**Acid Attacks on the Rise**

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When a social issue is brought into the limelight, one expects and hopes that it will have a ripple effect causing a shift from its previous position to one that will bring betterment in the society. This is what I had hoped when Saving Face, a popular film in 2012, made national and international headlines.

The majority was furious for portraying Pakistan in a negative light, a suppressive and backward society. But a handful of people knew that by highlighting this topic the government would be forced to take stringent action to stop such heinous crimes. Yet here we are, nine years later, still in a society that continues to stigmatize acid attack victims, lacks jurisprudence against acid attacks, and proper implementation.

Unfortunately, my belief in whatever little good our society holds was truly shaken at an incident in the famous beauty salon in Lahore’s DHA area that employs acid attack victims and gives them a second chance at life. As I waited to pay and leave, I interacted with the staff with everyday chitchat. A client entered the premises, and without a second’s pause, she commented at the receptionists, “Goodness, can you please remove these girls from the reception – it is not a sight I want so early in the morning.” At that moment, my heart sank. I was left speechless and could not believe what had just happened. I have not returned to that facility out of the embarrassment of facing those girls and not taking a stand.

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Since that day, I have been playing that moment in my head, thinking of a hundred things that could have gone differently. However, just a few weeks earlier, while researching for another topic, I came across these numbers and was reminded of the horrors of acid attacks.

The Acid Survivors Foundation reported over 1100 acid attacks from 2007 to 2018. Between 1994 and 2018, an independent assessment indicates that around 9,340 people in Pakistan were victims of acid attacks. Tragically, almost 80 per cent of the victims of these attacks are women. According to Pakistan’s Human Rights Commission, a record 67 acid attacks were reported in 2018 and 34 in 2019. There are many NGOs and members of civil society working to curb the rising numbers.

My research also indicates that there have been efforts by the judicial society to amend laws and implement new regulations to discourage the perpetrators and even facilitate the victims. In 2018, the Acid and Burn Crime Bill was enacted. This bill requires that victims of acid burns receive free healthcare and rehabilitation services to assist them in coping with the physical and psychological difficulties associated with acid assaults. While the bill establishes life imprisonment as the maximum penalty for murder by acid assault, an amendment to the bill states that if someone causes harm but does not kill the victim, their maximum sentence cannot exceed seven years.

Also on the brighter side of things, the Acid Survivors Foundation reports an 80 per cent decrease in acid attacks due to the positive intervention and collaboration between civil society and governmental institutions.

However, as reported by a private news programme, the absurdity in this entire situation is readily apparent. The reporter discovered that bottles of acid were widely available for 150 Rupees at a local chemical shop, despite the fact that the minimum fine for an acid attack is 1 million Rupees.

The fact that law enforcement officials and legislators have entirely failed to impose a limitation or blockade on the accessibility of this dangerous substance speaks volumes about our collective incompetence. We are so preoccupied with crafting fancy-sounding legislation and providing emotional content about the victims that we overlook the fundamentals. I truly wish there was someone we could hold accountable and ask, “How much effort does it require to stop the sales of acid on a mass level?”, “How many more innocents will have to lose their identities and life before we take this matter seriously?”

Since we seem to have lost our sensitivity to other human’s pain, lack to show compassion, and have no fear of the Almighty. Also, since our society is losing its humanity each passing day and we are far from the teachings of peace and tolerance, the strict implementation of law seems to be the only plausible solution.

To the lawmakers who read this – be vigilant, law enforcement people – be assertive, to those who think these victims are not a sight you want to see – be compassionate.

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