

Acid assaults: the cruelest manifestation of machismo



© DAMIR SAGOLJ (REUTERS). *Una víctima de un ataque con ácido.*

On January 12, just a few days after the beginning of 2021, two 26-year-old women were attacked with sulfuric acid in Cártama (Málaga, Spain). This cruel aggression was perpetrated by the ex-partner of one of the victims, who were admitted to the ICU for several days with 20% and 45% burns on their bodies. This type of aggression, although not so common in Spain, occurs frequently in other countries of the world. In fact, sulfuric acid, historically known as vitriol, was manufactured on an industrial scale in England between 1740 and 1750 and it was there where it began to be used for violent purposes as well. Between 1830 and 1940 in Glasgow acid attacks were so common that they were defined as "a stain on the national character." The first case of acid assault due to gender discrimination was registered in 1865 in the United States: a jealous husband disfigured his wife with acid after threatening to destroy her face. And now, more than a century later, this form of gender-based violence not only continues to occur but has become even more common.

According to UN WOMEN, acid attacks or *vitriolage* are premeditated attacks that consist of throwing acid or other corrosive substances at a victim and usually at the face. These attacks have serious physical and psychological consequences, in addition to the permanent disfigurement. It is a type of violence that mainly affects women and girls. In fact, the famous English NGO, *Acid Survivors Trust International*, declares that there are more than 1500 cases of acid attacks every year in the world, 80% of these attacks are against women and in 90% of cases the aggressors are men known by the victim or linked to her by some kind of relationship. In reality, the number of attacks is much higher since about 60% of these are not reported due to fear of repercussions or embarrassment. Spain is one of the countries that is affected by this brutal form of machismo, but it is not the only one. There have been cases in Italy, Mexico, Colombia, Uganda and Cambodia among others, but the countries where the most cases are registered are India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. In India the situation is truly tragic, as it

is estimated that there are more than 1000 cases every year.

Acid assaults on women usually have as triggering factors jealousy, rejection of the marriage proposal, sexual rejection or request for divorce. In some cases, they are the most extreme form of domestic violence. As stated by Ria Sharma, activist and founder of the Indian NGO *Make Love Not Scars*, these attacks are the result of the purely macho mentality of "if I can't have it, then nobody can". In fact, the aggressors do not intend to kill their victims, but rather their real intention is to disfigure them, to leave them without their identity. "Their intention is to harm and leave us damaged for life" said Viviana Hernández Soto, a victim of an acid assault in 2012.

The reason why these attacks are so numerous lies in the following three main elements: the extreme ease of obtaining the acid, its low price and the simplicity of its use. In fact, acids can be found in different stores such as hardware stores or supermarkets and in some online sales platforms and their price does not usually exceed 20 euros per liter. Acid, unlike other substances, is highly corrosive and once it comes into contact with the skin it burns all its layers until it reaches the bone, consequently these aggressions cause irreversible damages not only in the physical aspect but also aggravate the health's condition of the victims. For this reason, those who suffer from these attacks have to undergo difficult surgical operations and endure a very long healing process. The cures are usually very expensive, in addition specialized doctors and specific machinery are needed to treat these critical cases and in many places, especially in developing countries, they are missing or scarce elements. Likewise, victims also need psychological support to be able to overcome, or at least face, the trauma suffered. Everything is taken from these women: their identity, their daily life and their confidence. In fact, many of the victims no longer look at themselves in the mirror after the attack for fear of not being able to recognize their appearance.

In Asia there are different associations and foundations that support these women, help them and empower

them such as *Make Love Not Scars* and *Meer Foundation* in India, *ActionAid* and *Acid Survivors Foundation* in Bangladesh or *Depilex Smileagain Foundation* in Pakistan. All these, along with many others, work to give a future to these acid attacks' survivors who are systematically excluded from society and, many times, are abandoned by their own families. There are also specific initiatives such as *Sheroos Hangout* in India or the fashion shows of the survivors of acid attacks such as those that were organized in New Delhi and London in 2017, all initiatives that aim to sensitize and raise awareness in society and allow these women to move on.

In conclusion, acid attacks are a very current and very serious problem that requires an urgent and concrete solution. Some countries in recent years have developed laws to convict offenders, guarantee cures and protect victims. For example, the Pakistani government enacted strict regulations on the sale of acid, banned the sale of common chemicals and introduced a mere 14-year prison sentence with a monetary fine in its criminal code for offenders. Whilst the government of India prohibited the sale of acid, criminalized the crime with a penalty that goes from a 10-year jail sentence to life sentence and, it has also implemented a monetary fine. In addition to these measures, both countries established a fast track in their national courts for these cases. In many countries there are no specific laws that criminalize these attacks and, in fact, they are usually classified as *grievous bodily harm* while in countries that already have legislation, crimes often end up going unpunished. It is necessary to criminalize this type of aggressions and to establish adequate penalties for such a violation of human rights, but above all it, it is essential that society supports the victims, reintegrates them and condemns the aggressors. Laws will never be enough if society is not educated about the importance of gender equality and respect for human rights.

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Publicado por:



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