

CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND CONTROLLING MEASURES OF DOWRY DEATHS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The institution of marriage is an essential building block of societal structure, acting as a catalyst for joyous celebrations and fresh beginnings. Nonetheless, a persistent problem related to marriage, especially from the viewpoint of women in Indian society, is the dowry system. Despite extensive criticism and opposition, the custom remains prevalent manifesting in subtle as well as in overt ways. We still see a heightened and intensified manifestation of the evils of this system due to the problematic approach of the general public. The majority of the population still considers the practice of demanding and expecting bride prices to be acceptable and even justified. This study aimed to grasp the interconnected socio-demographic factors and suggest potential measures for intervention.

Key Words: Dowry Deaths, Status, Causes, Consequences, Controlling Measures in India

INTRODUCTION

Dowry deaths in India are the murder or suicide of married women due to harassment over unmet dowry demands, with over 6,100 cases reported in 2023. Rooted in patriarchal traditions, greed, and low status of women, these deaths usually occur within seven years of marriage, primarily through violence or "bride burning". Consequences include severe social injustice, violence, and extreme distress to families. Controlling measures include strict enforcement of the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Section 304B of the Indian Penal Code, and mandatory public awareness campaigns. A surge in dowry-related deaths across states like Uttar Pradesh, Chandigarh, and Tamil Nadu shows the persistent grip of this illegal practice. Women continue to face harassment, assault, and suicide over dowry, while investigations drag on and convictions remain rare.

Dowry-related deaths, a critical societal concern, have been extensively examined in the field of forensic medicine, to comprehend their epidemiology, causes, and medico-legal implications. These fatalities, frequently affecting young married females (without neglecting the fact that child marriages are also seen in the Indian scenario), are predominantly attributed to the demands for dowry in various forms, a custom deeply entrenched in certain societies. A notable proportion of these fatalities are considered to be homicides, utilizing means such as burning, poisoning, and strangulation, often camouflaged as suicides or mishaps to avoid legal repercussions. Studies suggest that the frequency of dowry-related fatalities fluctuates in accordance with the level of economic advancement in various geographical areas. In regions with limited economic progress, customary informal structures or institutions dictate conduct, leading to high levels of dowry-related fatalities. Conversely, with economic and social

development, the occurrence of dowry-related fatalities generally diminishes, indicating a multifaceted interplay between economic standing and societal conventions.

STATUS OF DOWRY DEATHS IN INDIA

In India dowry death statistic for the years 1989 to 1991 shows that 16,000 women were killed and 15 dowry death takes place per day. It is heartening to note that 52 newly married women are burnt to death for bringing insufficient dowry, say in an hour and 42 million are newly married women is burned to death.⁵³ The dowry deaths rate in India is highest in the world. The statistic as per the national crime records bureau is shown in table 1.

Table 1
Statistics of Dowry Deaths

Sl. No.	Year	No. of Dowry Deaths
1	1989/1991	16000
2	2002	6787
3	2005	6000
4	2011	8618
5	2012	8233
6	2013	8083
7	2014	8455
8	2015	7634
9	2016	8455
10	2017	7466
11	2018	7167
12	2019	7141
13	2020	6966
14	2023	6100

Source: National Bureau of Crimes, 2025

There are dowry deaths of a woman every 90 minutes, 1.4 deaths per year per 100,000 women in India. In the year 2012 as per national crime records bureau statistics for the year 2012 nearly 200,000 people including 47,951 women were arrested for demanding dowry and were tried for the offences but only 15% of the accused were convicted. State of Uttar Pradesh in India has highest number of reported dowry deaths in the year 2022. In Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya there is hardly any concept of dowry system. Dowry is most commonly practiced in Tamil Nadu, whereas it least common in Mumbai. India, Pakistan and Iran are the main countries where dower deaths

CAUSES OF DOWRY DEATHS

Patriarchal Mindset

Deep-rooted societal attitudes view women as inferior or a liability, justifying control and violence.

Greed and Materialism

Increased economic pressures lead to relentless demands for money, property, or luxury goods from the bride's family.

Social Status

In many areas, exorbitant dowry is wrongly seen as a marker of social prestige.

Victim Fear/Silence

Fear of social stigma, shame, or retaliation keeps many women from reporting harassment until it escalates.

Lack of Economic Independence

Women lacking independent income are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

CONSEQUENCES OF DOWRY DEATHS

Violent Deaths

Numerous young women are murdered or driven to suicide (burning, poisoning, and hanging).

Violation of Human Rights

Such deaths are a severe violation of a woman's right to life and dignity.

