

The Prevalence of Acid Attacks

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Of the 1500 acid attacks reported each year, 80% of these attacks are directed towards women, making them one of the most debilitating manifestations of violence against women (Acid Survivors Trust International , n.d.).

Acid attacks entail the throwing of acid or other corrosive substance on a person, generally a woman or a girl, with the intent to main, torture or kill them (ActionAid , n.d.). The implications of acid attacks are that they instantly damage and disfigure the victim, along with causing immense pain. The medical complications as a result of these attacks are long-lasting and require major surgeries. Acid attacks have serious impact on the psychological, social and economic condition of the victim, due to which the victim requires long-term support and rehabilitation (Acid Survivors Trust International , n.d.).

Often these attacks are used purposefully for disfigurement. Patriarchal attitudes and values emphasize that a women's appearance represents the value of her worth; to ruin a woman's appearance is to take away her value. In consideration of further patriarchal values, an acid attack can also occur with the intent on ruining a woman's career, future romantic prospects, and social status (Baruah, 2017).

In fact, the majority of the perpetrators of acid attacks are men (Baruah, 2017) and it is believed that the concept of 'toxic masculinity', contributes to the perpetration. Toxic masculinity is the stereotypical attitudes and ways of behaving that are associated with men and are detrimental to themselves and the society (Lexico, n.d.). Demonstrating one's own power and brutality is one of the most common underlying causes for the victimization of women, men, and transgendered individuals by men perpetrators (Baruah, 2017). These attacks are often fuelled by unrequited love, rejection, rejection of sexual advance, and dowry disagreements. Some of these attacks also occur due to land, business, and property disputes (Gupta, 2020).

Acid attacks are a worldwide phenomenon, with some countries accounting for a majority of the total cases. The Indian National Crime Bureau reported that 228 cases were reported in India in 2018, although the number of actual cases might be higher. Most of these attacks were on women, and were committed in public places including roads, schools and colleges. According to the Acid

Survivors Trust International (n.d.), Colombia has the highest per capita rate of acid attacks, with an average of 100 recorded attacks per year. In Pakistan, acid attacks are rooted in gender inequality, with 80 victims in 2018. We find in Bangladesh that 70% of the acid attacks are against women, and 80% of these occurred in the victim's homes. Most of these attacks are also directed at people from lower socio-economic status. A community survey in Uganda found that approximately 75% of people knew about the prevalence and danger of acid attacks; 20% actually knew a victim of an acid attack. The statistics for Cambodia, on the other hand, under-represent the true figures, because many victims either do not report the attacks or do not seek medical help. United Kingdom has the highest rates of recorded acid attacks in the world, 501 crimes were reported in 2018 in contrast to 452 in 2017. In the UK, however, the majority of the victims happen to be men (Acid Survivors Trust International , n.d.).

Acid attacks can be manifested in different ways and do not rely on the sole usage of acid to cause damage. For instance, in Nepal, a greater number of burn cases are due to kerosene and not acid. A recent maternal mortality and morbidity study in Nepal highlights that suicide is the leading cause of death among women aged 15-49 (16%). Fifty percent of these suicides included burn violence through self-immolation (using Kerosene), generally after domestic violence (Acid Survivors Trust International , n.d.).

Some of the countries mentioned above, e.g. Bangladesh, Pakistan and, Cambodia, have successfully experienced a steady decline in the number of cases of acid attacks due to tighter control on the sale of acid and legislation specific to acid attacks. For instance, the Bangladeshi government implemented the Acid Control Act 2002 and the Acid Crime Prevention Act 2002, which focused on but was not restricted to the establishment of a National Acid Control Council Fund and a rehabilitation centre for victims, treatment and legal aid for victims, prevention of the import and sale of acid, and capital punishment and penalty for the acid thrower (UN Women , n.d.). The implementation of these laws led to a decline in cases to under 100 a year in Bangladesh (Acid Survivors Trust International , n.d.).

To effectively eradicate acid attacks, however, is to implement these reactive strategies (e.g., Acid Control Act 2002) simultaneously with proactive prevention strategies, which entail sensitizing men and boys to gender-based violence and integrating them with prevention activities. The United Nations Population Fund has been actively working for the cause of gender equality and eradication of gender-based violence by organizing programmes that encourage

men and boys to discard stereotypes that are toxic, form healthy relationships that are built on respect and to support human rights (UNFPA, n.d.).

At an individual level, all of us need to serve as responsible humans and sensitize, educate, and spread awareness about acid attacks. In the event of an acid attack in your vicinity, Nath (2019) suggests some of the emergency measures that you can take:

- Douse the affected area with clean water, continuously, for a period of at least 20 minutes, or until the burning sensation subsides. This will disperse the chemicals and prevent the burning and melting of the skin.
- Jewellery on the body of the victim needs to be immediately removed to prevent any adverse chemical reaction.
- The acid-drenched clothes of the individual need to be removed immediately.
- The victim needs to be stopped from touching or rubbing their eyes. In case the acid affects the eyes, pour water on the eyes until the burning subsides.
- Antiseptic ointment, creams, or any neutralizing agent must not be applied on the burnt area. This can delay the treatment, and can cause exothermic reaction which can worsen the injury.

Furthermore, the social stigma and psychological implications attached to acid attacks are immense. Providing support and strength to the survivor is of utmost cruciality. This support can be emotional, instrumental or informational, but is essential to help the survivor recover (Nath, 2019).

Lastly, one needs to be empathetic to the suffering of all survivors. Laxmi Aggarwal was attacked with acid at the age of 15 for refusing to marry the attacker. She once said “People told my family to give me an injection that would kill me. That person attacked me once, but the society kept attacking me again and again with their negativity” (Gupta, 2020). Atsede Nguse, on the other hand, was attacked with acid and left disfigured by her estranged husband in the year 2017. She, however, had a different experience to share. She said that “There are more good people in the world than there are bad people. I have been touched by the kindness and love people showed me after the incident.” (Sahle)

Let’s all aim to become the kind of society that Nguse believes in.

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