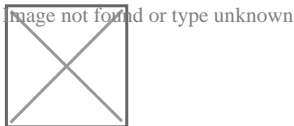




Convert, Marry Me, or Die by Acid: Christian Women in Muslim Pakistan

Description



In Pakistan, acid attacks against women — especially minority women, mainly Christians — are a common form of “retribution” for Muslim men who feel scorned. Pictured: Asiya Bibe, an acid attack victim, poses with a portrait before her disfigurement, in Multan, Pakistan on March 16, 2012. (Photo by Bay Ismoyo/AFP via Getty Images)

A Muslim man recently splashed acid onto the face of a teenage Christian girl, disfiguring her permanently. Her crime? Refusing to convert and turning him down.

On February 1, 2023, in Karachi, Pakistan, according to the [report](#), when Sunita Munawar, aged 19, stepped off the bus on her way to work:

“While at the bus stop she noticed that Kamran Allah Baksh a local neighbour who had been stalking and harassing her for several years, was already waiting at the bus stop. Despite a sense of foreboding, Miss Munawar bravely exited the bus and headed towards her workplace.

“As she passed by Mr Baksh without warning he threw something on Miss Munawar’s face. She could feel intense pain in her eyes and on the skin of her face, arms, torso and legs and knew immediately, that something was seriously wrong. She screamed and tried to wipe away the acid but found that the pain would not stop, a pain so severe that at some point Miss Munawar fainted and collapsed to the ground.”

Munawar was taken a nearby hospital, where it was confirmed that she had suffered 20 percent acid burns. From her hospital bed she [said](#) of her assailant:

“He wanted me to be his girlfriend but I refused his advances. I can’t believe what he has done to me, I did nothing to deserve this. It feels like he has destroyed my life. I have bright scars everywhere he sprayed the acid on me, it’s so hard to take.”

Munawar’s uncle added:

“He would try to force her to renounce her Christian faith, assuring her that he would marry her once she became a Muslim, but she refused to surrender to his illegitimate demands.... Sunita had informed her siblings about Kamran’s harassment, and they had repeatedly complained to his parents, urging them to stop him, but that did not work.”

After being apprehended, Kamran Allah Baksh confessed to his crime. “In his statement,” authorities reported, “Kamran claimed that he had fallen in love with Sunita and had attacked her with acid in retaliation after she rejected his marriage proposal.”

Whatever punishment — if any — might be meted out to Baksh, the damage is irrevocable, the girl’s uncle said:

“Sunita is just 19, but now her whole life has been physically and mentally scarred by Kamran. Even if he is convicted for his crime, will Sunita be able to live a normal life again? We all know how our society treats acid attack survivors....”

Munawar’s case is, unfortunately, not isolated. In April 2018, also in Pakistan, a Muslim man poured acid over a Christian woman and set her on fire. She, too, had refused to convert to Islam and marry him. Asma Yaqoob, 25, with burns covering nearly 90 percent of her body, died five days later. Soon after Yaqoob had answered the door, her father said, “we heard her screaming in pain.” They “rushed outside to see what had happened” and saw Rizwan Gujjar, 30, a onetime family friend, fleeing “while Asma was engulfed in flames.” Three months earlier, Gujjar had begun pressuring her to marry him. She, “not wanting to recant her Christian faith,” had politely declined and tried to avoid him.

Acid attacks against women — especially minority women, mainly Christians — are a common form of “retribution” for Muslim men who feel scorned.

In the last few months, just in Karachi, where Munawar was disfigured, there have been at least a dozen acid attacks.

In Pakistan, between 2007 and 2018, according to the “NGO the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), there were 1,485 reported cases of acid attacks. Nearly a third of victims were children splashed with acid when family members were attacked.”

Discussing this trend, Juliet Chowdhry, of the British Asian Christian Association, said:

“Acid throwing attacks are extremely violent crimes. Perpetrators seek to inflict severe physical and mental suffering on their victims, the large majority of whom are women. In

Pakistan, the most common reasons for such attacks are domestic violence, refusal of a marriage proposal, or the denial of a sexual advance. These attacks are vicious, pernicious and involve a high degree of premeditation. More responsive police could have prevented this attack when Sunita first reported stalking and harassment. Instead their inability to act, now means that Sunita will suffer years of disfigurement and treatments.”

