eye vision. "I am now dependent on my other family members, but how long I can survive," she told about the living conditions. The victim also faced terrible challenges after the incident. She tried to report FIR against the perpetrator, but he bribed the police and was not arrested. After a few years of acid attack, his husband died, and she is still suffering from the injuries and other social and psychological challenges. In response to the question of her interest in life, she replied: "I now fear from all the males in society, and sometimes I think to leave all and finish my life".

Case Study 4: Nasreen Saher

The fourth victim of the study was 40 years old lady whose entire life was totally ruined by her husband in a horrific incident. At the time of marriage, her husband was working as a daily laborer. Later due to low income and increasing family problems, her husband became violent and began to abuse her and her children. They were living their life in absolute poverty. Poverty became the reason for her miserable life. Both husband and wife frequently had arguments on family issues and low earning.

One morning a usual discussion turned into a heated argument, and the husband tortured his wife badly. Later he poured acid on his wife face and arms. She shouted for help, but he closed the doors of the house. The acid remained for hours on her body and had devastated effects on the entire body. It badly burned her face, permanently blind her, and abrupt the muscles of her neck and arm. Consequently, due to this accident, she completely lost her facial figures and unable to move her arms. She is dependent on other family members and living life in miserable conditions. In response to the question of her mental situation, she replied: I am observing the flames of hell in my life. Later the police arrested her husband, and he was sentenced to twelve years after many court hearings. After two years of punishment, her husband died in prison, and she is still facing hardships in life.

Case Study 5: Shgufta Rehan

Another victim of the study was a 22 years old girl Shagufta. She was living in the Gulshan Iqbal area in Karachi. At the age of 19, she fell in love with a police constable in the area. Despite objection from the family, she decided to engage with this boy. After few days, she realized that his fiancé is not serious in a relationship and indulged with other girls. She was shocked to know all this. In that scenario, the engagement did not work, and she ended this relationship soon with the help of her family. The broken relation created more problems for her and the family. They started to receive threats from her ex-fiancé for the reversal of the decision. She declined and rejected the offer of marriage.

A day before 'Eid, a religious festival, when she was returning home with his brother and an infant nephew, her ex-fiancé threw acid on her face. Immediately she was sent to the nearest hospital, but

the acid completely deformed her face and affected her eyes as well. She lost one eye in the attack and lost her left eye vision permanently. Her infant nephew also had deep scars on the left side of his face, and his head was badly burned. The victim had many surgeries, but her face remains disfigured and unrecognizable. Her family tried to file a police report against the perpetrator, but his strong influence did not allow police to take immediate action against the assaulter. As a result, she is still facing severe social and psychological problems. She said that: I am now living like a corpse in society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Most of the acid affected women are from poor background. The acid thrown accidents have devastated the lives of acid attack survivors. This study has shown that the young women of the mean age 30.8 are targeted in the violence. The most dangerous aspect of acid violence is the burning of the face and loss of vision in the incident. It has been observed in the study majority of women are now dependent on their family and rehabilitation organizations for survival. Furthermore, this study has shown the deep psychological and emotional scars on the life of acid violence survivors in Pakistan. All these women are with facing negative comments about appearance from different people in society. They have been rejected for marriage and did not receive any proposal after losing their facial beauty. These victims of acid attacks also suffer from different problems and obstacles in getting legal assistance. Government should make proper legislation to curb acid violence and take special measures for the rehabilitation of affected women.

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