

Dowry as a factor of violence in Marriage: A study of Women seeking help in Family Counseling Centers in Chandigarh**

By

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Abstract

A review of cases reported at the Family Counseling Centers (FCCs) in Chandigarh shows that dowry is a significant factor for marital discord. 36.2% of the married women who approached the FCCs complained of dowry-related violence. This violence manifested itself in physical, emotional and economic forms. Most women turned to their parental families for help against this violence (29.3%), and only 12.1% approached the police and even fewer, 10.3%, approached NGOs. In an overwhelming majority of cases (44.8%), the parents submitted to the dowry demand; only 12.1% filed a complaint with the police and just over 15% sought separation or divorce. Clearly, dowry is a deep-rooted social evil, whose victims are either reluctant or unable to get redress from the law enforcement agencies meant to support them or the NGOs.

Keywords : Dowry, Marriage, Violence in marriage, Family Counseling Centers, Help seeking by Women.

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Introduction

Dowry refers to “the property, money, ornaments or any other form of wealth which a man or his family receives from his wife or her family at the time of marriage .Dowry is both a practice and a problem with Indian marriage (Haveripeth, 2013)”. The practice of giving dowry was meant to assist a newly-wed couple to start their life together with ease; however, now it has become a commercial transaction in which monetary considerations receive priority over the personal merits of the bride.

Dowry system has given rise to many socio-economic problems with very serious consequences. Numerous incidents of bride burning, harassment and physical torture of newly-wed women and various kinds of pressure tactics being adopted by the husbands/in-laws pressurizing for more dowry have compelled the social reformers and the intelligentsia to give serious thoughts to various aspects associated with the institution of dowry (Sachdeva, 1998). Govt. of India enacted “Dowry Prohibition Act” in 1961, which was further amended in 1985 to control this menace. In spite of this Act, the “give and take” phenomenon of dowry is practiced widely throughout India, irrespective of caste and class (Ghansham, 2002). In many cases, when dowry amount is not considered sufficient, the bride is often harassed, abused and tortured (Singh, 2005). Dowry related violence and bride burning (dowry-death) are only peculiar to our country and beside husband, his kin also join together in persecuting the bride as the dowry and related customs provide a good excuse to them for humiliating, insulting and even beating up of woman (Haveripeth, 2013). The bride is helpless in her new home and physically so powerless that she cannot retaliate against the coercive tactics or actions of other; not many women have the guts to divorce their husbands on the ground of frequent mental or physical torture since they have nothing to fall back upon in a traditionally and poorly developed country like India (Singh, 2005).

Recent studies suggest a link between domestic violence and dowry demands. Wife abuse has been found to be higher when a husband and/or his family believes dowry payments are inadequate (Banerjee, 1999; Bloch and Rao 2002), Suran et al (2004) in a study “Does Dowry Improve life for Brides” found that in Bangladesh married females who paid dowry at marriage

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“have a higher likelihood of reporting domestic violence compared to those who did not; in fact, paying no dowry is just as protective, if not more so, in terms of preventing abuse as the largest dowry payments”.

Persons participating in dowry related violence are mostly mother-in-law and siblings of the husband and Gautam & Trivedi found that in a majority of cases the husband and the mother-in-law of the victim played a leading role in planning & execution of violence against the bride. These crimes appear to be a product of socially structured expectations about dowry giving the inferior status of women and consequently the low bargaining power of the women and her parents; the growing urban consumerism among lower and middle class sections of the society as well as the lack of effective legal sanctions against such crimes (Haveripeth, 2013).

Dowry related violence has been regarded as a universal phenomenon, cutting across all sorts of boundaries and is on continuous increase in India, it may be taken as a matter of grave concern that dowry death is one of the typical problems of Indian Society (Singh, 2005)

In this context, it is necessary to understand the extent of dowry related violence and the resultant efforts made by the sufferers to stop, control or overcome. The present study attempts to examine the role of dowry demands as a factor of marital discord as reported by women seeking help at FCCs situated at Chandigarh.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the present study was to understand the role of dowry demands in marital discord resulting in domestic violence as reported by women who sought help from FCCs situated in the city of Chandigarh. The study sought to analyze the demographic characteristics of the women included in the study and to learn about the prevalence of “give & take” of dowry and the role it played in marital problems faced by these women including domestic violence.

