



Explaining Dowry Violence in India: Patriarchy, Structural Inequality and Legal Failure

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Abstrak

Dalam keluarga, norma-norma patriarki menempatkan perempuan dalam posisi yang tidak setara. Kondisi ini meningkatkan tekanan terhadap kekerasan dalam rumah tangga dan pengendalian atas perempuan, yang menempatkan mereka pada risiko kematian. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi faktor struktural yang membentuk praktik mahar di India serta dampaknya terhadap kekerasan berbasis gender dalam institusi pernikahan. Adapun penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode deskriptif dan perspektif feminisme radikal sebagai kerangka analisis utama. Perspektif ini memandang pernikahan sebagai institusi patriarkal di mana laki-laki berkedudukan dominan, sementara perempuan hidup di bawah kontrol sosial, ekonomi, dan budaya. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui tinjauan pustaka atas kajian akademis, data kejahatan, dokumen kebijakan, dan laporan kekerasan terhadap perempuan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga temuan utama dengan menawarkan pembaruan dengan mengintegrasikan ketiganya dalam perspektif feminisme radikal. Pertama, norma-norma patriarki membentuk fondasi ideologis yang merendahkan nilai perempuan dan melegitimasi subordinasi mereka, sehingga mahar berkembang menjadi mekanisme kontrol sosial yang dilegitimasi secara budaya. Kedua, determinan sosio ekonomi dan budaya termasuk sistem kasta, keterbatasan akses pendidikan, dan ketergantungan ekonomi perempuan merupakan produk patriarki sebagai kontrol sosial. Ketiga, kegagalan institusional dalam penegakan hukum, yang tercermin dari lemahnya implementasi Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 dan Pasal 304B/498A IPC, memungkinkan pelaku terhindar dari pertanggungjawaban dan praktik kekerasan terus berulang.

Kata kunci: Tradisi Mahar, Kekerasan Berbasis Gender, India, Patriarki

Abstract

Within the family, patriarchal norms place women in an unequal position. This situation exacerbates domestic violence and control over women, putting them at risk of death. This study aims to identify the structural factors that shape dowry practices in India and their impact on gender-based violence within the institution of marriage. This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive methods and a radical feminist perspective as the primary analytical framework. This perspective views marriage as a patriarchal institution where men hold dominant positions, while women live under social, economic, and cultural control. Data collection was conducted through a literature review of academic studies, crime data, policy documents, and reports on violence against women. The research results reveal three main findings, offering an updated analysis by integrating all three within the framework of radical feminism. First, patriarchal norms form an ideological foundation that devalues women and legitimizes their subordination, thereby allowing the dowry to evolve into a culturally legitimized mechanism of social control. Second, socio-economic and cultural determinants—including the caste system, limited access to education, and women's economic dependence—are products of patriarchy as a form of social control. Third, institutional



failures in law enforcement—as evidenced by the weak implementation of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 and Sections 304B and 498A of the Indian Penal Code—allow perpetrators to evade accountability and enable the cycle of violence to continue.

Keywords: Dowry Tradition, Gender-Based Violence, India, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Dowry-related violence is one of the most extreme and persistent forms of gender-based violence in South Asia, particularly in India. This phenomenon refers to cases of violence, coercion, and abuse—often resulting in murder or suicide—experienced by newlywed women due to unmet demands for a dowry or bride price. Originally, the dowry served as a form of inheritance for women. However, over time, it has transformed into a transactional economic demand, often accompanied by ever-increasing material expectations. In societies with strong patriarchal norms, a woman's social worth is frequently measured by her family's ability to meet these demands. When these expectations are not met, women become vulnerable to pressure, coercion, violence, and even death.

This situation is exacerbated by gender inequality, which results in limited economic independence for women, as well as social stigmas that view divorce or returning to one's parents' home as a shameful choice. In addition to patriarchy, the caste system also plays a role in perpetuating the practice of dowry deaths in India. The caste system not only regulates social hierarchy but also shapes standards of honor, status, and social mobility that are closely related to marriage practices. In many communities, marriage is a strategic means of maintaining or improving caste position, so that dowries are treated as symbols of social status legitimacy. The pressure to meet dowry demands tends to be stronger among certain caste groups seeking to raise their social prestige.

Daughters are often seen as an economic burden. Conversely, marriage is constructed as the pinnacle of family honor and a woman's dignity. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms play a central role in shaping these dynamics (Social Work Institute, 2024). Although India has specific legal regulations to prohibit this practice through the Prohibition of Dowry Act of 1961, as well as specific provisions in the Indian Penal Code via Section 304B on death due to dowry and Section 498A on domestic violence, the number of cases and victims remains high.

Table 1.
Cases of Dowry Deaths (IPC Crime)

Year	Cases
2020	6.966
2021	6.753
2022	6.450

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2022

Based on data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), approximately 6,000 women are victims each year. The data indicate that this issue is not merely a criminal aspect but is also closely linked to social, cultural, and economic structures (NCRB, 2022). Along with modernization, an increase in social status is often associated with greater wealth transferred during marriage. This phenomenon shows that structural changes do not necessarily eliminate long-entrenched discriminatory practices. The data indicate that women are victimized every year. This issue is not merely a criminal matter but is also closely linked to social, cultural, and economic structures (NCRB, 2022).

