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Woman Blinded by Spurned Man Invokes Islamic Retribution

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By Thomas Erdbrink
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TEHRAN -- Ameneh Bahrami once enjoyed photography and mountain vistas. Her work for a medical equipment company gave her financial independence. Several men had asked for her hand in marriage, but the hazel-eyed electrical technician had refused them all. "I wanted to get married, but only to the man I really loved," she said.

Four years ago, a spurned suitor poured a bucket of sulfuric acid over her head, leaving her blind and disfigured.

Late last month, an Iranian court ordered that five drops of the same chemical be placed in each of her attacker's eyes, acceding to Bahrami's demand that he be punished according to a principle in Islamic jurisprudence that allows a victim to seek retribution for a crime. The sentence has not yet been carried out.

The implementation of corporal punishments allowed under Islamic law, including lashing, amputation and stoning, has often provoked controversy in [Iran](#), where many people have decried such sentences as barbaric. This case is different.

Tehran journalist Asieh Amini, who writes about human rights and opposes the sentence, said protest has been muted because people have been moved by Bahrami's story. "It's hard not to get emotional over what has happened to her," Amini said.

Bahrami, 31, said she has fought long and hard to obtain what she views as justice.

"At an age at which I should be putting on a wedding dress, I am asking for someone's eyes to be dripped with acid," she said in a recent interview, as rain poured against the windows of her parents' small apartment in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Tehran. "I am doing that because I don't want this to happen to any other women."

Some officials also said the punishment would be a deterrent.

"If propaganda is carried out on how acid attackers are punished, it will prevent such crimes in the future," Mahmoud Salarkia, deputy attorney general of Tehran, told reporters after the court issued its ruling.

There are no statistics on the number of acid attacks against women in Iran. "This is an extreme case of social violence, but crimes like spouse and 'honor' killings are clearly on the rise in Iran," Amini said. "These crimes are violent reactions to sexual limitations in this country."

In public life, men and women are often segregated in Iran, and sex before marriage is illegal.

Amini said she doubted that the sentence against Bahrami's attacker would reverse the trend. "Social violence will not be cured with more violence," she said.

In 2002, Bahrami was a 24-year-old electronics student at a university in Tehran. She and her friends felt sorry for a sometimes bedraggled younger student named Majid Movahedi, so they collected sweaters and pants and asked a university staff member to pass them on to him.

"Ameneh was always nice to everybody," said her mother, Shahin, carefully lifting a cup of tea to her daughter's lips.

Bahrami left a deep impression on Movahedi, even though the two had never spoken.

"He was absolutely crazy about her," said Aziz Movahedi, Majid's father. "At periods he would lock himself in his room, saying he only wanted to marry her."

Bahrami didn't share his feelings. "I remember him as a strange boy with an obsessive stare," she said. In 2003, Movahedi's mother called Bahrami's parents to propose a marriage. "I politely declined," Bahrami said.

Movahedi, refusing to be turned down, began waiting outside her workplace and stopping her in the street, crying that he would kill himself if she didn't marry him.

Police said they could not act before a crime had been committed, so Bahrami decided that she needed to act. "Things were out of control. I was facing an unbalanced person," Bahrami said.

On Oct. 31, 2004, she approached Movahedi as he waited near her office. "I made up a story that I had gotten engaged and was about to marry. 'Continue with your life,' I told him. 'There is absolutely no hope for us.' "

As she returned to her office, he vowed to kill her.

Three days later, on a cold, clear autumn afternoon, Bahrami was walking home through one of Tehran's busy city parks when someone tapped her on the shoulder. As she turned around, a burning fluid splashed onto her face.

"It felt like my head was stuck in a bowl of boiling water," Bahrami said. "I bent forward to allow the stuff to drip off my face, but the pain was intolerable. I fell on the pavement, screaming for help."

In the interview, Bahrami recounted these events calmly. Her mother, sitting next to her on a couch, held her daughter tightly.

Bahrami remembers a crowd gathering around her. "A bystander came with a jerry can of water. I splashed it on my face, but that only caused the acid to run down my arms onto my body."

Someone picked her up and took her to a nearby hospital. The doctors ordered a worker to hose her down in the hospital's courtyard.

"They didn't take her clothes off or wash her eyes properly. That could have softened the high degree of burns," said Farid Karimian, an Iranian ophthalmologist who began treating Bahrami a couple of days later. "She was a real mess."

Movahedi turned himself in to police two weeks after the attack. During a preliminary hearing, he acknowledged attacking Bahrami and was imprisoned to await trial.

"What was my sin? To want to choose freely in marriage?" Bahrami said. "What was he thinking?"

