

Acid Violence: A Burning Impact on Women of Karnataka -Case Study

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Abstract

Background: Acid throwing on the face and body of another person to cause or produce grievous injuries is a barbaric act of vengeance. For the last few years, it has been on the rise in both urban and rural areas of Karnataka. The perpetrators are mostly men and adolescent boys. The victims are females and mostly young girls. The objective of this study was to analyze some case studies to find out the reasons for attacks, and the application of acid control act and the result of its application and to estimate which age groups are more vulnerable for acid attacks. Cheap and easy availability of acids makes it the most effective weapon for man to use against girls' or young women for revenge and is one of the extreme forms of repression and violation of women's right.

Methods and Materials: The study population consisted of victims of acid throwing admitted in the Karnataka State Commission of Women campaign struggle against acid attack women (CSAAAW) and coming from all parts of the state. Face to face interview with the help of an interviewer administered questionnaire was conducted on 10 cases of acid victims.

Result: The study results reported that most of the acid victims were in the age group 15-20yrs. (25%) and 21-26yrs. (25%). Marital status of the acid victims revealed that majority of victims was unmarried (60%). Among the victims, 65% were students and 35% were housewives. Analysis of the causes revealed that 50% of cases was due to refusal of love/marriage/sex (50%) and 30% because of land/property/money dispute.

KEYWORDS: acid violence, case study, legal support, land dispute.

Introduction:

Acid throwing or vitriol age is a form of violent assault. Perpetrators of these attacks throw acid at their victims (usually at their faces), burning them, damaging skin tissue, often exposing and sometimes dissolving the bones. The consequences of these attacks include blindness and permanent scarring of the face and body .The chief target of these attacks are the women. It is one of the most heinous crimes that can be committed against a human being, which have very severe consequences on the victims. The attacks are clearly and cruelly calculated to permanently disfigure, debilitate and ultimately destroy the person, physically, economically and psychologically. A person burnt by acid is like a living corpse. This type of attack is worse than attempted murder. The victims continue to battle medical complications as acid seeps into the body and harms internal organs over an extended period of time. The victim needs both short term and long term medical facilities in the form of specialized plastic surgery. But it is almost impossible for the victim's family to pay for the extensive surgeries needed to reconstruct the damaged face of the victim and thus many of the victims remain like a living corpse.

Acid violence refers to the premeditated act of throwing corrosive acid on the face and body, with the intent to disfigure, torture, or kill the victim. The acid melts the flesh, sometimes to the bone, and causes lifelong scarring, physical disfigurement, and in some cases, permanent disability including blindness and immobility. Acid violence not only has a significant physical impact, but causes intense psychological distress, with survivors frequently reporting depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Although acid throwing is a form of violence known to have been committed throughout history, there is a steep rise in the number of cases documented in recent years. Some of this increase has been attributed to better documentation and survivors reporting the attacks more often. However, there appears to be a substantive increase in the number of acid attacks committed in recent times.

Objectives

The main objectives of this study are to:

- To focus attention on the socio-economic background & problems of acid victims of women.
- To evaluate the reasons of acid throwing.
- To study the health problems of acid victims of women.
- To analyze the Govt. & Non-Govt. Programmes, implications, for the acid victims of women.

Methods:

Over all Karnataka 76 acid victims of women were found. I have used convenient sampling method for my field study. This research uses the descriptive and qualitative technique for presenting research data. Both primary and secondary sources of data would be perused.

Data Analysis:

Acid attacks from 1999 to 2011

| Period | Number of incidents | Number of persons attacked | |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| | | Women | Total |
| May-Dec: 1999 | 115 | 58 | 139 |
| 2000 | 172 | 98 | 235 |
| 2001 | 250 | 140 | 344 |
| 2002 | 366 | 219 | 487 |
| 2003 | 335 | 185 | 412 |
| 2004 | 266 | 180 | 325 |
| 2005 | 212 | 144 | 268 |
| 2006 | 182 | | 223 |

| | | | |
|------|-----|----|-----|
| 2007 | 162 | | 199 |
| 2008 | 143 | | 185 |
| 2009 | 125 | | 155 |
| 2010 | 120 | | 158 |
| 2011 | 91 | 60 | 118 |

Source: Acid Survivors Foundation, Statistics of Acid Attack 1999 to 2011

Causes of Acid attack

This series highlighted the role of acid and sugar in causing dental erosion. When teeth are exposed to high sugar and acidic foods for long periods, the saliva in our mouths cannot neutralise these acids. This will lead to tooth structure breaking down.