Destabilization of Families

Beyond the loss of life, it causes immense psychological trauma, social stigma, and financial ruin for the bride's family.

Perpetuation of Gender Discrimination

Such crimes reinforce the perception that women are burdens, fuelling gender inequality.

CONTROLLING MEASURES AND LEGAL PROVISIONS

Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

Explicitly bans taking or giving dowry, making it a criminal offense.

Section 304B of IPC (now Section 85 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita)

Specifically addresses dowry deaths, placing the onus on the husband/relatives to prove they did not cause the death if it occurs within seven years of marriage under suspicious circumstances.

Section 498A of IPC (now Section 80 of BNS)

Protects married women from cruelty by in-laws.

Strict Punishment

Legal provisions mandate minimum imprisonment of 7 years, which can extend to life imprisonment.

Education and Awareness

Campaigns to educate the public to stop giving or taking dowry and to encourage victims to speak out.

Reforms in Enforcement

Increasing women's economic independence and reforming the police to ensure quicker, non-biased investigations.

Reasons for the Persistence of Dowry-related Deaths in India

Cultural Entitlement and Deep-rooted Traditions

Dowry, though illegal since 1961 under the Dowry Prohibition Act, continues to be treated as a social practice. Many families still see it as an essential part of

marriage, often disguised as "gifts." In some sections a girl's worth is judged not by the life she builds, but by the dowry she brings. Cultural and societal pressures push families to meet rising dowry demands which often lead to harassment, abuse and even deaths.

Extent of the Dowry Problem in India

Between 2017 and 2022, India saw an average of 7,000 dowry deaths annually, based on reports from the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)**. The NCRB data is conservative, as many dowry deaths go unreported, underscoring the extent of the issue. A **World Bank** study covering 40,000 marriages in rural India from 1960 to 2008 revealed that dowry was paid in **95% of marriages**. This shows how deep-rooted the practice remains.

Gender Discrimination and Patriarchal Practices

Dowry is often used to **assert control over women**, who are perceived as a burden upon marriage. The demands from husbands and in-laws for additional dowries are rooted in patriarchal attitudes that value women as commodities.

Normalizing Abuse

Laws like Section 80 and 85 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 make dowry-related deaths and harassment criminal offenses. Yet, the practice of dowry has normalized abuse in many households. Such violence often goes unreported, dismissed as a private family matter. Between 2017 and 2022, dowry was the main motive in over 6,100 murders across India. Over 60% occurred in West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar. Together with Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Haryana, these States accounted for 80% of all dowry death cases during this period. This lack of awareness and ineffective implementation of laws makes it harder for women to break free from abusive relationships.

Role of Economic Factors

Rising economic pressures contribute to the demand for higher dowries. The growing **consumerism, social media influence, and the desire for a 'grand wedding'** create an environment conducive to dowry expectations.

JUDICIAL INTERVENTIONS

Sanjay Kumar Jain v. State of Delhi (2011)

The Supreme Court condemned the dowry system as a curse on Indian society and called for strong efforts to eliminate the rising menace of dowry deaths.

K. Prema S. Rao v. Yadla Srinivasa Rao (2003)

The Supreme Court stressed that stricter laws would only be effective if implemented seriously. It urged courts and enforcement agencies to act firmly to meet the intent of anti-dowry legislation.

Satvir Singh & Ors v. State of Punjab (1998)

The Punjab & Haryana High Court called dowry a stigma and social evil, stressing the urgent need for a shift in societal thinking and stronger laws to prevent dowry-related deaths.

S. Gopal Reddy v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1996)

The Supreme Court emphasized that the Dowry Prohibition Act targets both receiving and demanding dowry. Dowry, as a **quid pro quo for marriage, is illegal and reflects deep-rooted gender bias.**

LEGAL AND JUDICIAL CHALLENGES IN DOWRY-RELATED CASES IN INDIA

Inadequate Investigation and Slow Response

Only around 4,500 out of 7,000 dowry deaths reported each year lead to charge sheets. The rest remain stuck due to investigations being **delayed, mishandled, or disposed** of due to lack of evidence or false complaints. More than **67% of dowry deaths in 2022** had investigations **pending for over six months**, indicating systemic delays.

Judicial Bottlenecks

Even after charge sheets are filed, over **90% of cases face delays in courts**. With limited convictions (around 100 annually), cases often remain unresolved for years, leading to a sense of impunity among perpetrators.

Lack of Coordination between Police and Judiciary

Police often try to “resolve” dowry complaints through **mediation**, especially in small towns or villages. Additionally, the slow pace of charge sheet filing (70% after two months or more) and delays in court proceedings create a system where justice is not only delayed but sometimes denied.

