

Exploring Perceptions and Attitudes of University Students towards Acid Attack Survivors: A Psychosocial Analysis

Ankita Dalal¹, Dr. Indu Bala² and Prof. Rajesh Nair³

¹PhD Scholar, Amity University of Behavioural and Allied Sciences (AIBAS),
Amity University Haryana, Gurugram, India

²Assistant Professor, Amity University of Behavioural and Allied Sciences (AIBAS),
Amity University Haryana, Gurugram, India

³Director-ADARSH, Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI)
Gurugram, Delhi-NCR

*Corresponding author: ankita.dalal1@s.amity.edu

Cite this paper as: Ankita Dalal, Dr. Indu Bala and Prof. Rajesh Nair (2024) Exploring Perceptions and Attitudes of University Students towards Acid Attack Survivors: A Psychosocial Analysis". *Frontiers in Health Informatics*, (8), 5418-5434

ABSTRACT

The present research aims to investigate the psychological variables influencing the perceptions and attitudes of university students in Delhi NCR towards acid attack survivors. The study employed qualitative research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Psychological variables such as empathy, social stigma, media influence and cultural factors were examined to unravel the complex dynamics shaping students' perspectives. By exploring these variables, the research intended to contribute valuable insights that can inform interventions and educational programs aimed at fostering empathy, reducing stigma and promoting inclusivity for acid attack survivors within university settings. The researcher gathered data from the student's body of university, ensuring a comprehensive and representative dataset for analysis. The research study culminates in its findings through a meticulous application of data collection methodologies, specifically employing the Focus Group Discussions and Thematic Analysis. The study included a cohort of 20 randomly selected students. The participants responses were systematically recorded following a photographic presentation and exposure to documentary videos on acid attacks post the collection of data. The detailed study of psychological factors affecting University students' perceptions and attitudes toward acid attack survivors has provided valuable insights. The discovered insights provide a robust basis for targeted interventions and educational initiatives to be taken at the University level. This helped in motivating students to proactively engage in initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and preventing acid attacks. Thus, fostering a culture of empathy, awareness and social responsibility within the academic community.

Keywords: Acid attack, survivor, victim, empathy, social stigma, media influence, cultural factors

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

India has witnessed a notable increase in reported acid attacks in recent years, drawing attention to the urgent need for understanding and addressing the social dynamics that perpetuate stigma and discrimination against survivors. Although acid attacks have garnered considerable media and policy attention, they continue to be insufficiently researched and inadequately comprehended (Yousaf and Purkayastha, 2016). University campuses, as microcosms of society, play a crucial role in shaping attitudes and perceptions. This research seeks to delve into psychosocial aspects influencing University students' perspectives on acid attack survivors.

1.2 Prevalence and Nature of Acid Attacks

The prevalence of acid attacks has witnessed an alarming surge in various parts of the world, with a particular focus on regions such as South Asia, including India. According to available data, the prevalence of acid attacks was most reliably documented in the United Kingdom (UK) and India. In the UK, it was estimated that approximately 800 corrosive attacks occur annually on a national scale (Hopkins et al., 2021). Meanwhile, data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2018) indicates that India typically experiences around 200 cases per year.

1.3 Socio-Cultural Factors

Many researches offer insights into the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the prevalence of acid attacks. The World Bank (2014) reported that women in South Asia encounter substantial challenges, attributing this issue to a masculine culture that encourages violence against women as a means of asserting masculinity. Research studies highlight the role of gender-based violence, dowry-related disputes, rejected marriage proposals and disputes over property as significant contributors to acid attacks (Ghosh, 2013; Doley, 2020). Kaur (2018) identified additional reasons for acid violence, such as the affordability and easy accessibility of acid, patriarchal cultures, masculine ego, refusal in love, denial of indecent offers, land or cash disputes, occupational conflicts, suspicion of faithlessness, lack of regulations on acid purchase and sale, family disagreements, domestic violence, association conflicts, dowry demands, sexual crimes and the negative role of media. According to Karmakar (2006), a significant proportion of acid attacks, specifically 60 percent, go unreported annually due to cultural norms, with women constituting 80 percent of the victims.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Acid Attacks in India