According to a survey 68% of Australian children between the ages of 6 and 15 showed at least one tooth with signs of dental erosion (Choice 2010).

The cause of dental erosion is usually linked to the types of foods we choose to consume and also the frequency in which they are consumed.

Most types of fruits are generally acidic, citrus fruits being more acidic than other types of fruit. However white grapes and red delicious apples are also quite acidic.

Even though fruits have sugar in their makeup the type of sugar found in fruit is not easily broken down by bacteria. As a result sugars in fruit are generally less harmful to teeth.

There are some types of beverages which are consumed frequently in our diets that are rather bad for the teeth. These include soft drinks, wine, some types of fruit juice and energy drinks, to name a few. Even drinks which have artificial sugar in them can be acidic. Like diet types of soft drinks, these may be low in ‘sugar’ but are still acidic due to their various preservative content.

When these beverages are consumed regularly and sipped over an extended period of time, the level of exposure of the acid and sugar will eventually lead to dental erosion.

Common types of foods like some cereal bars eg apricot muesli bars, confectionery like mixed jellies, chupa chups, tomato sauces and also honey can be high in sugar and acidic. Some may seem healthy but can be rather detrimental to teeth.

Socio-economic Factors behind Acid-Throwing

By examining cases over the past few years, seven main causes of the crime are found, namely: land disputes, refusals of a relationship or marriage proposal, failures of a girl to bring a dowry to her husband, family disputes, marital disputes, political rivalries and the accidental presence of the victims at the scene. Land and property disputes are the most significant reason for acid attacks in Bangladesh though. As the litigation process in the country is very time-consuming, it often takes a substantial period of time to settle a land or property-related dispute legally. In addition, corruption is involved in almost every step of the proceedings, and it becomes quite costly to continue a case for such a long time. Under these circumstances, acid-throwing is often used as a weapon to weaken an

opponent physically, mentally and financially so that he or she would not dare to persist with legal action. As most acid attackers go unpunished, this further encourages them to commit the crime repeatedly. According to the ASF, the problem of land disputes accounted for 27 percent of total acid attacks in 2003, the highest among all the causes.

Refusals of a relationship or marriage proposal are another important factor in acid attacks, particularly on adolescent girls. In Bangladesh's male-dominated society, a girl's refusal to have a relationship with a man or rejection of his marriage proposal is not well received by the man himself. In many cases, especially in rural areas where the enforcement of law and order is not very strict, the spoiled young men take revenge by throwing acid on the girls. The victims mostly come from poor families and are not well protected by their families. Girls and children are vulnerable to acid attacks or attacks of any kind at any time as they can be easily approached by anyone on their way to school or when they go out to fetch water or collect firewood. The access of poor people to police and legal assistance, as well as medical facilities, is very limited. In 2002, only 9 percent of the total cases of acid attacks were related to the refusal of a relationship or proposal, but the percentage jumped to 17 percent in 2003.

Dowry, which is a known cause of violence against women, in general, is also a source of acid attacks. Following Islamic customs, a dowry is a compulsory gift or amount of money that must be given by the husband to the wife. Conversely, in Hinduism, the custom is that the dowry has to be paid by the wife's father to the husband. In reality, this Hindu custom is practised in low-income groups of both the Hindu and Muslim communities in Bangladesh. Failure to give a dowry often means death for the wife or an acid burn on her face and body. The dowry issue triggered 6 percent of the total cases of acid attacks in both 2002 and 2003.