Bahrami was transferred to a burn unit at another hospital, where she had several surgeries over the next six months.

"All the time I had to sleep standing up. I was completely blinded," she said.

After the operations, doctors referred her to an eye clinic in Barcelona for a last attempt to restore some of her vision.

But Bahrami had no insurance. Iran's president at the time, [Mohammad Khatami](#), who had heard Bahrami's story through her attorney, personally paid a large portion of her bills and promised that the government would make the remaining payments.

" 'You don't worry about anything; we'll take care of you,' they said," Bahrami recalled.

Doctors at Barcelona's Instituto de Microcirugia Ocular, an eye surgery hospital,

were impressed by Bahrami. "She was an amazing patient. So brave. She came to a foreign country, blind, without knowing the language. She only wanted one thing: to be able to see again," said Ramón Medel, an eyelid surgeon at the hospital.

Medel and other doctors focused on Bahrami's right eye, which was less damaged.

"After some operations, she could at least see some shadows," Medel said. "But we needed to do more work on her."

In August 2005, almost a year after the attack, [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) became president, and the payments for Bahrami's medical costs and her Barcelona apartment suddenly stopped.

Iran's ambassador to Spain at the time, Morteza Alviri, said he had nightmares after meeting Bahrami. "I felt so sorry for her. I tried to do what I could," he said. But when Ahmadinejad changed several ambassadors, supporters of the previous government, Alviri was the first to leave. "I don't know what happened to Ameneh after that," he said.

Ahmadinejad's media adviser, Medhi Kalhor, said he could guess why the payments were cut off. "Did Mr. Khatami throw the acid? No. He shouldn't have paid for her out of the people's pocket," he said. "If Bahrami was an old man with an ingrown toenail, no one would speak of it. . . . There are so many people who need our help. We cannot just pay for everybody."

Bahrami eventually was evicted from her apartment, and members of a Spanish organization took her to a homeless shelter in Barcelona.

"After some days, I understood that I was surrounded by drug addicts, drunkards and prostitutes," she said. "I cried so hard -- what had I done to deserve all this?"

"It was a horrible, crazy place, where they had put her," said Amir Sabouri, president of the Iranian Friendship Association of New York, a charity that helps Iranians worldwide. Sabouri traveled to Spain to help Bahrami after hearing about her plight.

Soon after, Bahrami felt fluid dripping from her right eye.

"Unfortunately her eye, which was very weak, gave out," Medel said. "She must have caught some bacteria somewhere."

Bahrami returned to Tehran in June.

With little left to lose, Bahrami took the unusual step of asking the court for qisas, or eye-for-an-eye retribution as allowed under Islamic law.

Courts usually order families of the accused to pay "blood money" for the crimes. But Bahrami insisted on the punishment. She had several meetings with the head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who tends to favor less strict interpretations of Islamic law.

"Shahroudi really pressed me to demand blood money instead of retribution. He explained that such a sentence would cause lots of bad publicity for Iran. But I refused," she said.

The judiciary did not respond to a request for an interview.

More than two weeks ago, Movahedi was led into court by two policemen. He showed no remorse when the court ruled on the case. When the judge asked whether he was ready for his punishment, Movahedi said that he still loved Bahrami but that if she asked for his eyes to be taken out, he would seek the same punishment for her.

"They must also completely empty out her eyes, since I'm not sure that she cannot secretly see," he said. "The newspapers have made this a huge case, but I haven't done anything bad."

Movahedi was sentenced to five drips of sulfuric acid in each eye. His father said he was "incredibly sorry" for what had happened. "If Ameneh is really blind, the verdict against my son must be implemented," he said.

Under Iranian law, a convict has 20 days to appeal the verdict. If Movahedi fails to do so, the punishment will be carried out on a date decided by the judiciary.

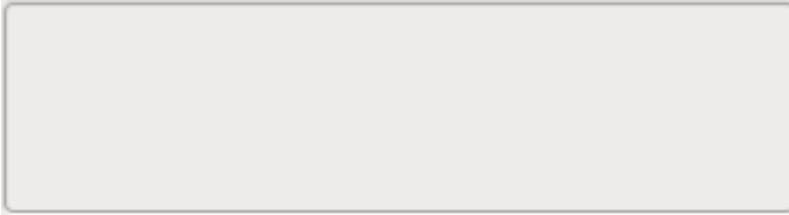
Medel, the doctor in Barcelona, said he was shocked to hear that his former patient had asked for another person's eyes to be taken out.

"I heard about that court case on the radio here in Spain," he said. "I never linked it to Ameneh. It's a harsh sentence, but she really had to go through a lot. I don't know what I would have done if she had been my daughter."

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