According to the World Health Organization (2013), violence against women was a significant global public health concern with epidemic proportions. Approximately 33% of women are at risk of physical assault, sexual violence, or other forms of abuse in their lifetime. Gender-based violence, recognized as both a criminal act and a violation of human rights by international norms, was intricately linked to systemic gender disparities (Wesson, 2002; United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2003; Pio & Singh, 2016; Kuriakose et al., 2017). As per the National Commission of India's definition (2009), an acid attack involves the intentional application of acid with the knowledge that it caused partial damage, deformity, or disfigurement. Acid attacks lead to physical harm, encompassing visual

impairment, retinal injuries and disfigurement, along with psychological, emotional and economic challenges (Ghosal & Chattopadhyay, 2021). These attacks have profound societal consequences, often resulting in isolation, estrangement and financial difficulties for victims and their families (Khoshnami et al., 2017; Kuriakose et al., 2017; Walsh, 2012). Despite legislation aiming to restrict acid sales, attacks persist, with recorded figures showing a sustained pattern. In 2021, there were 176 reported cases and NCRB reported over 1000 incidents in the preceding five years. However, underreporting and documentation limitations likely underestimate the true prevalence, particularly in remote and rural areas (Byard et al., 2023; Rai, 2022). Addressing this issue requires an epistemological shift and systematic changes within society to facilitate survivors' successful reintegration (Hameed & Bhattacharya, 2022).

2.2 Psychosocial Impact of Acid Attacks

Acid attacks constitute a heinous crime with profound psychological implications for survivors, significantly impacting their mental and emotional well-being (Owens, Pike, & Chard, 2001). Guerrero (2013) found that the victims of such violent acts often engage in self-blame, leading to increased distress, particularly among those who have experienced sexual abuse. Survivors of acid attacks confront various psychological challenges, including anxiety, depression, social isolation and exclusion. Families often blame survivors for the attacks, resulting in heightened sensitivity and reduced behavioural control, leading to feelings of hopelessness (Mannan et al., 2006). Qazi et al. (2019) report that acid attack survivors face severe social isolation, with stigmatization from surrounding individuals making communication challenging. The psychological distress was further underscored by Qazi et al., (2019) study, highlighting the serious social issues faced by survivors' post-acid attack incidents.

2.3 Empathy and Social Stigma

There was limited literature addressing the psycho-social consequences of disfigurement in India, extensive research in the US and the UK has revealed that individuals with highly visible facial scarring encounter severe stigma and a heightened likelihood of a poor psychosocial quality of life. Women survivors of these incidents face immense challenges in employment, marriage and social interactions, grappling with unwanted attention, harsh treatment and abusive inquiries about the cause of their disfigurement. The victims perceive a loss of power, life and attractiveness on the day of the attack, aligning with Yang et al., (2007) assertion that disfigurement jeopardizes their life and alters their daily life scope in the Indian context.

2.4 Media Influence

This section of the research delves into the intricate relationship between media influence concerning perceptions and attitudes towards survivors of acid attacks. Researchers have scrutinized print, electronic and social media to analyse the depiction of survivors, the language used in reporting and overall framing of acid attack incidents. Findings highlight the potential impact of media representation, ranging from perpetuating negative stereotypes to fostering empathy and increasing public awareness.

2.5 Educational Institutions as catalysts for social change

Educational institutions act as catalysts for social change by actively shaping the perceptions of students towards acid attack survivors. Through inclusive curricula, these institutions integrate content that sheds light on the experiences and challenges faced by survivors, fostering a deeper understanding of the physical, emotional and social consequences of acid attacks. Sensitization programs within educational settings engage students in discussions, workshops and seminars that promote awareness and dispel myths, contributing to empathy and altering negative perceptions. Student-led initiatives and clubs focusing on social issues provide platforms for meaningful discussions and awareness campaigns, actively involving students in changing perceptions. Diverse representation in various aspects of campus life ensures that individuals who have overcome acid attacks share their stories, impacting the way students perceive survivors. Institutional anti-discrimination policies create an environment where students are expected to treat each other with respect, fostering a supportive and accepting community. Overall, educational institutions play a vital role in shaping a more compassionate, informed and inclusive student community with regards to acid attack survivors.

3. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The perceptions and attitudes of others play a critical role in shaping the societal response toward the survivors. University students, as future leaders and influencers hold the potential to drive positive change in societal attitudes. This study explores the perceptions and attitudes of university students toward acid attack survivors focusing on the psychosocial factors that influence these views. It was important because their attitudes can either perpetuate stigma or promote empathy and acceptance. The study also seeks to identify how factors such as media, cultural norms and personal experiences shape these perceptions. The present research was significant because it not only identifies gaps in awareness but also provides insights into building a more compassionate and supportive social environment for survivors among the students of university.

Research questions: The proposed research study and formulation of objectives was guided by the following research questions:

- a) What are the perceptions and attitudes of university students in India towards acid attack survivors?
- b) How do empathy, social stigma, media influence and cultural factors contribute to these perceptions?

Objectives of the Study:

- a) To study the perceptions and attitudes of University going students towards acid attack survivors.
- b) To examine the levels of empathy among University students towards acid attack survivors.
- c) To analyse the impact of social stigma on the perceptions of University students towards acid attack survivors.
- d) To investigate the role of media influence in shaping attitudes towards acid attack survivors.
- e) To explore the influence of cultural factors on the perceptions of University students towards acid attack survivors.

Research design: The cross-sectional study was carried out in Delhi NCR among the University going

students by using qualitative research method. Purposeful sampling ensured diversity in gender, academic disciplines and cultural backgrounds among participants.

Sampling technique: Geographical locations, academic disciplines, age, gender were considered as key factors to populate the list of University going students. Simple random sampling was used to select the respondents for FGDs and IDIs. Participants were recruited from the University going students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Delhi NCR.

Sample size: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 3 groups each having 6 - 7 participants, facilitated by an experienced moderator in incorporating visual stimuli such as Photovoice images. Additionally, five In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted using a semi-structured set of questions to explore individual perceptions, attitudes and experiences related to acid attack survivors. The responses were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically to identify the patterns.

Procedure: In this study, the data was collected through a Focus Group Discussions with 20 randomly selected university going students, representing various undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The participants were made aware that their participation was entirely voluntary. The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, systematically identifying patterns and themes within the narratives obtained ensuring a nuanced understanding of university students' perceptions and attitudes towards acid attack survivors.

Inclusion Criteria:

- a) Participants must be currently enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate program at University level.
- b) Inclusion of participants from various academic disciplines to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives.
- c) Participants should be affiliated with University, considering the regional context in India.
- d) Individuals who express voluntary consent to take part in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Exclusion Criteria:

- a) Individuals not currently enrolled in any undergraduate and postgraduate program at University level.
- b) Exclusion of participants from a narrow range of academic disciplines to ensure a diverse sample.
- c) Those not affiliated with any University in Delhi NCR to maintain the study's focus on a specific geographical location.
- d) Individuals unwilling or unable to provide voluntary informed consent for participation.

Ethical Considerations

The present study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the safety and respect of all participants. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before their involvement in the study. They were given clear information about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved and how their data would be used. Participants were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

The study was conducted solely for academic purposes and the data collected was used only for research and educational objectives. The confidentiality of all participants was maintained and no personal information was disclosed. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant academic institutions to ensure compliance with ethical research standards. These measures ensured respect, safety and transparency throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

In this research study, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted among a randomly selected sample of 20 students representing various undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The participants were chosen through purposeful sampling to ensure a diverse representation of opinions and perspectives within the student population. The results of the present study were conducted using thematic analysis. This method helped to systematically identify and analyse themes that emerged from the narratives of university students.