Case studies

- **Karthika Parameshwaran** This was one Church attack that had nothing to do with religious fundamentalists or narrow minded extremists. A 22-year-old Bangalore law student, who was a native of Thiruvananthapuram and was pursuing her studies in the Karnataka capital—was attacked on Tuesday morning. Police say the girl was attacked with a bottle of sulphuric acid by a man after Karthika rejected his offer to marry him. The elusive assailant, who has been booked for murder, pounced on her at the Holy Trinity Church services where Karthika was attending a prayer meeting. Karthika has suffered nearly 30 per cent burns and is battling for life at a private hospital.
- **Haseena** Nineteen-year-old worked as a secretary in Rodrigues's firm. Haseena's only fault was that she spurned Rodrigues's advances. On April 20, 1999, in a premeditated act of crime, Rodrigues threw 2 litres of sulphuric acid on her face. He was arrested the same day but was punished only several years later.
- **Hina Fatima** But not all victims of acid attacks in the Silicon Valley state of Karnataka have lived to tell their tales of survival. Hina Fatima was a young bride of six months when her husband Fairoz, unable to keep any job for long, began

harassing her for dowry. She tried to reason with him about her family's poor financial status, but the threats continued. On August 8, 2007, Fairuz forced her to drink whisky which was laced with sulphuric acid, bought from a nearby shop. Then, he threw a bottle of acid on her face and burnt her eyes with a cigarette butt. Neighbours rushed her to a nearby hospital, but she died on August 21, 2007, in Bangalore's Victoria Hospital.

Social Background

In addition to medical and psychological effects, many social implications exist for acid survivors, especially women. For example, such attacks usually leave victims handicapped in some way, rendering them dependent on either their spouse or family for everyday activities, such as eating and running errands. These dependencies are increased by the fact that many acid survivors are not able to find suitable work, due to impaired vision and physical handicap. This negatively impacts their economic viability, causing hardships on the families/spouses that care for them. As a result, divorce rates are high, with abandonment by husbands found in 25% acid assault cases in Uganda (compared to only 3% of wives abandoning their disfigured husbands). Moreover, acid survivors who are single when attacked almost certainly become ostracized from society, effectively ruining marriage prospects.

LAWS AGAINST ACID ATTACKS

Afgahnistan

The elimination of violence against women Law (EVAW) was passed in 2009. It is the first law in Afghanistan to criminalise violence against women. Including acid attacks.

Consequence: the attacker gets a punishment of at least 10 years in jail and at most life imprisonment.

Pakistan

Yet to pass the Acid throwing and Bum Crime Bill 2012 which was drafted after Fakhra Youns, an acid attack victim from Karachi, committed suicide.

Consequence: the new bill stipulates a minimum sentence of 14 years in prison, a maximum sentence of life imprisonment and fines up to 1 million Pakistani rupees (₹10,200). Activists are campaigning to include compensation to survivors.

Bangladesh

The acid crime Prevention Act 2002 regulates the sales of acid across the country.

Consequence: the Acid Crime Control Act 2002 imposes death penalty on the culprits. The number of acid attacks has decreased ever since the act came into being.

India

A new law passed in February, 2013 following the Delhi gang-rape case which also criminalises acid attacks.

Consequence: the law defines acid attack as a separate Indian Penal Code offence and proposes punishment not less than 10 years to a life maximum of imprisonment for perpetrators and fine that could go up to ₹10 lakh.

Note: the supreme court on July 2013 passed the order to regulate the sale of acids across the country. The decision was taken in the light of a PIL which was filed in 2006 by Lakshmi, an acid attack victim from Delhi.

Conclusion

The preceding chapters highlight that acid attacks are an increasing phenomenon in India. However, since no special section in the Indian Penal Code deals with acid attacks, the incidents are not even recorded separately. Section 326 of the I.P.C, which deals with causing grievous hurt by throwing of a corrosive substance etc. is insufficient/ inadequate to deal with the issue. Firstly, the definition of grievous hurt is not broad enough to cover the various kinds of injuries which are inflicted during acid attacks. Secondly, the section does not cover the act of administering acid. Thirdly, the section gives a wide discretion to the courts as far as punishment is concerned. The cases on acid attacks in India show that normally inadequate punishment is awarded in these cases. Fourthly, the section in the I.P.C does not punish the intentional act of throwing of acid if no injuries occur. Lastly, the section also does not specify who the fine should be awarded to.

We also feel that if a person has thrown or administered the acid on another person a presumption should be raised against the person, who has thrown or administered the acid, that he has done so deliberately. Apart from the above we feel that the distribution and sale of Acid should be banned except for commercial and scientific purposes. Acid should be made a scheduled banned chemical which should not be available over the counter. The particulars of purchasers of acid should be recorded.

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