

SCARRED FOR LIFE: THE ENDURING BATTLES OF ACID ATTACK SURVIVORS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the challenges that acid attack survivors faced in their daily lives long after the incident. A qualitative approach was used, and in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 25 acid attack survivors using an interview guide. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The study findings revealed that acid attack survivors in Pakistan faced multiple challenges in their daily lives long after the incident. The majority of the survivors were from poor families and had little or no education. Due to their poor economic condition, they could not afford the necessary medication and treatment. They often experienced mental health issues and faced little social acceptance. To address these challenges, acid attack survivors required rehabilitation programs that empowered and educated them, helping them reintegrate into society and return to normalcy. The challenges faced by acid attack survivors in Pakistan were significant and required immediate attention from government and non-governmental organizations. To enable acid attack survivors to recover from their trauma, comprehensive rehabilitation programs that addressed their mental, physical, and social needs needed to be implemented. By empowering and educating acid attack survivors, we could help them overcome the multiple challenges they faced and enable them to lead fulfilling lives.

Keywords: Acid violence, human rights violation, women victims, lifelong challenges,

INTRODUCTION

Acid attack, also known as "intimate terrorism," involves pouring hydrochloric acid, nitric acid, or sulphuric acid on the body of another person with the intention of causing lifelong agony to the victim and their family (Morrison, 2005 as cited by Mujeeb & Kamal, 2018). This brutal act is one of the cruelest forms of gender-based violence, with women being the majority of victims (Patel, 2014, p.1). Acid violence is a heinous form of violence that knows no bounds and can occur anywhere, regardless of nationality, religion, or geographic location (Haque & Ahsan, 2014). It is a global phenomenon, it has been reported since the 1800s in the United States and the United Kingdom, and have since spread to Africa and Southeast Asia, with the number of incidents rising sharply in underdeveloped countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Cambodia (Khoshnami et al., 2017). Where Male perpetrators often commit these attacks in the name of honor and shame (Welsh, 2009, p. iii) without committing this act without considering the immense pain and loss they are causing to the victim's life (Begum, 2004)

Table No. 1 Acid attacks global context

Global context	Every year	Acid attacks	Gender based context Acid survival trust int.2018 (data source)
World wide	Every year	1500	80% victims are female
India	2018	228	ASTI int. indicates that most of the victims are women and girls
Bangladesh	2010-2018	720	70% victims are female (ASTI)

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Columbia	Every year	100	most of the victims are women and girls
Uganda	Every year	35 plus	most of the victims are women and girls
Pakistan	2007-2018	1485	ASFP data base shows that that majority of the females are victimized

<https://www.asti.org.uk/a-worldwide-problem.html>

Acid attacks cause immense pain by damaging various layers of the skin and even dissolving bones in some cases. The extent of skin damage is so severe that the victim is unable to tolerate sunlight exposure (Cambodia Human Rights Promotion Federation, 2003). While it is possible for men to be victims of acid violence, but the available literature shows that it is a form of gender-based violence that primarily targets women (Mannan et al., 2007). Typically, men perpetrate acid attacks against women as a punishment for refusing their advances or for other perceived transgressions related to love, marriage, or sexual activity (Anwary, 2003; de Castella, 2013; Mannan et al., 2005; Menon & Vashishtha, 2013). Unfortunately, violence against women is pervasive and affects women from all socio-political backgrounds (Patel, 2010), leaving a lasting impact on their lives (Raj & Silverman, 2002). As per the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, gender-based violence is characterized as any act that is rooted in gender discrimination and causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering. This includes threats, coercion, or any arbitrary restriction of freedom, regardless of whether it occurs in public or private settings (United Nations, 1993).

