

Women's rights and gender equality Global development

'Death by dowry' claim by bereaved family in India

Reported suicide is alleged to be part of alarming trend that sees 20 women die every day as a result of harassment over a dowry - either murdered, or compelled to take their own lives



▲ A wedding mural on a wall in Udaipur. Dowry payments were criminalised in India in 1961, yet the conviction rate is low and the custom continues. Photograph: Duncan Vere Green/Alamy

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Before leaving Delhi for a work trip earlier this year, a man paid a visit to his local police station. He was so afraid his daughter's life was in danger that he wrote a letter, which he left with the police. In it, he accused his son-in-law and his relatives of abusing and tormenting her over their demands for dowry.

If anything happens, he wrote, then this family are responsible.

Just weeks later, his daughter is reported to have killed herself. Shortly before, she had texted a family member saying: "Because of him, my life is going to go."

Police believe it to be suicide, although her family claim that she was murdered. They assert she was the victim of continuous beatings. "He kept demanding money from her. This is not a suicide. It's murder over dowry," says her father.

Police say the husband told them that the woman texted him threatening to kill herself minutes before she jumped to her death.

Her death could prove to be another of India's dowry

death statistics. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, [7,634 women died in 2015](#) - 20 every day - due to dowry harassment. They were either murdered or felt compelled to take their own lives.

These were women whose parents had already given a usually hefty dowry at the time of the arranged marriage, but the husband wanted more - cash, land, property, a car, a scooter, a flatscreen TV or an iPhone.

Friends say the dead woman was financially and socially independent, from an affluent upper middle class family. The couple shared similar backgrounds and the marriage was not a traditional arranged one.

But even love marriages are not immune to the scourge of dowry demands, says Subhashini Ali, president of the All [India](#) Democratic Women's Association.

"The husband's parents often taunt him with lurid details of what parents of prospective 'arranged' brides were offering. When the husband himself is a drinker and abuser then the mix can be deadly," says Ali.

One man who knows how hard it is to change the Indian dowry custom is Satya Naresh, a web entrepreneur in Hyderabad. In 2006, he set up India's first matrimonial site for [dowry-free marriages](#). The words on the homepage say: "I want just u ... I don't want dowry."

In 12 years, only 5,399 men have registered. The brutal reality, as Naresh admits, is that hardly any men are prepared to forego the prospect of hard cash. "It's way harder than I thought it would be to fight dowry," he says. "It's just greed. No matter what nice things people say in public, they all want the money. Even if a bridegroom doesn't want a dowry, his parents want it and he can't defy them."

The reasons dowry and post-marriage dowry demands have persisted, despite a [1961 law](#) making them a crime punishable with a minimum five-year jail sentence, are complex.

These are rooted in Indian culture and include arranged marriages, the subordinate status of women, parents' fears that no one will marry their daughter without a dowry, and the centrality of the institution of marriage, which makes it difficult for parents to even contemplate their daughters remaining single.

Experts say a more consumerist and aspirational society has simply fuelled the traditional drivers for dowries. And the conviction rate is low. The NCRB's figures show that police nationwide have charged around 93% of the accused in dowry deaths. Yet only about 34% result in convictions.

Last year research by the Hindustan Times newspaper found there had been 15 dowry deaths in the Indian capital alone over the previous five years but not a single conviction.

Women's rights groups blame shoddy police investigations, and out-of-court settlements. Often, the woman's family are reluctant to take on the burden (and expense) of a case that might go on for 20 years because of the [27 million pending cases](#) of all kinds clogging the legal system.

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