These themes are shown in a table below:

Perceptions towards acid attack survivors	Attitude towards acid attack survivors	Empathy
Social stigma	Media influence	Cultural factors
In-depth explorations	Visual stimuli-photovoice	Group dynamics

Results and findings

The findings are presented in tabular format categorizing them into three main sections: the core themes, comprising psychosocial analysis with emphasis on psychological and social dimensions; sub-themes; and transcribed verbatim excerpts.

Sub-themes	Verbatim
<p>Perception: University students perceive acid attacks as deeply disturbing crimes, particularly when committed by individuals known to the victims. These acts evoke profound emotional responses, including pity, empathy, anger and sadness, while being condemned as cruel, selfish and shameful. Media portrayals including social media, news and documentaries, significantly shape these perceptions, deepening understanding and empathy. Students also express admiration for survivors’ resilience, strength and remarkable will to live, despite the immense physical and emotional pain endured. The vivid image of disfigurement and social isolation further underscores the deep psychological and</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “.....disturbing nature of these crimes, especially when perpetrated by those with personal connections to the victims..... perceive any wrongdoing by their attackers, shedding light on the profound psychological impact...” 2. “.....witnessed a street attack.... evoked feelings of pity, empathy and sadness...” 3. “....cruel and selfish acts....” 4. baffling why someone would harm another based solely on their life choices.....”

<p>societal impact of these attacks.</p>	<p>5. “....perception has been significantly shaped by sources like social media, news, movies and documentaries....”</p>
<p>In-depth exploration: University students emphasized the need for raising awareness about acid attack incidents through inclusivity workshops, fostering understanding and breaking stereotypes. Creative approaches such as webinars, workshops on healthy relationships and dramatizations of survivors’ experiences were highlighted as impactful tools for building empathy and promoting education. Sensitization and psycho-education programs were suggested to shift attitudes, along with motivational seminars featuring survivors to inspire resilience and drive change. Participants advocated for non-judgmental spaces where individuals are valued beyond appearances. Finally, awareness campaigns targeting universities and youth were seen as essential for cultivating a culture of support and proactive engagement against violence.</p>	<p>1. “....need for more societal reflections in films....” 2. “....raise awareness about incidents, necessitating inclusivity workshops....” 3. “....University environments can foster respect despite romantic rejections....” 4. “....promoting webinars and workshops on relationships, along with showcasing victims’ pain through dramas....” 5. “....Sensitization and psycho-education orientations....” 6. “....increased inclusivity, awareness and motivational seminars featuring acid attack survivors....” 7. “....Fostering awareness and positive attitudes creates more supportive spaces....”</p>
<p>Visual stimuli-photovoice: Incorporating photovoice as a visual stimulus in research unveils a powerful medium to engage participants emotionally and foster deeper insights into societal issues. Participants expressed that the visual content was “emotionally impactful,” shedding light on the “harsh reality of the attacks” and the continued prevalence of these incidents, with “the frequency of these cases not diminished” over time. Such stimuli provoke critical reflections, raising questions about societal dynamics, such as “how someone can boast about such actions and still seek societal validation.” The images also portrayed the “resilience of the victims who endured a perilous period in their lives,”</p>	<p>1. “....were emotionally impactful....” 2. “....revealing the harsh reality of the attacks....” 3. “....raises questions about how someone can boast about such actions and still seek societal validation....” 4. “....resilience of the victims who endured a perilous period in their lives....” 5. “....struggle, evident in both physical and mental aspects....” 6. “....showcased a complete transformation from a positive to a challenging existence....” 7. “....the frequency of these cases has not diminished....”</p>