Some attacks on Christian women are motivated simply because they are Christian.

In 2012, for instance, Julie Aftab, a Christian woman who had fled her native Pakistan to America, recalled how Muslim men had permanently disfigured her when she was 16. After one entered her place of employment and noticed her wearing a cross around her neck, he “became abusive,” telling her “that she was living in the gutter and would go to hell for shunning Islam.” The man then “left and returned half an hour later, clutching a bottle of battery acid which he savagely chucked over her head”.

“As she ran screaming for the door a second man grabbed her by the hair and forced more of the liquid down her throat, searing her esophagus. Teeth fell from her mouth as she desperately called for help, stumbling down the street. A woman heard her cries and took her to her home, pouring water over her head and taking her to hospital. At first the doctors refused to treat her, because she was a Christian. ‘They all turned against me... Even the people who took me to the hospital. They told the doctor they were going to set the hospital on fire if they treated me.’ ... 67 per cent of her esophagus was burned and she was missing an eye and both eyelids. What remained of her teeth could be seen through a gaping hole where her cheek had been. The doctors predicted she would die any day. Despite the odds she pulled through.”

Fatal attacks are commonplace. In 2021, the bloated bodies of two Christian sisters were found in a sewer. Two months earlier, Sajida (28) and Abida (26), who were both married and had children, were reported missing. According to their husbands, the two Muslim men for whom they worked had regularly pressured them to convert to Islam and marry them. Even though the young women “made it clear that they were Christian and married, the men threatened them and kept harassing the sisters.”

After their decomposed bodies were discovered, their Muslim supervisors “confessed that they had abducted the sisters,” Sadija’s husband [said](#), “and after keeping them hostage for a few days for satisfying their lust, had slit their throats and thrown their bodies into the drain.” He described the families’ ordeal:

“When police informed us that they had identified the two bodies as those of our loved ones, it seemed that our entire world had come crumbling down.... I still cannot fathom the site [sic] of seeing my wife’s decomposed body.”

Around the same time, two other Muslim men also murdered a young Christian woman. Five months earlier, one of the men, Muhammad Shehzad, had started to harass Sonia Bibi, 24. When he would ask her to renounce her faith and marry him, she would decline. One day, while she was walking to work, Shehzad and an accomplice drove by and shot Bibi dead. In the words of her father,

“A few days before the incident, Sonia was again harassed by Shehzad. Since she was a committed Christian she did not betray Jesus and sacrificed her life for her faith.”

“We are being harassed and pressurized to withdraw the case against culprits,” her father, who must at least have hoped for justice, said.

In another incident, in June 2021, a young Christian woman, Neelam Masih, was beaten and raped in her home for refusing to convert to Islam and marry the man who then raped her. She was alone, Masih said, when Faisal Basra “entered my home at gunpoint.”

“[He] dragged me to my bedroom and began to punch and kick me. He threw me on the bed and started to rape me. He demanded I marry him and convert to Islam. I refused. I am not willing to deny Jesus and he said that if I would not agree he would kill me. He hit me on the face with his pistol and I shouted and screamed and tried to escape but he kept pulling me back, dragging me by my hair.”

Eventually Masih’s Christian neighbor heard her cries and came rushing to the house, prompting Basra to flee.

How do some Muslim men see Christian women in Pakistan?

In January 2016, a group of Muslims in a car stalked and sexually harassed three Christian girls walking home from work. When the girls tried to run away, the Muslims chased them down in their car and ran them over, killing one of the girls, aged 17. After the girls had refused their advances, and before the chase began, the surviving girls had heard one of the Muslims mockingly say, “Christian girls are only meant for one thing, the [sexual] pleasure of Muslim men.”

If they resist, they might get splashed with acid or murdered outright.

Not one of these attacks, with the exception of Julie Aftab, was reported on the mainstream media. Even then, no mention was made that such attacks on Christian women follow a pattern in Pakistan.

Perhaps that is something for all those who claim to care about women’s rights to think about.

Raymond Ibrahim, author of Defenders of the West, Sword and Scimitar, Crucified Again, and The Al Qaeda Reader, is the Distinguished Senior Shillman Fellow at the Gatestone Institute and the Judith Rosen Friedman Fellow at the Middle East Forum.

by Raymond Ibrahim

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