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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## **“ACID ATTACKS: THE BEAUTY WITHIN THEIR REACH”** **BY KULSUM SHADAB WAHAB**

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



India ranks as the worst country on earth to be a woman or even a girl. I grew up here but was lucky to be shielded from gender violence by my family. Throughout childhood, I was unaware of the extent to which all manners of domestic violence affects people who are part of our daily lives. In 2014, the United Nations described violence against women in India as a systematic crime that stretches “from the womb to the tomb.”

**Discrimination cuts across all sectors of society and its root causes cannot be reduced to poverty alone.** Instead, the entire nation is still deeply influenced by social and cultural barriers that prevent us from addressing the abuses that are taking place in our own backyards.

When you hear of gender inequality in India, your mind leaps to the harrowing statistics surrounding sexual violence: rapes are reported at a rate of one every 15 minutes on average. And I let you guess how many onslaughts are left unreported. There isn't a cause more important than the other in this space, obviously, but despite their prevalence, acid attacks remain a little-acknowledged crime. **Such offenses occur when perpetrators throw acid or a similarly corrosive substance onto someone else, usually aiming for the face, with the intention to disfigure, maim, torture, or kill.** Those who survive are condemned to live with permanent scarring of the face and body, they are also often blinded, at least partially. Unsurprisingly, many of the victims are women, most commonly attacked over domestic or land disputes, rejected marriage proposals or spurned sexual advances, according to the Acid Survivors Foundation.

The Indian media doesn't bother to cover most cases and **our society is so highly fragmented and unwilling to confront the problem that it creates yet another injury: rejection that leaves victims feeling doubly wounded.** There are 250 to 300 acid attacks reported every year. But the unreported ones could go beyond a thousand, driving entire families to bankruptcy to support recovery costs.

I first saw what acid attack victims go through when volunteering at a hospital where I work with greatly disabled children. There, I witnessed the grief and stigma. One time, I was just leaving the hospital with a burned woman when we came across a child who, upon seeing her damaged face, started crying. One cannot blame the child, however I was shocked by the mother's reaction: she closed her eyes and rushed away from us. **I could sense the overwhelming guilt the victim felt for causing such negative emotions. She too ran away towards the car to hide herself. Both were running away, one for seeing, the other for being seen.**

Challenges also include the absence of a comprehensive national system for recording and monitoring burn injuries. And when it comes to seeking justice, the social stigma and pressure prevents survivors from coming forward against perpetrators. Once, at the same hospital I volunteer at, I met a woman who had been burnt by acid. I was naive at the time and didn't know how to behave. I went up to her and said hello. But she became nervous and rushed out of the room. Disturbed by her plight, I contacted the hospital and tried reaching out to her. **For weeks, she wouldn't answer my calls but in the end, she overcame her reservations and agreed to meet me.** She confided in me, telling me about the challenges in her life, from being ridiculed, to not being able to find a job. Not being able to pay for her surgery, and even being ostracized by her family.

Since that day in the hospital, I have determined that generating awareness among adults and children alike would be one of my priorities as a women's rights activist. **The survivors I work with show great moral strength and it is not my intention to let them embark on this path alone.**

I work with a team of psychologists and psychiatrists, and having studied psychology myself, I know the importance of being seen and heard by others. Sometimes, simply spending an afternoon with a survivor can have an enormous impact on her life— showing acceptance, love and care is the best healing process. But the challenges are so multifaceted that they require survivors to express themselves directly. **They have been through an unimaginable ordeal, with the blink of an eye, their lives were turned upside down and no one is better qualified to speak out.** While specialists work with them at a deeper level, I host activities for survivors to take part in public events, but in a safe zone. It could be a marathon or a workshop, anything that normalizes their routine is essential to their road to recovery.

Today, many such women have triggered a conversation within India, and this is only the beginning. But there are no structural changes yet, there might be some intents to ban the crime but little is done to see completion. A lot could be achieved right away such as banning the retail sale of acid. The most common types used for attacking people are sulfuric and nitric acid, both readily available in most states.

Because of the lack of awareness, it remains very difficult for the international community to engage in a meaningful way, or even to manage to speak to the people who could make a change. I am working now on creating strategic partnerships with global institutions and other countries to structure how we can collaborate. We need to let the world to know.

At the Hothur Foundation\* we focus on building awareness, removing stigmas and providing essential life skills for survivors. We also have camps where we gather victims from all over India and give them medical aid for rehabilitative surgery. **Each survivor may need from 11 to as much as 30 reconstructive operations and scars take about five months to heal.** We correct the functional and cosmetic deformities and help economically challenged burned survivors who can't afford surgery. We also provide vocational skills because a victim's own families often disowned them as I learnt from the child at the hospital.



Also, many women are illiterate single mothers and they have no one to turn to. **I want each survivor to feel complete, whole, and to be able to yield the strength that I know is within them, to be empowered to reach that other form of beauty that shines through.** I don't believe in beauty as a superficial construct but as the glow that comes from within. In India, culture has the enormous power to shape the society we live in and influence the law. A law misunderstood or unsupported by the people- would be redundant in a nation like ours hence our collaboration with Bollywood, everyone looks up to it. First, let's change mind-sets and justice can follow. At least theoretically, because a backlog of criminal cases and the mere overload of pending trials means that **it can take up to a decade for courts to deliver a judgment. Many fight for compensation settlements for years and it takes anywhere between 5 to 10 years for any case to be resolved.** Eight years into activism to support acid attack survivors taught me that for every battle won, there is a dismal challenge ahead. I find disheartening for instance that people won't hesitate to donate eyes upon their death to save someone else yet superstitious beliefs say that donating skin would prevent one's body to be at peace after death.



I have always expressed myself through fashion and today; I am delighted that my passion for it has allowed me to bring purpose and relief to survivors. In its early stages the ARA LUMIERE\* initiative was a therapeutic endeavour for survivors, to endow them financially while giving them a sense of purpose. But over time, the organization has been more successful than I could ever dream. **It was my purpose to redefine beauty and I feel like we are inching closer towards this mighty goal.** People who are made to feel worthless and unwanted, are being recognized by prestigious international platforms is a triumph. By bringing recognition on an international level, we are also sending a message of hope and strength to millions of victims of acid attacks, or other gender based crimes worldwide. We are telling them that their circumstances won't define who they are, that their perpetrators have failed.

It is my vision to share the victims' struggle, but more importantly their victories, to the forefront of the conversation. I want I to make fashion a more inclusive space; I want to build dialogues without geographic boundaries or other types of restrictions.

It would be impossible to capture everything I have learned during this ongoing journey but working with the survivors has certainly transformed me as a person, as most of what I learned and achieved pales in comparison to the strength and humane beauty these women display every day.

