

## Post-legislative Acid Crime Situation and Women Status in Pakistan: Narrative Analysis of Rural Women Acid Survivors in Punjab

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### Abstract

*This paper aims at investigating the post-legislative acid crimes situation with reference to women status in rural Punjab after the promulgation 'The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2011'. The research followed qualitative research method by using narrative research technique. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews by following volunteer sampling technique and the size of sample relied on saturation of data. The data was analyzed by following the overall process guided by Creswell (2013). Results showed that said law is still weak to control the acid attacks on women in the rural areas. There are certain gaps in policy formulation, its strong implementation and good governance and women are still living a miserable life. It is suggested that not only the state machinery should play its part to control and eliminate Vitriolage from the society but community should also play its role as active citizens to fulfil their responsibility.*

**Key Words:** Vitriol age, Women Status, Narrative Analysis, Acid Attacked Survivors.

### Introduction

Due to multiple reasons, rural women are the vulnerable and oppressed group with reference to violence against women in Pakistan. Experts describe women status in Pakistan as they have low literacy rate, lives in underprivileged health stipulations, economically poor and reliant, faces violence in the name of traditions and has no authority to make decisions (Butt & Asad, 2016).

As more than half of our population is residing in rural areas in Pakistan, women of these rustic areas are especially vulnerable to violence due to their comparatively weaker social position and lack of awareness about their legal rights (Zakar, Zakar & Abbas, 2016). They work for long hours a day but rather acknowledgment for it; they are facing brutal forms of violence in their own community.

Documented categories of VAW in Pakistan are observed in the form of physical violence, economic violence, sexual violence and VAW in political arena (NCSW, 2016) and gender-based violence. Acid attacks are considered as gender-based violence and is found are the most in India, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Pakistan (AGCWJ, 2011). It is reported in different corners of the country that women are attacked by acid on their face or body resulting in severe results. Acid violence (ibid) is defined in the following words.

*Acid violence is the premeditated, deliberate use of acid to attack another human being. Attackers often target the head and face in order to maim, disfigure and blind.*

Actually acid is extremely harsh chemical. Superficial burns are caused by contact with acid in only 5 short seconds while full thickness burns take a mere 30 seconds. Superficial burns cause more agony than deeper burns because in deeper burns the acid destroys nerve cells. Immediately the victim of acid is at a great risk of pulmonary failure because of inhaled acid fumes or a swelling of the neck which can close off the airway. Those who survive, the attack are severely scarred and, in the months to come, have to deal with the risk of infections, such as septicemia or gangrene. Infections prevent burns from healing and can spread to healthy parts of the body, increasing the chances of subsequent death (ICDDR, 2013). But it ruins the entire social and economic life of the victims.

In response to such severe social problem, the Government of Pakistan, like other countries, has legislated against acid attacks. It promulgated 'The *Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2011*'. But even after legislation, the said issue is still observed in the country, as there are reported 22 incidents of acid attacks in rural Punjab and 17 reported cases in urban Punjab. Even there were six reported accidents of acid attacks in provincial capital Lahore (Dawn, 2014), ruining the whole life of women. This arises the research question that why acid attacks on women are still in practice in the country after the strong promulgation of legislation? To answer this research question, this article will explain and explore the acid attacks on women in rural Punjab.

### **Review of the Literature**

The severe social issue of Vitriol age is a documented phenomenon across the globe and is documented in the mostly in underdeveloped countries like Bangladesh and Cambodia (AGCWJ, 2011). However acid attacks are more widespread than this, and have also been reported in many other countries including East and South Asian countries (LICADHO, 2003).

Much of published literature found regarding acid attacks on women is based on statistical data in Pakistan. This work comprised of reports published by non-government organizations mostly and is taken from the cases reported in daily newspapers.

The reported statistical data by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan describe that seven women were assassinated in acid attacks (HRCP, 2014) which shows an alarming situation even after its legislation.

Some qualitative work has attempted to explain the said phenomenon in Cambodia (unpublished work) but little attention has been given to understand social and cultural life taboos faced by acid attacked women survivors in Pakistan, especially the situational and cultural causes of acid attacks on women and the effects of legislation on acid attack crime.

This article aims to investigate the experiences of women who are victim of acid attacks in Pakistan and particularly in Rural Punjab. The researcher aims to contribute to the literature on the experience of acid attack survivors through narrative approach.

