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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“IN-VISIBLE” BY LAURA SALM-REIFFERSCHIEDT & ANN-CHRISTINE WOEHRL

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.



At best, if they ever get punished, perpetrators will be released from prison after a few years. Victims, however, will remain trapped inside their own burnt skin for the rest of their lives. The acid used to disfigure people penetrates the skin and tissues down to the bones. It melts the cartilage, destroys the nose, ears, and eyes within a very short time and can only be diluted with a lot of water (alternatively, victims are splashed with kerosene and then set on fire, some also attempt to commit suicide by immolation.)

Patients usually have to endure 20 to 30 operations for skin transplants, reconstruction, or to regain mobility. But the majority cannot afford these treatments or the dire need for psychological counseling.

Acid and fire attacks are not the horrific privilege of anyone country, religion or society and motives are manifold ranging from jealousy to declined sexual advances or marriage proposals, arguments about land or dowry are also frequent. The media have recently reported cases in England and Italy but Iran, Afghanistan and Columbia are on the list as well and the worst countries remain Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Uganda. But the common denominator between all these countries is gender, the vast majority of victims are women: the female body, as the depository of male pride and community honor.

Iqra, a young woman from the Pakistan province of South Punjab, suffered an acid attack committed by her neighbors' son. His family had proposed to her several times. Iqra's father thought she was too young to marry and refused. "The neighbors thought that if they are not good enough for me, they would make sure that I would not be good enough for someone else either," said Iqra.

Acid is very cheap (less than a euro per litre) and readily available. Most of the 100 to 150 attacks registered yearly in Pakistan are committed in the province of South Punjab, a major cotton-growing area which seeds are cleaned with sulfuric acid. In Cambodia, nitric acid or hydrochloric acid are used in the jewelry industry and for the production of rubber. Moreover, many households generate electricity with car batteries, so that battery acid is also used for attacks. A cheap, inconspicuous weapon used by perpetrators that cannot be traced, as one can simply throw it from a motorbike or a car and escape.

Bangladesh and Cambodia efforts to address the issue by regulating the buying, selling and use of acid were effective. Bangladesh led the way with its Acid Control Act 2002, restricting the acid trade and sentencing the perpetrators harshly, including death penalty. The number of attacks reported has decreased from 500 reported cases by

15 to 20 percent annually since then. In 2012, an acid act was passed in Cambodia, followed by an additional provision which provides for imprisonment of people committing acid attacks and regulates the buying and selling of highly concentrated acids. As a result, the number of survivors of acid attacks decreased by 83 percent of 20 attacks with 36 survivors was recorded.

But bringing the cases to court is a major challenge because of police corruption and domestic violence and often, the perpetrator isn't even the one seeking revenge. Ritah from Kampala, in Uganda, was attacked on her way home from university. She had never seen the two men before. She doesn't know who was behind the attack but suspects a young man whose advances she had declined. He was questioned by the police, but released soon afterwards. He came from a wealthy family and his parents helped him leave the country. The majority of perpetrators, who have been caught are bailed out and abscond. Of the nearly 430 acid attacks, which have been reported to the police in Uganda, only seven per cent of the attackers were sentenced.

Fire attacks, frequent in Nepal and India are even more difficult to prove. Most survivors say that they have suffered burns from domestic accidents, while cooking, for example. But their wounds speak another truth. "The women often only talk when they have had psychological treatment for a while," says Rumi Rajbhandari of Burns Violence Survivors Nepal. And that truth is that not only husbands, lovers or relatives throw kerosene at women and set fire to them, but that the women also set fire to themselves because of domestic violence. Neehaari from Andhra Pradesh, India, was abused by her husband mentally and sexually. When she was two months pregnant, she could no longer take her husband's humiliations, and the thought of possibly giving birth to a girl who might have to endure a similar fate one day, drove her to set fire to herself in an act of despair. She survived, badly burnt.

Many physicians help the survivors free of charge. One of them is Mohammad Mazhaar Hussain from Islamabad, Pakistan, a hair transplant specialist. The physician talks openly about his first contact with survivors of acid attacks: "It may sound harsh, but when burns are fresh it is almost unbearable to look at them," he says. When he treated his first patient, two more were sitting in the waiting-room : "I could hear them chatting and giggling like regular teenagers. This showed me that the human spirit cannot be broken quite so easily," says Hussain.

**The NGO gathered under the umbrella of Acid Survivors Foundation International provide lawyers for the survivors, they lobby for legislative changes, provide the survivors with housing, help them find a small job, and pay for operations.

Photos courtesy of Ann-Christine Woehrl.