Sample

The sample of the present study comprised of the women who complained of domestic violence due to dowry demand while seeking help from

FCCs located in the city of Chandigarh, during the period April 2009 to March 2010. There are 5 F.C.C.s in the U.T. of Chandigarh. 169 women who visited these FCCs complained of domestic violence and out of them 58 reported dowry related violence.

Method

All the 58 women who comprised the sample of the present study were personally contacted and administered a pre-designed, structural interview schedule. The subjects were guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

Definition of dowry related violence

The following definition of dowry related violence was adopted for the present study “any act of violence or harassment associated with the giving or receiving of dowry at any time before, during or after the marriage”.

Results

The results of the study show that out of a total of 315 women who approached FCCs during the period under study, 160 were married and 58 i.e. 36.2% complained of dowry related violence. Out of these 58 women, 41.4% were between the age group of 21 - 30 years, 31.1%, between 16-20 years, 20.6%, between 31-44 years of age and 6.90% were more than 41 years of age (Figure-I). 65.5% of the sample belonged to Hindu religion, 29.5% belonged to Sikh, 5.1% to Christian and 3.5% belonged to the Muslim religion (Figure-II). A majority of these women had an arranged marriage 58.6%, while 21.1% had a love marriage and 17.3% had love-cum-arranged marriage. The education level of these women is shown in Figure III. A majority of them were living in joint family (30) while 21 were living in nuclear and 7 in extended joint family (Figure-IV). The occupation of these women and their husbands are shown in diagram 1.

The monthly income of the sample is shown in diagram 2. A majority of these women were from a lower income group i.e. less than Rs.10,000/- per month.

The details of dowry related demands are shown in Table 1. A look at Table 1 (A) shows that in majority of the cases (34.6%) the dowry demands were made before/soon after the marriage, in 31.1% cases, between the first 12 months of the marriage, in 18.9% of the cases between 13-24 months of the marriage, in 15.5% cases after a period of 24 months of marriage.

Table 1 (B) shows the persons by whom dowry demand was made. In 48.3% cases it was husband, followed by mother-in-law (20.7%), father-in-law (12.1%) and all of them in 18.9% of the cases. Regarding the reasons of asking dowry/monetary help given by the respondents are shown in table 1 (C'. The main reason was to meet the expenses of education of husband or his sister, or brother (22.4%). The next reason was purchase of motor vehicle or house-hold gadgets (20.7%). The next reason was medical treatment (17.2%), of husband or his family members, marriage of sister-in-law/brother-in-law (13.8%), business expansion (10.3%), the right in parents' property (8.6%), air-fare for going abroad of husband and un-employment of husband (3.5%) each.

Table 1 (D' shows the types of violence suffered by these women. 31% reported physical violence, 27.6% psychological/emotional, 20.7% economic, 17.3% verbal and 3.4% reported more than one mode of violence against them.

The respondents were further asked about the help sought by them on experiencing dowry related violence. 29.3% sought help from parents, 20.7% from relatives, 27.6% from neighbours/village Sarpanch/elders of community, 12.1% from police and 10.3% sought help from NGOs Table 1 (E". The reaction of the parents of the respondents to dowry related violence is shown in Table 1 (F). 44.8% submitted to dowry demands, 27.6% sought help of relatives/village Sarpanch, 12.1% reported the matter to the police and 10.4% filed divorce petitions while 5.1% sought legal separation.

Figures I-IV showing age, religion, education and type of material family of subjects.