When it is talked about Pakistan it has no exception to it where gender discrimination is common and the gender-based violence is normal in the daily lives of women (Social Policy Development Center, 2012, p. 5). In Pakistan, there has been a significant rise in acid crimes, although the government has not released any official statistics on this issue. Various organizations have attempted to map and report on the prevalence of acid violence, but the lack of reliable data from government agencies, police, and courts has made this task difficult. (ASFP, 2017). Much of the literature that have statistical data regarding acid attacks in Pakistan consist of those reports that are published by NGOs. In this scenario the actual data is not located which is caused by the difficulty of data collection from far off areas (Zia, 2013) and the under reporting and misreporting of the acid attacks (Soelberg, 2010).

In Pakistan, gender-based violence is unfortunately a common occurrence, and discrimination against women is prevalent in society (Social Policy Development Center, 2012). Despite the prevalence of acid attacks in the country, accurate statistical data is difficult to obtain due to the remoteness of some areas (Zia, 2013) and the underreporting and misreporting of these incidents (Soelberg, 2010). In Pakistan NGOs are a significant source of information on the subject (Zia, 2013). Acid attacks not only cause physical impairment but also leave lifelong psychological, social, and economic effects on survivors (Rehman, 2014). These attacks have a profound impact on the lives of survivors, leaving them with limited opportunities and often completely transforming their lives. In Pakistan, acid attacks disproportionately affect women, who are socially isolated due to their restricted traditional gender roles (ASFP, 2015). Shockingly, all 1,375 reported cases of acid attacks in Pakistan from 2006 to 2016 were perpetrated against women (ASF, 2016). The highest number of cases were reported in the districts of Multan, Muzaffargarh, Rahim Yar Khan, and Bahawalpur (ASFP, 2015). However, due to the difficulty of data collection from remote areas and underreporting, the actual number of acid attacks in Pakistan is likely much higher than reported (Zia, 2013; Soelberg, 2010).

Despite the passage of multiple bills and laws in Pakistan, progress in reducing acid attacks, particularly against women, has been slow. NGOs and women's rights activists, along with the state and global agencies, have made significant efforts to reduce the occurrence of acid attack (Chaudhry, 2005) but still there is lot of need to be done. All of this work mostly focuses upon the immediate needs of victims. However, long-term problems, including medical, social, psychological, and economic issues, are often overlooked. These problems can make it challenging for survivors to reintegrate into society and lead a normal life. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the difficulties faced by acid attack survivors who continue to experience ongoing challenges in their daily lives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a phenomenological approach within the interpretive qualitative research design paradigm. The focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of acid attack survivors who had

been victims for at least five years. Two prominent organizations, Acid Survivor Foundation and Duplex Smile Again Foundation, were consulted to locate potential respondents. The majority of acid attack victims were from Punjab, especially southern Punjab, which was the universe of this study. The target population included victims of acid attacks who had been survivors for at least five years. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who were currently experiencing the problem under investigation. This technique included inclusive and exclusive criteria, with inclusion criteria requiring victims who had been attacked for at least five years, and exclusion criteria including those who were newly attacked or had been victims for less than five years. The purpose of selecting these respondents was to gain insight into the long-term experiences of acid attack survivors. The sample size for this study was 25 respondents, and the data collection tool was an interview guide. To gather the required data, comprehensive interviews were carried out. The recorded interviews were transcribed and manually coded to extract themes for data analysis. Moreover, the researcher ensured that the information remained confidential and anonymous. The study was a component of the researcher's doctoral dissertation, and it received approval for all protocols from the Advanced Study Board at the University of Punjab.