<p>highlighting their journey through “struggles evident in both physical and mental aspects” and their “complete transformation from a positive to a challenging existence.” However, the students also recognized the dual-edged nature of photovoice. While it emphasizes resilience and awareness, it can also have adverse effects. For instance, participants noted that “photo and video media can negatively impact victims” by “triggering trauma among victims” and amplifying harm when “offenders create jokes and memes on public platforms.”</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. “...photo and video media can negatively impact victims....” 9. “...offenders create jokes and memes on public platforms....” 10. “.....trigger trauma among victims....” 11. “.....a positive and supportive approach can contribute to their growth and recovery....” 12. “....an unimaginable level of pain....”
<p>Interventions and educational programs: University students highlighted the need for intervention and educational programs to support acid attack survivors and promote societal change. They suggested providing free visual aids for survivors who lost their vision and improving existing schemes to ensure better support. Platforms like dharma shows, TED talks and open-mic events were recommended to share survivors’ stories, fostering empathy and raising awareness about social issues. Psycho-education programs for the younger generation were proposed to build empathy and discourage harmful behaviours, such as supporting or engaging in attacks.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “....free visual aids to survivors who lost their vision....” 2. “....addressing the shortcomings of existing schemes....” 3. “....dharma shows, TED talks and open-mic events to listen to survivors....” 4. “....fostering understanding of their pain and addressing broader social issues....” 5. “....implement psycho-education programs for the younger generation....”
<p>Empathy: Empathy is a powerful emotional response expressed by university students in the research. Many participants felt fear and unease upon witnessing the victims’ conditions, which highlighted their vulnerability. This fear transformed into overwhelming pain, with reactions described as intense and deeply emotional. Students reported feeling empathy for the victims, combined with anger toward the offenders. They were particularly outraged by the trivial reasons given for such heinous acts, like rejecting a marriage proposal. This mix of</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “.....victims’ conditions was frightening, potentially leading to a fear of social surroundings....” 2. “....overwhelming, evoking intense pain when observing their condition.....” 3. “.....empathy for the victims and intense anger towards the offenders.....” 4. “.....infuriating to consider the absurd reasons given by the culprits....”

<p>anger and sadness highlighted the cruelty present in humanity.</p>	<p>5. “....survivors refuse to acknowledge that their own family members were responsible....”</p>
<p>Social stigma: Social stigma surrounding acid attack survivors significantly affects their experiences and recovery. Many individuals express a desire for greater empathy towards victims, highlighting the need for understanding rather than judgment. Unfortunately, societal attitudes often lean toward victim-blaming, where victims are held responsible for the attacks they endured. This harsh perspective contributes to a culture of body-shaming and bullying, with survivors frequently subjected to derogatory comments that further diminish their self-esteem. Survivors face not only verbal abuse but also social exclusion. They encounter harsh stares and mockery in public spaces, such as temples and universities, reinforcing their sense of isolation. This exclusion can lead to feelings of despair, making it difficult for them to reintegrate into society. Moreover, the stigma is compounded by the perception that not reporting the crime is a wrongdoing in itself, adding another layer of shame for the survivors.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “....empathy towards victims....” 2. “....contributing to their treatment....” 3. “....body-shaming and bullying through harsh comments....” 4. “....face harsh stares, mockery and exclusion from public places like temples and universities....” 5. “..often blame victims, not reporting the crime was itself a wrongdoing..” 6. “....addressing wrong judgments about attacks...” 7. “.....redirecting attitudes towards politeness, respect and sensitivity for the victims....” 8. “....female individuals, facing instances of “male entitlement,” leading to attacks when rejecting demands....” 9. “....the Indian narrative often wrongly links attacks to relationship issues....”
<p>Media influence: Media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of acid attack survivors and the incidents themselves. Many students expressed concerns that media representations often reduce survivors to objects of pity, emphasizing the need for empathy and care rather than mere sympathy. This approach undermines the complexity of their experiences and ignores their resilience and strength. Additionally, some participants noted that media narratives sometimes frame the actions of attackers as justified, which can perpetuate harmful mentalities around violence and victimization. This framing not only affects</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “....portrays survivors as objects of pity, but they deserve empathy and care, not just a second glance....” 2. “....frames incidents to suggest the attacker was justified....” 3. “....perpetuating harmful mentalities....” 4. “....Survivors, especially women, should not be victims of such perceptions; the offenders must face consequences....” 5. “....shape perceptions of acid attacks and survivors....”