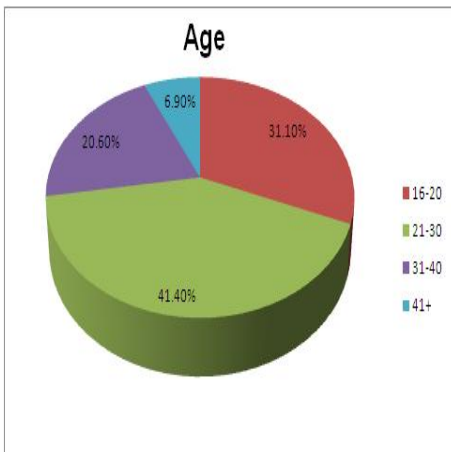


Figure I

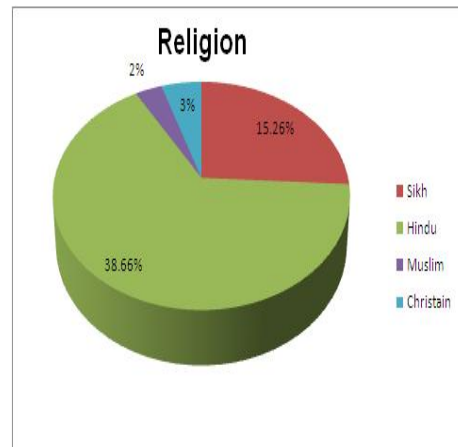


Figure II

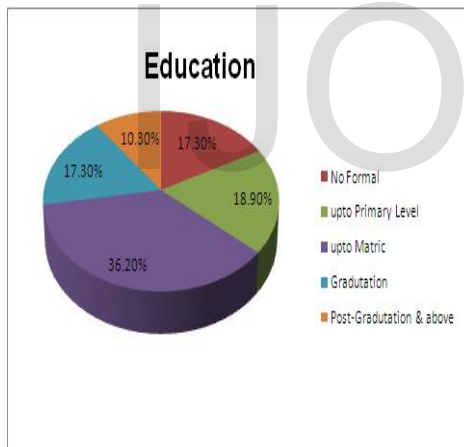


Figure III

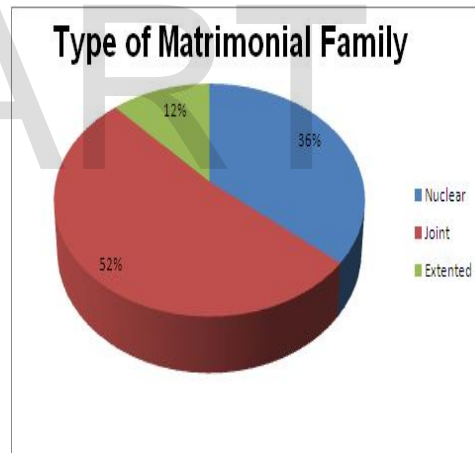


Figure IV

Diagrams I-II shows data as per occupation and monthly income

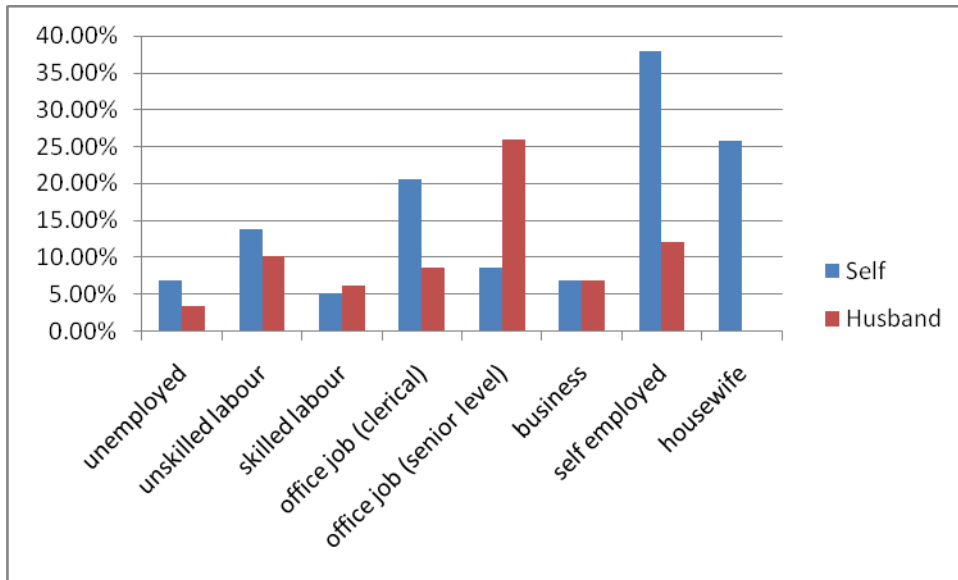


Diagram-I shows distribution of sample as per their occupation

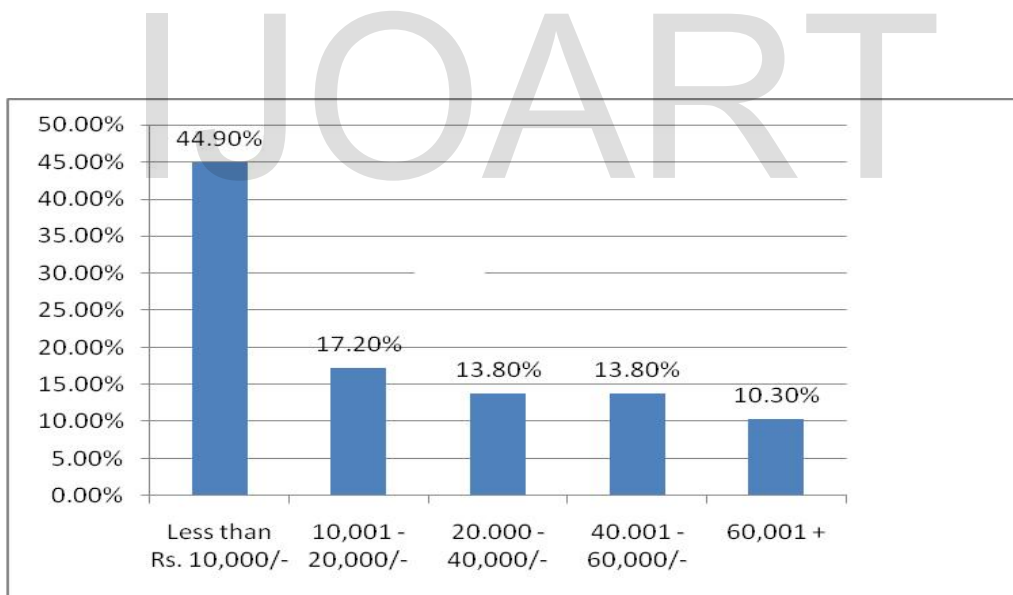


Diagram –II shows distribution of sample as per their monthly income

Table-1
Table showing the data regarding dowry demands
N=58 (100%)

A. When dowry demands were made		D. Type of dowry related violence	
	N %		N %
Before/soon after the marriage	20 (34.6%)	Physical violence	18 (31.0%)
Between 1 st to 12 months	18 (31.1%)	Psychological/emotional	16 (27.6%)
Between 12 th to 24 months	11 (18.9%)	Economic verbal	12 (20.7%)
After 24 months	9 (15.5%)	More than one	10 (17.3%)
			2 (3.4%)
B. By whom demand is made		E. Help sought for dowry related violence	
	N %		N %
Husband	28(48.3%)	Parents	17 (29.3%)
Mother-in-law	12(20.7%)	Relatives	12 (20.7%)
Father-in-law	7(12.1%)	Neighbors/village respond/elder of community	16 (27.6%)
All	11(18.9%)	Police	7 (12.1%)
		NGO's	6 (10.3%)
C. Reasons of asking dowry/monetary help		F. Reaction of parents to dowry related violence	
	N %		N %
Unemployment	2(3.5%)	Submitted to dowry demands	26 (44.8%)
Business Expansion	6(10.3%)	Sought police case	7 (12.1%)
Marriage of sister/brother-in-law	8(13.8%)	Help of relatives/community elders/village sarpanch	16 (27.6%)
Education expenses of husband	13(22.4%)	Legal separation	3 (5.1%)
Medical treatment	10(17.2%)	Filled divorce petition	6 (10.4%)
Purchase of M. Vehicles	12(20.7%)		
Air fare for going abroad	2(3.5%)		
Right in parent property	5(8.6%)		

Discussion of Results

Dowry is a transfer of property from bride's family to that of the bridegroom, at the time of marriage (Negi, 1997). The practice of giving material gifts and cash to bridegroom and his kin continues even after marriage (Paul, 1993). In its new form, dowry has come to include cash, jewellery, household items, appliances and vehicles and it is often open-ended in nature (Puri, 1999, Van Willigen & Channa, 1991).