Thematic Analysis

1) Physical Disability and Psychological Distress among acid Survivors

The survivors of acid attacks often endure severe bodily disfigurement, which can lead to long-term physical and psychological challenges. In Pakistan, victims of acid attacks have a high survival rate, but frequently face significant health problems, injuries, physical challenges, and require extensive surgical treatments. The psychological impact of an acid attack can also be profound, necessitating interventions to address the trauma and its effects on the survivor's psychological, social, and economic well-being within their communities. Overall, the far-reaching effects of acid attacks can result in a lifetime of physical, emotional, and financial struggle for survivors. My study findings reveal severe physical and mental health problems that these survivors face. The majority of victims, who are women, continue to suffer from debilitating physical health issues even long after the attack. Their bodies are left with permanent scars and disfigurement, which can cause immense pain and stress, leading to depression in some cases. The attackers aim to inflict long-term suffering, and the victims are left to endure the painful physical injuries and damages. *One respondent described their experience in the study*

“My whole face and body are burned so badly that till now whenever I look at myself in the mirror, I get scared, thinking what has happened to me. My mental health is deteriorated I cry loudly, yelling at others to overcome my pain”

Survivors of acid attacks often endure painful injuries and permanent damage to their bodies, which can cause long-term physical discomfort. Bleeding and itching are common symptoms experienced by survivors that can worsen during the summer months, exacerbating their discomfort. As one respondent noted, the physical pain and discomfort can be challenging to manage, stating,

“I have undergone four to five surgeries. Now I need some advanced surgeries on my own expenses. Still I am in a lot of pain. Since after the incident I have been in so much pain. In winters I cannot wear sweater nor can I take a blanket because my skin develops a burning sensation which is intolerable. Where as in summers, when the heat power is out and the skin sweats, it develops intense itching so much so that it bleeds. It becomes unbearable to stand the thinnest of fabric on my skin”.

The aftermath of acid attacks can have a devastating psychological impact on the victims, causing feelings of depression, anxiety, and a persistent fear of future attacks if the perpetrator is not caught. Survivors of acid attacks often experience long-term mental health issues, such as chronic anxiety and low self-esteem, due to the disfiguring effects of the attack and the significant impact it has on their daily lives. While physical injuries may heal over time, the emotional scars remain with the victims for a lifetime. For example, Zarmina, a victim of an acid attack perpetrated by her neighbor following a children's fight, has been left feeling vulnerable and depressed for the rest of her life. It is common for females to be targeted by male perpetrators in acid attacks, which can exacerbate the psychological trauma experienced by the victim

“After the incident I used to be very depressed when I used to listen to people gossiping about me it was very depressing for me. I am habitual to remain tense now I avoid people just to get rid of this depression”.

2) The Ongoing Financial Toll of Acid Violence on Survivors' Medical Treatment

Acid violence inflicts severe and lasting injuries on its victims, resulting in long-term physical damage that survivors must contend with. Unfortunately, the cost of treating these injuries can be prohibitively expensive, especially for acid attack survivors from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Respondents in my study were predominantly from lower-class backgrounds, and many struggled to afford the necessary medical treatment for their injuries. Acid attacks can cause a range of health issues, including disfigurement of the face, eyes, nose, and ears, as well as damage to skin tissues, muscles, and bones. In many cases, multiple surgeries are required to address these injuries, but the expense of these procedures can be beyond the reach of many survivors.

While the Acid Crime and Burn Bill 2017 aimed to provide free medical and rehabilitation services to acid attack victims, including medication and surgeries, my findings suggest that the reality on the ground is different. Although some surgeries are available for free through government hospitals, NGOs, and foundations, the cost of post-surgical medication and other expenses is still borne by the survivors, who may be unable to afford it. The high cost of medical treatment and ongoing care for acid attack survivors is a significant barrier to recovery and highlights the urgent need for improved access to affordable medical care for those affected by acid violence

One of the respondents stated that,

“after surgery we have to purchase all the medicines by ourselves, I need some medicine which I have to buy myself which is difficult to manage and this health deterioration won't make me able to move towards life normalcy but now I learn to live it, with patience because there is nothing in my hand.”

3) Social Implications of Acid Attacks on Survivors"

Survivors of acid attacks face social exclusion due to the disfigurement of their face and body. This makes it difficult for them to be accepted as normal members of society and interact with others freely. They are often blamed for the attack and not considered for employment opportunities, leading to further social and economic marginalization. Acid attack survivors face discrimination in social gatherings, where they are often subject to sarcastic remarks and treated impolitely due to their physical condition. They are not considered as equal members of society and are stigmatized, which leads to their self-isolation and restriction to their homes. These victims are also unable to perform their daily tasks outside their homes, as people blame and hurt them. The respondents in the study highlighted these social implications of acid attacks on survivors.