<p>how society views the survivors but also impacts the accountability of offenders, as it can obscure the necessity of holding perpetrators responsible for their actions. Survivors, particularly women, should not be burdened with societal perceptions that paint them as victims without agency.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. “.....preventing attacks rather than generalizing offenders’ faults or defending victims....” 7. “.....awareness-building initiatives like the movie “Chhapaak,” can promote a positive attitude and inclusivity.....”
<p>Cultural factors: Cultural influences significantly shape perceptions and attitudes toward women, particularly in contexts where patriarchal values dominate. Many individuals adopt a judgmental perspective that blames women for their misfortunes, suggesting that “the girl must have done something wrong, or else God wouldn’t have punished her.” This victim-blaming mentality is deeply rooted in certain families holding traditional norms. Such beliefs reflect a misguided notion that a girl’s worth is tied to her beauty or that she should remain confined at home. These harmful notions are perpetuated by segments of society that promote misogynistic attitudes, especially in male-oriented households. Participants expressed a dislike for cultural aspects that inherently bias against women, pointing out the unequal treatment of girls compared to boys. The prevailing misogyny often manifests as a lack of professionalism in public discourse, where social media can amplify subjective opinions that mock or belittle women.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “...judgmental perspective often suggests, “The girl must have done something wrong, or else God wouldn’t have punished her.”....” 2. “.....misguided idea that a girl must be beautiful, or she should be confined at home....” 3. “...victim-blaming was deeply ingrained in some patriarchal Indian families....” 4. “.....a manifestation of the prevailing misogynistic attitudes predominantly observed in male-oriented households....” 5. “.....dislike aspects of my culture due to its inherent bias against women and the unequal treatment of girls compared to boys....” 6. “.....lacks professionalism as it tends to reflect subjective opinions from the masses on social media, often resorting to making fun of them.....”
<p>Group dynamics: Group dynamics play a crucial role in shaping perspectives and influencing discussions about sensitive topics like acid attacks. Exposure to these experiences can lead individuals to develop strong opinions, sometimes even blaming survivors for the attacks and suggesting preventive actions they could have taken. This tendency highlights how societal beliefs can impact collective</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “.....exposure to acid attack experiences among individuals can shape their perspectives, potentially influencing discussions.....” 2. “.....hold strong opinions blaming women for the attacks, suggesting preventive actions they could have taken.....”

<p>viewpoints and perpetuate victim-blaming attitudes. The diversity of perspectives among university students significantly enriches discussions. Participants noted that varied cultural backgrounds contribute to differing opinions on acid attack survivors, emphasizing that India's multicultural fabric shapes these viewpoints. Some students expressed that values and expectations are often instilled more heavily in women, which reinforces traditional gender roles and societal expectations.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. "...diverse perspectives in discussions significantly influence collective viewpoints...." 4. "...enhanced support networks within academic institutions and society are crucial for aiding survivors in their journey of physical and emotional recovery...." 5. ".....perceived as submissive, expected to conform to familial or male desires...."
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5. Discussion

This study explored the psychosocial factors shaping university students' perceptions and attitudes toward acid attack survivors.

Perceptions of Acid Attacks among University students

University students' awareness of acid attacks has increased due to media coverage and social campaigns and networks. However, the depth of their understanding varies. Many participants expressed shock at the brutality of acid attacks while also emphasizing the irreversible physical and emotional trauma inflicted on victims. This aligns with findings by Kuriakose et al. (2017), which indicated that educational interventions can significantly enhance awareness about the severity of violence against women, including acid attacks.

In the present study, university students recognized acid attacks as a form of gender-based violence deeply rooted in societal norms and patriarchal values. Many participants acknowledged that these attacks disproportionately affect women, reflecting broader systemic issues of gender inequality and power dynamics. According to a report by the World Health Organization (2013), violence against women is a major global public health issue that reaches epidemic levels with acid attacks being a particularly brutal manifestation of this violence. Participants noted that societal attitudes often trivialize the severity of such violence, perpetuating the cycle of victimization.