The results of the present study show that this demand for dowry is present in all religions, in all types of marriage (Love /Arranged/Love-cum-arranged) and in all types of families (nuclear, joint or joint extended). People of all economic status and educational background have demanded dowry and indulged in domestic violence when this demand has not been fulfilled. According to Gangrade and Chander (1991), "the dowry system as it is practiced today, has become an instrument of oppression and torture for the bride and her parents". The results of the present study are in line with these findings. 36.2% of women reporting domestic violence gave dowry demands as the primary cause of violence against them. They have faced all kinds of violence i.e. physical, psychological/emotional, economic and verbal.

The persons who indulged in this domestic violence against them were husband followed by mother-in-law, father-in-law and all of them. According to Kumar (1993) "the control of women and the potential for violence are especially great when a woman leaves her natal home to become part of her husband's family. On moving in with-in-laws, the status of the daughter-in-law is often very low compared with the men and even any older women in the household. If there are dowry related problems, it is at this stage that the likelihood of fatal violence is elevated". The abuse begins when the husband and/or in-laws harass the wife for more money and more goods from her family (Kelkar, 1992).

The reasons for making monetary demands in the shape of dowry as given by the respondents were education expenses for husband or his brother/sister's education, followed by to purchase of motor vehicle (motor cycle/car) or other household items like refrigerator/air conditioner, T.V. etc. "Exposure to media has resulted in an increasing trend towards consumerism;

people cannot afford the luxuries that are thrust upon them through advertisements targeted at the urban population and they see dowry as an avenue to fulfill their otherwise impossible dreams, (Negi, 1997). Sometimes, the dowry provided by the parents of the bride is seen insufficient and demands for supplement items continue long after the couple is married (Narsimhan, 1994). Another feeling among mothers-in-law is that when she herself brought dowry from her house at the time of her marriage, why shouldn't she take dowry for her son (Saravanan, 2002). This may be the reason of so many mothers-in-law resorting to violence on their daughters-in-law and they do not feel shy of indulging in it.

Once married, women leave their natal home and begin their new life as part of their husband's family (Puri, 1999). "This residential pattern is another factor that contributes to the violence and dowry murders because often the woman's kin do not reside close to her, as a result, the abused woman cannot leave her marital home and retreat to the safety of her natal home. Even if she does manage to return to her parents' home, her husband or his family often comes to retrieve her, claiming the violence will stop, which usually does not" (Johnson and Johnson, 2001).

In the present study, 29.3% of women facing domestic violence reported about this abuse to their parents and another 20.7% to their relatives. 27.6% sought help from elders of community/Sarpanch or neighbours. Only 12.1% went for police help. Presently in India, laws exist that prohibit dowry and dowry murder, but these laws are either ignored, unknown by law enforcement or not enforced by some higher officials (Gangrade & Chander, 1991). Laws that banned the practice of dowry were passed in 1961 but were not effective, so they were further amended in 1984 and 1986 making dowry practice "punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than five years; and with fine which shall not be less than fifteen thousand rupees or the amount of such dowry whichever is more". Despite of these changes, the laws are ineffective due to the continuous support and expectation among the population for dowry (Puri, 1999). The findings that a majority of parents (44.8%) submitted to the dowry demands may be explained in the light of above given reasons.

It can be safely concluded that the laws relating to dowry prohibition have failed to curb the giving and taking of dowry and reduce violence against brides. One primary reason may be the provisions in the Act that allows gifts to be given at the time of wedding (Basu, 2001; Diwan and Diwan, 1995), thus providing a loophole whereby parties to a marriage can claim that transfers are gifts, not dowry (Shenk, 2007). Moreover, since both giving and taking of dowry are illegal, the family of a bride who is being harassed or abused over insufficient dowry, will implicate themselves by complaining (Basu, 2001). People rarely adhere to the legal provisions of making lists of gifts exchanged and thus may not have any basis for reclaiming property when faced with the situation.

It can be added that dowry is a social custom and it is very difficult to change customs all of a sudden; practicing customs generate and strengthen solidarity and cohesiveness among people; many people give and take dowry only because their parents and forefathers had been practicing it. Till the time the younger generation musters courage to stop this practice and girls resist social pressure to take it, people will stick to this custom.

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