

Socio-Demographic Profile of Female Victims of Vitriolage in Interior Sindh Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Object: Vitriolage is a reprehensible crime. It is an easy mean of taking revenge in our society. The most common victims of this criminal act are women. This study highlights the sociodemographic profile of such cases.

Study Design: Retrospective / observational study.

Place and Duration of Study: This study was conducted in the medico-legal section of Deptt. of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, PUMHS for Women, District Shaheed Benazirabad during the period from 1st January 2013 to 31st December 2013.

Material & Methods: Sixteen cases of vitriolage were studied with reference to age, literacy, socioeconomic background, marital status, occupation, relationship with offender, time of incidence, time between occurrence and medical examination, place of incidence.

Results: All the cases were females, majority in age group 20-30, unmarried, uneducated, from middle class, had first degree burns and disfigurement of face. The offenders were known to victims in all the cases.

Conclusion: The problem needs to be acknowledged by public at large. Individuals social issues should be resolved timely and wisely to guard against such happenings. Emotionally unstable people must be provided counseling by psychologists. The initiative taken by Peshawar High Court in the form of restriction on the sale of acid is a great attempt to minimize the risk and should be appreciated.

Key Words: Socio-Demographic Profile, Victims of Vitriolage, Interior Sindh

INTRODUCTION

Vitriolage is an acid violence or throwing of acid. It is also called acid attack. The definition of vitriolage is an act of throwing acid onto the body of another person. The motive behind this cruel act is to disfigure the opponent. It is done to take revenge or in jealousy against the victim.

Vitriolage is a reprehensible crime. It is an easy mean of taking revenge in our society. The most common victims of this criminal act are women, the weak gender of interior Sindh. The effects of vitriolage are not only physical but also brings about financial, social & psychological problems. These problems are faced not only by the victims but whole family suffers (Welsh et al 2009)³⁻⁴. Most commonly sulphuric acid (oil of vitriol) is used but nitric acid & carbolic acid are also used (A man depkans). Caustic soda, caustic potash, iodine, and marking nut juice are sometimes used. These fluids are usually thrown on the face with the object of facial



disfigurement & destroying vision and these results in grievous hurt (Mithiharn 2005, Readj 2004)¹⁻².

Vitriolage cases are common in many countries including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Oas, Hong Kong, China, United Kingdom, Kenya etc.⁵

The epidemiological studies have shown that acid attacks are common around the world from the third world countries to the highly developed countries like China, France, Turkey, and United States⁵. The highest incidence of vitriolage is in South Asia. About 1500 cases occur annually in the world, 50% of all these cases are females and 40% to 70% of which are teenage girls.

Keeping in view the above situation the cases of throwing of acid (vitriolage) were studied in tertiary care hospital in Interior Sindh.



MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted in the medico-legal section of Deptt. of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, PUMHS for Women, District Shaheed Benazirabad during the

period from 1st January 2013 to 31st December 2013. Sixteen cases of vitriolage were studied with reference to age, literacy, socioeconomic background, marital status, occupation, relationship with offender, time of incidence, time between occurrence and medical examination, place of incidence.

RESULTS

Out of 16 vitriolage victims included in the study most of the victims (50%) were in the age group of 20 – 30, followed by 25% in the age group 15 – 20 years, 12.5% in the age group of 30 – 40 and same number in 40 – 50 years. Table No.1. The maximum numbers of victims were unmarried (62.5%), while married were 05 (31.2%), and one victim (6.25%) was divorcee. Table No.2. The majority of victims were uneducated (44.75%), 4 (25%) were matriculate, same number were intermediate and 1 victim (6.25%) was graduate. Table No.3. Most of victims were of middle class (62.5%), 6 (37.5%) were from middle class and none in upper class. Table No. 4. In our study most of the victims had first degree burn of (75%), while 4 victims (25%) had 2nd degree burns. Table No.5. Out of 16 vitriolage victims, 10 victims shown disfigurement of face accounting (62.5%) followed by unilateral corneal opacity in 4 victims (25%), while 2 victims (12.5%) had bilateral corneal opacities as shown in Table No.6. Offenders were known to victims in all the cases. None of the victims was engaged in any job.

Table No.1: Age of victims of vitriolage

S.No.	Age in years	No. of Victims	Percentage
1.	15 – 20	04	25.00
2.	20 – 30	08	50.00
3.	30 – 40	02	12.50
4.	40 – 50	02	12.50
Total		16	100.00

Table No.2: Marital status of victims of vitriolage

S.No.	Marital Status	No. of Victims	Percentage
1.	Married	05	31.20
2.	Unmarried	10	62.50
3.	Divorcee	01	6.25
Total		16	100.00

Table No.3: Educational status of victims of vitriolage

S.No.	Level of Education	No. of Victims	Percentage
1.	Matriculation	04	25.00
2.	Intermediate	04	25.00
3.	Graduate	01	6.25
4.	Illiterate	07	43.75
Total		16	100.00

Table No.4: Economic status of victims of vitriolage

S.No.	Economic status	No. of Victims	Percentage
1.	Lower class	06	37.0%
2.	Middle class	10	62.50
3.	Upper class	00	00.00
Total		16	100.00

Table No.5: Clinical Presentations of victims of vitriolage

S. No.	Clinical Presentation	No. of Victims	Percentage
1.	1 st degree Burn	12	75.00
2.	2 nd degree Burn	04	25.00
3.	3 rd degree Burn	00	00.00
Total		16	100.00

Table No.6: Complications in victims of vitriolage

S. No.	Complication	No. of Victims	Percentage
1.	Disfigurement of face	10	62.50
2.	Unilateral corneal opacity	04	25.00
3.	Bilateral corneal opacity	02	12.50
Total		16	100.00

DISCUSSION

Acid is used as an easily available weapon, especially against women in most of the developing as well as developed countries. Vitriolage is at rise in developing countries, including Pakistan. Pakistani women are treated in uncivilized manners. They are often victim of such violent incidences. They are bound in cultural restrictions and gender based injustice. The vitriolage cases are reflection of the limitations imposed upon them, Any female going a little away from such limitations they have to experience grave consequences like vitriolage. Victims suffer unbearable pain and unimaginable mental torture (anguish). The dark aspect of the fact is that most families conceal the facts such as name of victim, name of assailant, address & social reason behind this crucial act and photographs. The victim families talked to us only on assurance of secrecy.