“A major problem is that I am facing is that people gossip a lot When they see me, they would turn their faces and it used to give me immeasurable pain. It became a social stigma for me, though it was not my fault that it happened, but they used to give comments and pass remarks about my state. On one hand you have faced a tragedy and on the top people of your area or community and others start blaming the victim”, saying that she must have done something to deserve this. This is unbearable pain I just cry over it; else I can't do anything”.

The correlation between social acceptance and social isolation is significant for acid survivors. If they are accepted by society, they are less likely to isolate themselves, but if not accepted, they tend to become socially isolated. Unfortunately, society often refuses to accept them as normal human beings, which can hinder their success in job interviews and other social situations. Even skilled survivors may face discrimination and mockery based on their appearance, making it difficult for them to use their skills to gain empowerment. Therefore, it is crucial for acid survivors to be socially accepted for their survival, as highlighted by one of the victims in her statement.

“When people used to look at me, they would say words like “baychari”. they often comment that my life has been destroyed. I often ask them that why do they think so. I can still move around and living my life well. They have a sick thinking which I can't change. Once I went to a wedding function. I was dressed up well like all other people. I heard a comment about me. Some of them said, ‘rassi jal gye magar bal nahi gya’ and ‘why does she need to dress up? I was shocked to hear this. My skin is burnt, not my heart and my desires. But I realized that You can't change anyone's thinking so it's better to avoid and live your life”

4 Rehabilitating Acid Attack Survivors' Lives.

Rehabilitation is a crucial process that aims to empower survivors and help them return to normalcy. However, for it to be successful, survivors need to be mentally and physically prepared. In May 2018, Pakistan's National Assembly passed the 'Acid and Burn Crime Bill 2017' which requires free medical treatment and rehabilitation for acid attack survivors. The bill also includes provisions for a prompt trial

of the perpetrator. Nonetheless, the Senate of Pakistan still needs to pass the bill for it to become law. During the previous government, the Chief Minister of Punjab initiated the "Nai Zindagi" program to offer free rehabilitation and medical services to acid attack survivors. However, my study reveals that there still exists a gap in fulfilling the program. The rehabilitation process includes education, vocational training, and self-entrepreneurship. Its objective is to provide aid to victims of violence and help them regain a quality life by restoring their functions, health, and wellbeing. Many acid survivors continue to live a miserable life with no awareness of their rights. To enable them to live as normal members of society, it is crucial to rehabilitate them. The majority of acid attack victims come from lower-class families with little or no education. After the acid attack, they face economic challenges due to the high costs of treatment and medication required to heal from burn injuries. Inability to bear such expenses results in dependence on family members, which can adversely affect their mental health. According to one respondent, this is a significant issue that needs attention.

"Unfortunately, a lot of women who suffer from this trauma have no empowerment opportunities and jobs, they are unable to make money for themselves, the feeling of being a burden remains constant which deteriorate the mental state and they are unable to get out of this incident and live their life as a normal member of society."

Acid attack survivors can be empowered through education and vocational training, which can equip them with the necessary skills to secure jobs or become self-employed. Education can also help them acquire knowledge and develop abilities that are essential in organizations, while vocational training can enable them to utilize their skills to work independently. Keeping the view of education in term of earning one of the respondents said:

"I am working as a makeup artist in a parlor near my hometown. Initially the clients did not want my services in the saloon. They used to avoid me. But later on, I proved my skills and now they are no more reluctant to get their work done by me this empowerment heals my pain and I believe on myself that I am also a normal human being like others."