For instance, one participant shared their perspective on the high-profile case of Laxmi Agarwal, a survivor of an acid attack in India. Laxmi's story, which gained national attention after being portrayed in the film "Chhapaak," illustrates the profound impact of acid attacks on women's lives and the urgent need for societal change (Khatri, 2022). Students expressed empathy towards Laxmi and recognized resilience in advocating for stricter laws against acid attacks and for improved support systems for survivors. This case highlights how societal norms and patriarchal values can lead to violence against women, as it was motivated by rejection and a desire to exert control over survivor's life. The participants also noted that cultural narratives often shape the perception of acid attack survivors, leading to stigmatization. Some students mentioned that survivors are frequently viewed through the lens of their physical appearance which is heavily influenced by societal standards of beauty. This

view can hinder their reintegration into society and affect their mental well-being. Research has shown that the societal context emphasizes beauty as a crucial standard, with media portrayals often reinforcing these stereotypes (Young et al., 2002). This was evident in discussions about the psychological impact of disfigurement on survivors where participants noted that many women face not only physical challenges but also emotional distress related to their altered appearances.

Additionally, the participants pointed out that while some families and communities actively support survivors' others exhibit indifference or even hostility. For example, several students recounted stories of survivors being shunned by their families or communities due to the stigma attached to their injuries. This social rejection can exacerbate the psychological trauma experienced by survivors leading to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Research indicates that social support plays a critical role in the recovery of survivors emphasizing the need for community engagement and awareness to counteract stigma (Mannan et al., 2004). Their discussions underscore the importance of advocacy and education in addressing the cultural norms that contribute to such violence, highlighting the potential for students to become agents of change within their communities. By understanding the complexities surrounding acid attacks and their impact on survivors, university students can contribute to a more informed and empathetic society.

Despite this recognition, some students exhibited victim-blaming attitudes, suggesting that survivors could have taken steps to avoid such attacks. This finding mirrors research by Das and Khan (2019) which highlighted how societal expectations and cultural norms often lead to victim-blaming narratives. Such perceptions can exacerbate the stigma faced by survivors hindering their recovery and reintegration into society.

Attitudes Toward Victims of Acid Attacks

The attitudes of university students towards acid attack survivors revealed a complex interplay of empathy and stigma. Many participants expressed a deep sense of compassion for survivors, acknowledging their struggles with body image, mental health and societal acceptance. This aligns with previous research studies indicating that empathy can lead to supportive behaviors, encouraging students to advocate for better resources and support for survivors (Ramesh et al., 2018). Many students expressed deep compassion for survivors, acknowledging the physical and psychological trauma they endure. These attitudes align with findings from Ahmed (2012), who highlighted that acid attack survivors face profound challenges in self-esteem, social interactions and mental well-being due to disfigurement and societal stigma. However, our research revealed that while empathy was prevalent, a significant portion of students also exhibited underlying biases, such as victim-blaming. Some participants suggested that survivors might have taken steps to prevent the attacks, reflecting the deeply ingrained cultural practice of holding women accountable for gender-based violence. This mirrors societal attitudes documented by Farhad et al. (2011), where victims often face blame for their suffering.

Empathy emerged as a significant theme in participants' responses. Many expressed feelings of compassion and sadness for survivors, recognizing the emotional and physical pain they endure. Similar studies have shown that survivors experience profound emotional distress due to their

circumstances, leading to feelings of hopelessness and anxiety (Farhad et al., 2011). Participants noted that understanding the survivors' experiences could evoke empathy and promote supportive attitudes. **Stigma** was another critical theme. Participants acknowledged that societal perceptions often lead to victim-blaming attitudes, where some individuals believe survivors could have prevented the attack. This finding aligns with research that highlights how systemic gender inequalities contribute to the stigma surrounding violence against women (Kuriakose et al., 2017). Survivors often face discrimination which further impacts their mental health and social integration.