### **Material and Method**

The intention of this study was to investigate the post-legislative acid attacks situation in rural Punjab. To explain and explore the said issue, the following study, followed qualitative research methodology and used one of the approaches of qualitative research i.e. narrative approach. Narrative research is one of the qualitative approaches in which narrative research is the verbal or textual account of a phenomenon or action in a chronological order (Czarniawska, 2014). The procedure for the said approach is comprised of selecting and studying a small number of respondents, collecting data by collecting their narration through in-depth stories and ordering their experiences chronologically. Auto ethnography is one of the types of Narratives (Cresswell, 2013) which was adopted for the present research. It is written and recorded by the individuals who are the subject of the study (Muncey, 2010). The present research was conducted by collecting the narratives of women acid attack survivors in Rural Punjab. As the acid victims are hard to approach; so the preferred site for this study for the data collection was selected as some government hospitals where such patients come for their follow up checkups. The respondents were selected on the basis of volunteer sampling, relying on the volunteer respondents who are difficult to approach directly in a community (Patton, 2002) and their identity was kept confidential upon their will so that they may feel free to narrate the acid crime. Their narratives provided primary data; while the library sources were used to take the secondary data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six respondents to collect the narratives which provided rich and saturated data for this research. This article followed the procedure for conducting narrative research by Cresswell (2013) and followed the steps as determination of research question, selection of an individual or small number of individuals, collection and recording of data, collect information within participant's personal information and restorying (ibid). The data was analyzed manually by following the overall process guided by Creswell (ibid) and later analysis was presented through the major themes.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

This article emphasizes on how women discuss Vitriolage as a crucial form of violence and how they interpret the State's policies in response to such severe violence. It demonstrates that how the narrative approach allowed women to go beyond mere "standard" descriptions of violence and to have their individual multifaceted understandings of violence in their community. The major themes arise out of transcribed data are as follow.

### **The Intricacies of Acid Attacks**

The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2011 penalize culprits of Vitriolage by inculcating acid crimes under the definition of hurt and defines it as "*hurt by dangerous means or substance, including any corrosive substance or acid to be crimes*". The punishment of criminals can be extended up to life imprisonment

under the said legislation and monetary fine limit is not less than five hundred thousand rupees. Also unauthorized seller of acid will have to face the imprisonment of one year or a fine of a hundred thousand rupees or both under the law. Further than this documented definition of hurt and penalties, this article describes the intricacies of Vitriolage meaning in the light of respondent's view i.e. acid attacks. As women narrate the acid attacks as a horrible incident of their life and one of the respondents said,

*Following many days serious conflict with my husband, one day when his hate and anger feelings reach to its maximum height, he threw acid on me. It stroked the right side of my ear and shoulder. There is a hell of difference in watching and experiencing an incident like this. I felt as I am getting the penalties of hell in this world. .*

Others respondent opined,

*When I was attacked with acid, I was on the road side, I felt I am in a volcano and I will not survive now. After a long suffering of severe burns, I have lost one of my eyes. God knows what the people find by destroying not only my face but my entire life. Now I always keep my face covered inside the home too. I cannot see mirror because I don't feel I am a woman now, I am merely a lost person.*

For the victims acid attack is the ruining of their social and economic life. They feel themselves in a helpless world where they are survivors but cannot find their lost life and faces again. In the said legislation, acid attacks means only *hurt by dangerous means like acid* but for the acid survivors, it is the hurt of their soul which cannot be healed at all.

By structuring the experiences of acid attacks in their specific words, respondents raise voices not only of their burns but of their miseries and sorrows for the rest of their life.

Narrative interviews, as an uninterrupted research technique for women to narrate their stories of acid attacks, allow them articulate the horrible instants of their life that may be entwined to their retorts to this cruel violence. Their subconscious, conscious and unconscious thoughts are well explained during the interview. Their narrations continued in stream of consciousness but they remembered all the incidences that they had faced and are facing presently. Some are hopeful about their future but some has lost hope to have a contented life again.