Comprehensive rehabilitative treatment after medical treatment is crucial for survivors to continue their education or develop skills through vocational training. Illiteracy and lack of education, particularly among women, contribute to their lower socio-economic status. Education is a significant element in the rehabilitation process. However, my research indicates that some survivors who were receiving education before the attack discontinued their studies due to stigmatization and lack of acceptance. Continuation of this trend will make rehabilitation more challenging for such survivors. The stance of one respondent was,

"I want to acquire education but unfortunately after this incident I left my college and studies because I don't have courage to face society, initially I went to college but not a single girl wants to resume her relation with me. My best friend left me while saying my mother don't want me to your friend because it happens to you it must be your fault it breaks me in to pieces and I left education, I think hiding myself at home is the best way to live otherwise the people will kill you with their comments".

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Acid violence is a deliberate form of criminal violence that is intended to cause harm to the victim. It is a widespread issue at the global level, with the majority of reported cases occurring in South Asia (AGCWJ, 2011; ASFP, 2018). and Pakistan is no exception to this. The majority of acid violence victims are women, and the perpetrators often target their faces and bodies with acid in order to cause severe physical damage (ASFP, 2015). The findings of this study reveal that acid attack victims continue to face various challenges in their daily lives for a prolonged period of time. Women are the primary targets of acid attacks, largely due to the prevalence of a patriarchal system (Singh et al., 2018). In addition to the physical and medical implications, acid attacks also have significant economic, social, and psychological effects on the victims' lives (Rehman, 2014). The findings of my research indicate that acid survivors experience physical health problems that include multiple injuries, damages, scars, and disfigurement. These physical damages are severe enough to cause lifelong pain and suffering for the survivors. To recover from these injuries, the victims must undergo multiple surgeries and other medical procedures. Additionally, acid survivors experience long-lasting pain and other long-term complications that affect their mobility. This is consistent with the research conducted by Jenkinson (2017). In addition to the physical health problems, acid attack survivors also experience mental health

issues, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These psychological problems can have a profound impact on the victim's quality of life and can persist for a long time after the attack. Mannan et al. (2007) have similarly found that acid attack victims are susceptible to serious mental health issues including PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

My study revealed that the Mental health problems among acid survivors are linked to physical health problems such as pain and suffering. However, social issues also play a role, as acid victims often experience negative social reactions from those around them and are not treated as normal members of society. These survivors face a lack of support from their communities, as documented in the research of Hiremath (2021). In addition to physical and mental health issues, my research found that acid attack survivors frequently choose to avoid social events such as weddings and parties due to negative comments and remarks that can worsen their depression and isolation. Furthermore, survivors may experience limited employment opportunities due to their physical appearance and lack of education or skills, as noted by Khoshnami et al. (2017). Thus, rehabilitation programs are vital to empower and educate acid attack survivors, enabling them to reintegrate into society as productive and self-sufficient individuals.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has explored the long-term challenges faced by the acid survivor in their lifelong time. Acid violence is the extreme form of violence that is a serious violation of human rights. Majority of the victims are women and incidents are reported from Punjab province in Pakistan. Acid attacks cause severe burn and injuries to the victim's body and face. This physical damage requires multiple surgeries and medical procedures for long run to heal. These medication and treatment are expensive which are difficult to bear for the acid victims. Acid victims are usually from poor families with little or no education at all. After the incidents they are dependent on their family members for financial support. Financial dependency on pain and suffering causes the mental health issue of these victims. Parallel to these issues their social life works as fuel to fire for their life. These victims are not accepted by society as normal members. They are unable to find some jobs for them. In social life they have to face the negative and sarcastic remarks from the surrounding people which further cause depression in them. Rehabilitation is required for these victims to return to normalcy which includes to get them education and skills which can empower them financially and emotionally. Addressing the needs of acid attack survivors requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal reforms, access to medical care, provision of free or low-cost medicines, and educational and skill-building opportunities. By working together to provide these resources, we can help create a safer and more supportive environment for all acid attack victims.

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