Underreporting and Victim-Blaming

Many dowry-related deaths go unreported due to **fear of stigma, lack of legal awareness**, and pressure from both society and family. Many women **fear being disowned**, and victims' families often hesitate to pursue justice in close-knit communities.

Measure to Break the Cycle of Dowry-related Violence

Economic Empowerment

Empowering women financially is key to breaking the cycle of dowry violence. Laws like the Prevention of Child Marriage Act, 2006 and Right to Education Act, 2009 must be strictly enforced to keep girls in school and delay early marriage. Schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Mudra Yojana, and the National Skill Development Mission can give women the tools, savings, and skills needed for independence. When women earn and control resources, they're better able to resist abuse and build their own future.

Make Dowry Reporting Easier and Safer

Use tech-based platforms (apps, WhatsApp help lines) to allow anonymous complaints and track police response. Provide legal anonymity and protection for whistleblowers within families or communities. Safer reporting helps more women come forward.

Strengthening Law Enforcement

Police must be trained to handle dowry-related cases with greater sensitivity and urgency. Timely investigation and stringent action against the accused must be

prioritized. Dowry complaints must be registered and investigated as criminal offenses from the start. Treating these cases seriously sends a strong signal that dowry abuse isn't negotiable, it's a crime.

Create Real Exit Pathways for Women

Leaving abuse isn't an option without support. Every district needs proper shelters with counselling, legal aid, and job help. Direct cash or income support must back women who walk out, so survival isn't the next struggle.

Judicial Reforms and Fast-Tracking Cases

Setting up fast-track courts dedicated to dowry death cases would expedite trials and reduce the delay in the justice system.

Increase Awareness and Legal Support

Victims of dowry harassment should be provided with easier access to legal aid and counselling. Social awareness campaigns targeting the negative impacts of dowry could help change societal attitudes over time, reducing dowry-related violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Dowry deaths remain a grave issue in India, necessitating multifaceted interventions to mitigate this social evil. The anti-dowry programs implemented by United Nations Women and Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International, focusing on advocacy, education, economy, and health, have shown promise in reducing gender discrimination and dowry-related deaths. However, the persistence of dowry deaths, particularly among young, unemployed women within the first few years of marriage, underscores the need for continuous legal and social reforms. The alarming statistics, such as the NCRB's report of an average of six dowry-related female suicides per day, highlight the inadequacy related to enforcing mechanisms of existing laws. To address this, it is crucial to enhance the legal framework by revising and strictly enforcing laws against dowry demands and related violence. Additionally, increasing public awareness and education about women's rights and the legal repercussions of dowry practices can empower women and deter potential offenders. The socioetiological factors, such as the high incidence of suicidal burns and the vulnerability of women in the early years of marriage, call for targeted interventions, including support systems for newly married women and stringent monitoring of dowry practices. Furthermore, the cultural and religious dimensions of dowry need to be addressed through community engagement and dialogue to shift societal norms. Overall, a combination of legal reforms, educational initiatives, and community-based approaches is essential to eradicate dowry deaths and protect women's rights in India.

CONCLUSION

A multitude of factors are markedly associated with the rising occurrences of dowry-related fatalities, including the level of education attained by women, the prevalence of extended family structures, the dynamics within the matrimonial relationship, the employment status of the spouse, women's dependency on their husbands and/or in-laws, socioeconomic conditions, and cases of marital unfaithfulness. More stringent enactment of the existing laws against offenders, the enhancement of educational and professional

opportunities for women, and the improvement of their overall socio-economic status are essential measures for addressing this societal affliction.

. Predominantly, the marriages are arranged and a dowry request of some kind is typically articulated before the marriage, with half of these marriages lasting no more than two years. The majority of dowry-related deaths exhibit homicidal characteristics, followed by cases of suicides, with burn injuries emerging as the most prevalent cause of fatality, followed by stab wounds, firearm wounds, and instances of hanging. A significant portion of these incidents occurred either at the residence of the in-laws or the husband's domicile, with the in-laws and the husband themselves being identified as the primary perpetrators in most scenarios, wherein they either directly caused the death or coerced the victim into taking her own life, typically triggered by demands for dowry and maltreatment by the in-laws. A notable proportion of fatalities transpired during medical treatment in healthcare institutions, followed by deaths at the scene of the crime, with most occurrences transpiring during the night time, followed by the morning hours. The findings underscore the pressing need for more concerted efforts by various stakeholders to eliminate this heinous menace from Indian society.

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