

Stop Acid Attacks



Image by [Ravi Choudhary](#).

The formative years of my life were spent in India. Growing up, I often heard stories of the difficulties faced by joint families, members of an extended family living in the same household—a model still predominant in India. I heard stories of physically abusive in-laws who threaten their daughters-in-law, causing them to feel pressured to stay quiet and to avoid bringing shame to the family. In extreme cases of hostility, this form of violence, although mostly emotional, would escalate to a bride burning or an acid attack.

An acid attack is the act of throwing acid, or a similar corrosive substance, onto the body of another with the intention to disfigure, torture, or kill the victim. It is also used as a weapon for revenge. Acid attack cases are mostly found in parts of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Africa, but occur in other places as well.

In the summer of 2014, I became an integral part of an

organization and ongoing campaign against acid violence. [Stop Acid Attacks](#) is a non-profit entity in India that provides long-term rehabilitation and assistance to acid attack survivors. I came across the organization's work on social media. I was speechless after reading the story of Laxmi, a survivor who was a minor at the time of the attack. Laxmi fought for more than ten years to change the judicial system in India and to tighten restrictions on the sale of acid. I was inspired to join this cause and to help increase awareness about these incidents on a global scale.

LAXMI'S STORY

In 2005, fifteen-year-old Laxmi, after refusing to marry a man more than twice her age, was attacked with acid in New Delhi. She was waiting for the bus at school when the man approached her with his brother's girlfriend. They pushed her to the ground and threw acid on her face. After this traumatic experience, Laxmi refused to step outside for two years. To this day, she has undergone more than seven major surgeries and struggled every day to express her grief and emotions with a still-severely scarred face. After many years, she gathered the courage to go out in public and decided that she wanted to speak up for other women and girls who have experienced similar suffering. She became the spokesperson for Stop Acid Attacks.

Laxmi fought with the Indian government and the Supreme Court for a decade, finally managing to file for a PIL (Public Interest Litigation). The central government of India then used the Poisons Act of 1919 to regulate the sale of acid in the country. This was a major victory for Laxmi and thousands of other survivors across the nation. The Indian government also recently passed a law mandating that hospitals cover expenses and treatment for these survivors.

In countries where acid attacks are more common, these violent acts are committed on a daily basis. As many as thousands of women are reportedly attacked each year; the actual number of these cases may even be double, since many go unreported. Stop Acid Attacks aims to change these circumstances by offering strength and support to those willing to raise their voices and to bring the perpetrators to justice. Our organization also highlights these stories for the purpose of fostering dialogue on acid attacks and other challenges to women's human rights in India.

Despite Laxmi's efforts to force the authorities to regulate the sale of acid in India, these substances are reportedly sold on every street corner without adequate legal paperwork. In addition to supporting the victims, Stop Acid Attacks continues to pressure the justice system to look at this problem closely. We have organized marches in Delhi and at the Parliament. Laxmi has stood in the assembly with her petition also at the Supreme Court. She has personally visited most villages in India to educate and inform the villagers of the evil of acid attacks and such forms of violence.

GETTING INVOLVED

In December 2012, like many activists around the world, I closely followed with great horror the news of the rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi. Jyoti was a young medical student attacked on a bus while returning home from a movie with her male friend. [India's Daughter](#), a recent documentary based on those events, was [banned](#) by an Indian court and thus throughout the country because the excerpts "appeared to encourage and incite violence against women." When the scandal broke around the film, I started to watch interviews with the filmmaker, Leslee Udwin, and other related stories. I was left perplexed by the dichotomy—how could a developing nation such as India with historically monumental leaders, cutting-edge

technology, and a global perspective—be so far behind in social values? India is home to innovative filmmakers and writers, voices of their generation who cannot speak the truth out loud without fearing for their lives.

As an actor and producer, I have found a meaningful way to increase the momentum. I recently produced two films in which female protagonists give us a glimpse of their triumphant struggles for equality, voice, and respect in society. I also portrayed a Pakistani woman in search of her identity in the film [In Search of America, Inshallah](#), for which I received the Best Actress award at the California Women's Film Festival in Hollywood. Recently, I secured the rights to adapt Laxmi's courageous story into a screenplay.

My involvement and work at Stop Acid Attacks has expanded since we have created two other platforms. First, there is [Sheroes](#), a cafe solely run by acid attack survivors near the Taj Mahal in Agra, India. Sheroes provides employment opportunities and the means for victims to restore the societal- and self-respect they deserve. Second is [Chhanv](#), an organization that serves as a bridge between survivors and society. Although it is difficult to maneuver through the complexities of a traumatic experience, such as acid attacks, and to discern what might be the right type of help to provide to the survivors, these initiatives make it possible to educate the public about this violence, and to rehabilitate the victims. I firmly believe that only good can come from confronting the issue directly, and from providing opportunities for women to offer support to one another, to learn from each other, and to be inspired and encouraged by other women's stories.

My ultimate goal is to create more job opportunities for these survivors via social media platforms and e-tailor avenues. I believe that creating global awareness and forging an avenue for society to show acceptance of these women will not only give the survivors confidence, but also aid in their recovery.

I also want to focus on providing education to all, but particularly to men, on the importance of women's roles in societies. This in turn will help in closing the gap in gender equality, and in cultivating respect toward both women and men.

It is impossible to know when these heinous crimes will be a thing of the past; but, as long as acid attacks against women persist, my team and I at Stop Acid Attacks will continue our work to educate and to support.

To date, Stop Acid Attacks has rehabilitated more than 50 survivors of acid attacks.

To learn more about the organization, visit Stopacidattacks.org.