### **Access to Judicial System**

When women face an acid attack by any of their family members or relatives, it should be reported to police firstly. When the respondents were asked about their access to judicial system mostly replied that no one reported the violence in the police. The respondents stated,

*No one reported this crime in the police as it was by my own family members. I am not a rich woman, nor a working one; how could I get access to judicial system. I had nothing to pay to neither to lawyer, nor could I go to some city to get the outsider help. I had no money to spend on bus fare. When I had collected few, I came to government hospital. Even I don't know how to talk and report it in police station. I cannot have any contacts there and no one listen us being poor at these places.*

In the above excerpt, women narrate the multitude of their problems associated with their access to judicial system in the country. Being violated, poor, ignorant and oppressed, far from justice is another and additional misery of their life. Further in the social structure of Pakistani society women are not visible independently in the judicial system rather they had to rely on patriarchal structure for the mobility outside the four walls of the house and hence their access to judicial system is also under the umbrella of patriarch. Under such circumstances, women rarely access to judicial system for the violence being confronted.

Even after the legislation being promulgated for women empowerment in the country, the women are still in the web of extreme poverty and ignorance. The inconvenience of the prescribed, high-priced, multifaceted, poorly governance and time-consuming court system also supports the poor women status in getting their rights (Butt & Asad, 2016).

Due to such reasons, access to judicial system is still a mere dream for them. There is a clear difference in the status of urban and rural women in the country which opens a new chapter of discrimination in Pakistan.

### **Narrating Acid Attacks Legislation**

Acid attacks include the throwing of harmful acid on someone with malintentions and has been legislated as a crime in the country. When the respondents were asked about the said legislation, they narrated,

*Laws are promulgated to control the crimes and to provide welfare to the citizens. What types of laws are here in Pakistan as the crime is being done and criminal are moving in our society? There is no law and order in the country in case of acid attacks. Laws are only for the rich and powerful in this state. There is no public outcry for us. Rural women have the same status in case of domestic violence. Women are not empowered in this country rather has more poor status in the villages where their only role is to obey the men and nothing.*

When a victim does not find justice and in miserable condition, for them there is “no law” situation in the country. Such paper laws are floating laws which do

not benefit the masses in the country. For an oppressed, welfare is the relief from the oppression which he/she finds in life. When the said legislation is in the papers only and they are far from justice, “no law” situation will exist in the society.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The results for the present study concluded that to address the grave social problem of Vitriolage, the government of Pakistan has legislated The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2011 (Criminal Law Second Amendment Act, 2011). But the overview of the said social problem reveals the fact that the said policy is still weak to control the acid attacks on women in the rural areas. Even after the promulgation of the said law, Vitriolage has increased rather decreased in the country. There are certain gaps in policy formulation, its strong implementation and good governance. The women residing in rural areas are still far from social justice and are living a miserable life. The status of women has not risen under the banner of “women empowerment” in the Pakistani society and especially in the rural life.

There are certain ground realities associated with the failure of women empowerment policies. One underline reason is the fact that social policies for the uplifted women status in Pakistan are framed on *Empowerment Approach* which encompasses social and economic sufferings of the oppressed ones. It has its roots in the international conventions signed by government two decades before. The government lacks social policy research at national level to assess the needs of the women as oppressed in each decade; hence by applying international approaches we are unable to get the solution of social problems related to women status in Pakistan.

Secondly, the Government does not bring it in public notice that the said law is still unable to protect women from acid violence and do not take suggestions from the social policy makers to fill up the required loopholes in the said policy in the light of previous case of Vitriolage in Pakistan. Although the country has observed the last decade as a two consecutive democratic governments and the problem of political instability of 90s is history now but the situation is of the same color. There is no remarkable change in the women status and the protecting laws like the acid crime law are still ineffective because of the State’s ineffective role. Under the banner of “women empowerment”, the status of women in Pakistan is still of an oppressed and disadvantaged one. The victims of such problems are the sufferers for the whole life by ruining their biological, social, psychological and economic life and justice is merely a dream for them.

Based on the data analysis and conclusion drawn out of it, It is suggested that

- State machinery might conduct a social policy research on a social problem like Vitriolage before its implementation in the country.
- There should be policy analysis involving the policy stakeholders and victims and in the light of its results it should be amended so that the welfare of the victims is ensured.
- An awareness campaign should be launch in each district to spread awareness about the severity of punishment regarding Vitriolage.

- Community members should also play their active citizen role to complaint about such incidences.
- Police department should accomplish their investigations with gender experts to deal the Vitriolage as a sensitive aspect of society.
- There should be trained medical personals to deal with Vitriolage injuries properly.
- The production and sale of acid should be strictly monitored by the administration.
- Judiciary should process the trials speedily.
- Imprisonment should not be compensated by fine.

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