Media influence played a notable role in shaping perceptions. Participants discussed how films like "Chhapaak," which portray the struggles of acid attack survivors, can raise awareness and foster empathy. Previous studies have shown that cinematic representations can encourage critical reflection on societal issues and promote social change (Kashani, 2016). However, while media efforts aim to raise awareness, they sometimes fail to challenge deep-rooted biases effectively.

Cultural norms significantly impact how survivors are perceived. Participants noted that societal beauty standards often place undue pressure on women, making it challenging for survivors to reintegrate into society after an attack. Research indicates that cultural stereotypes about beauty can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy among survivors (Young et al., 2002). This pressure reinforces the need for societal change regarding how beauty is defined and valued.

Group dynamics also influenced participants' attitudes. The study found that support networks within academic institutions are crucial for fostering empathy and understanding toward survivors. Similar studies have emphasized the importance of community support in promoting resilience among survivors (Caldwell et al., 2012). However, the elevated status of men in society often leads to disempowerment for women, perpetuating cycles of violence and discrimination (UNHCR, 2020).

Overall, this research highlights the complex interplay of psychological, social and cultural factors in shaping university students' perceptions of acid attack survivors. There is a pressing need for inclusive interventions, educational programs and media representation that challenge stigma and promote empathy. By addressing these themes, researchers can work toward a more supportive and understanding society for acid attack survivors.

Significance of the Study

This research study holds substantial significance for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes significantly to the understanding of psychosocial factors that shape the attitudes of University students towards acid attack survivors in India. By delving into the intricacies of empathy, social stigma, media influence and cultural factors, the study aims to unearth nuanced insights that provide a holistic perspective on the complex dynamics governing perceptions. This deeper understanding was pivotal in fostering a comprehensive awareness of the challenges faced by acid attack survivors within University settings.

Secondly, the study's findings bear direct implications for the development of targeted interventions and educational programs in the context of University environments. By identifying the specific psychosocial variables influencing attitudes, the research equips stakeholders, including educators, administrators and support services, with valuable insights. This knowledge can be instrumental in

designing evidence-based interventions aimed at fostering empathy, reducing stigma and promoting inclusivity for acid attack survivors within the University community. Implementing such programs holds the potential to create a more supportive and understanding environment, ultimately contributing to the well-being and integration of survivors in academic settings. Therefore, the study's significance extends beyond academic exploration to practical applications with the potential to bring about positive societal change.

Limitations of the study:

- a) **Potential Biases in Self-Reported Data:** While self-reported data was invaluable in exploring individual perceptions and attitudes, it was susceptible to biases such as social desirability bias or recall bias. Participants may provide responses influenced by societal expectations or memory inaccuracies, potentially impacting the validity of the findings. Efforts were made to minimize bias through the use of carefully crafted questions and assurances of confidentiality, yet the inherent limitations of self-report measures must be acknowledged.
- b) **Limited Generalizability due to the Focus on University Students:** The study's exclusive focus on University students at University may restrict the generalizability of findings to a broader population. The unique characteristics and experiences of University students may not fully capture the perceptions of individuals outside this demographic. Generalizing the results beyond this specific group should be done cautiously, recognizing that attitudes towards acid attack survivors may vary across different age groups, educational backgrounds and societal contexts. Future research involving a more diverse participant pool was necessary to enhance the external validity of the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration has delved into the intricate psychosocial factors influencing university students' attitudes towards acid attack survivors, revealing a nuanced understanding of perceptions, visual-stimuli photovoice, interventions and educational programs. The global concern of violence against women, particularly acid crimes, underscores the significant public health issue. Cinematic representations like "Chhapaak" and documentaries contribute to awareness and gender sensitization, showcasing the transformative potential of media. Support networks and the recognition of ethical responsibilities play pivotal roles in shaping perspectives and empowering survivors. The study emphasizes the need for holistic, inclusive interventions, combining empathy and awareness to address the complex challenges faced by acid attack survivors for their overall well-being. This research contributes valuable insights into the perceptions and attitudes of university students in India towards acid attack survivors. By understanding the psychological variables at play, the study aims to inform targeted interventions that promote empathy, reduce stigma and foster inclusivity within university settings.

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