In a Reuters report around 1,500 acid attacks are reported each year and 80 percent of them target women. Yet the number is most likely higher, as many victims are afraid to speak out. According to Monira Rahman, CEO of the Acid Survivors Association in Bangladesh, most of the women and girls she supported were attacked by men who viewed them as commodities and therefore believed they were justified in disfiguring them and violating their rights. She writes until women have real equality, they will continue to

suffer not only from poverty but also be subjected to violence.⁶

The Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) predicts that 150 acid attacks occur in Pakistan each year, with many more going unreported.²⁴

The number of acid attacks in Colombia has increased in recent years. A woman in India may be attacked over a dowry or caught without a veil in Pakistan, but in Colombia often attacked out of anger over her independence. Europe is also not an exception. Such incidences are also seen there.⁹

NHS statistics for England do not separate out acid attacks. In 2011-12 there were 105 hospital admissions in England for "assault by corrosive substance", but the category covers more than just acid.¹²

According to The Aurat Foundation, a women's rights organization, more than 8,500 acid attacks, forced marriages and other forms of violence against women were reported in Pakistan in 2011.⁷

In 2010, at least 8,000 acid attacks, forced marriages and other forms of violence against women were reported, according to The Aurat Foundation.

Acid burnings are among the most horrific crimes against women in Pakistan that are now criminalized in a landmark set of laws passed by the parliament. They stand to protect millions of women from common forms of abuse in a conservative, Muslim country with a terrible history of gender inequality. This is a big achievement for the women of Pakistan, civil society and the organizations that have been working for more than 30 years to get women friendly bills passed. The new laws explicitly criminalized acid attacks, and mandated that convicted attackers would get a minimum sentence of 14 years that could extend to life, and pay a minimum fine of about \$11,200.⁸ Previously, victims had to prosecute attacks as attempted murder or disfigurement and were largely unsuccessful, said Valerie Khan, head of the Acid Survivors Foundation.⁹

According to Dawn News the Peshawar High Court in October, 2013 has banned the open sale of acid. Chief Justice Peshawar High Court, Justice Dost Muhammad Khan, remarked that acid was being used as a form of weapon & women were being targeted with it.¹⁰

Acid attacks are seen to be on the rise in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In year 2012, 150 acid attack cases were registered in Pakistan, 30 of which were reported from KP's Mardan district alone. According to Acid Survivors Foundation, the data shows an upward trend in this form of violence targeting women. Some 45 per cent of the acid attacks are the result of family feuds while 17 per cent are linked to refusals to marriage proposals. Moreover, a report by the Aurat Foundation released in January 2013 said that although the total number of reported cases of violence against women had decreased by 12 per cent, a deeper analysis showed a significant 89 per cent increase in cases of acid-

throwing, followed by a 62 per cent rise in domestic violence.¹⁰

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is working on acid throwing cases as part of its involvement in denouncing human rights violations across Asia. It has commented that acid attacks are serious concern in Pakistan.¹¹

It is a crime with a marked gender skew. Experts say that women and girls are victims in 75-80% of cases. Of the female victims, about 30% are under 18.¹²

In our study 62.5% victims were unmarried, constituting the major group of victims. The reason behind is their refusal for marriage because of their illegitimate relations. Females are the victims in most of the cases in our study, being the weak gender of sindhi community. It is accordance with study of Bandyopadhyay¹³.

In our study most of victims were uneducated (50%), while 25% were matriculate & three (18.75%) were intermediate and only one girl was graduate (6.25%).

The majority of victims belong to lower middle class (62.5%), while 37.5% victims belonged to lower and none from upper class. As in our society mostly girls from lower middle class go out for work in factories, fields, schools or for domestic work, therefore more prone for encounters with men. It results in disputes consequent upon refusal for illegitimate relations or marriage.

In our study majority of females suffered from disfigurement of face (62.5%). Howard health policy review is also in accord suggesting that the main motive of offenders was to disfigure the face.¹⁷ Stating that perpetrators of these acid throwing attacks at their victims, usually were at their faces for burning them.¹⁸ It causes permanent scarring of face,^{13,14,15,18,20} 25% of victims had unilateral and 12.5% bilateral corneal opacity as studied by Bandyopadhyay¹³ & Bahl¹⁹. The long term consequences of these attacks cause blindness, according to acid survivors foundation in Pakistan the most notable effects of an acid attack is the life long disfigurement^{20,22}.

In our study all the victims were females of all ages. This is comparable to articles by barrister Afzal Hussain¹⁴, stating that cases of women being the victim were more common & same comment in study of Naveed & Sloan.²³

CONCLUSION

The problem needs to be acknowledged by public at large. Individual's social issues should be resolved timely and wisely to guard against such happenings. Emotionally unstable people must be provided counseling by psychologists. The initiative taken by Peshawar High Court in the form of restriction on the sale of acid is a great attempt to minimize the risk and should be appreciated.

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