Furthermore, although a regulatory framework has been established, law enforcement still faces various obstacles, such as gender-insensitive investigative processes, the reluctance of many victims to report due to pressure from family and society, and the tendency of authorities to



view such cases as private domestic matters. Many cases end without clear punishment or with only light sentences, thus failing to deter perpetrators. This structure creates conditions that allow violence to recur repeatedly without real consequences for the perpetrators.

Kate Millett, in "Sexual Politics" (1970), notes that the family is regarded as the "key institution of patriarchy" because it reproduces hierarchical gender relations and instills women's subordinate status from an early age. From this perspective, Millett argues that patriarchy persists not only because women are directly coerced but also because patriarchal values are made to appear normal and accepted by society. Furthermore, Millett defines patriarchy as a political institution in which men dominate women through ideological, economic, and sexual structures which can help explain the dowry-related violence in India, where marriage practices often reinforce women's economic dependence, social subordination, and vulnerability to violence.

Therefore, this article departs from the question of how the interaction between patriarchy, socio-economic structures, and the weakness of legal institutions shapes and perpetuates gender-based violence in the practice of dowry in India through a radical feminist perspective. The authors argue that if the laws that apply within the social structure are still gender biased, this will result in weak implementation and difficulty in taking the side of victims. Thus, patriarchal values and gender inequality will remain the basis of social and institutional relations.

This study focuses on how the interaction between patriarchy, socio-economic structures, and the weakness of legal institutions shapes and perpetuates gender-based violence in the practice of dowry in India through a radical feminist perspective. In general, this study uses a categorical method to review previous literature, which is divided into (1) dowry as a product of patriarchy and gender-based structural violence and (2) socio-economic inequality and institutional failure as the causes of the dowry practice.

The first group of writings places the practice of dowry as a product of the patriarchal system and gender-based structural violence. Rajinder Singh's (2024) research shows that the transformation of dowry from a voluntary tradition to a mandatory economic requirement cannot be separated from the patriarchal structure of the hypergamous caste system and the construction of women's social status in marriage. This practice contributes directly to domestic violence, abuse, suicide, and dowry-related murders, acknowledging that violence is systemic and not individual. A similar perspective is developed by [Parul Sinha](#), [Uma Gupta](#), [Jyotsna Singh](#), and [Anand Srivastava](#) (2017) who explain dowry as a form of structural violence, as conceptualized by Johan Galtung. In this literature, patriarchy is understood as the root of gender inequality that legitimizes control over women's bodies, rights to life, and choices, including in the context of marriage and dowry demands. Sadia Gondal (2015) also asserts that the transformation of dowry into material traction has made women the object that determines the social status of the family, especially the husband's family, thereby increasing their vulnerability to extreme violence, particularly in the first seven years of marriage.

The second group of literature focuses on analyzing socio-economic inequality and institutional failure in maintaining the dowry practice. In their research, Mitchell and Soni (2021) explain that greater economic development is associated with higher dowry-related deaths, especially in underdeveloped regions. This is due to the weak capacity of local institutions to control social behavior and protect vulnerable groups. This finding confirms that economic growth without strengthening legal and social institutions creates incentives for the exploitation of women. This institutional perspective is also reinforced by writings that emphasize that, despite the existence of legal frameworks such as the Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 and related criminal provisions, dowry practices persist due to weak law enforcement, low reporting rates, and limited access to information in poor and rural communities. Meanwhile, Gutierrez (2025) highlights that dowry practices exacerbate household economic vulnerability by increasing debt, selling productive assets, and reducing investment in children's education and health. Khushboo Zeb (2023) situates dowry as a structural problem produced by economic inequality and public policy failures, rather than merely a cultural norm. This literature positions dowry as a structural problem



produced by economic inequality and public policy failures, not merely a result of cultural norms.

Despite extensive scholarship on dowry violence in India, existing studies tend to examine patriarchy, socio-economic inequality, or legal failure in isolation. There remains a lack of research that explains dowry deaths as the outcome of interlocking structural forces, where patriarchal norms, caste-based economic hierarchies, and weak law enforcement mutually reinforce one another. Moreover, radical feminism has rarely been employed as a primary analytical framework to interrogate marriage and legal institutions as political sites that normalize and sustain dowry-related violence.

To provide novelty, the research gap between this study and previous research lies in the fact that this study focuses on three main factors influencing the persistence of dowry-related marriage and dowry-related violence. This study also employs a radical feminist perspective, which has not yet been widely used to analyze issues rooted in patriarchy, as in this case. This study also offers a new perspective in which the factors of patriarchy, socioeconomic inequality, and institutional failure mutually reinforce one another, thereby perpetuating this practice and normalizing male dominance over women.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive method, relying on secondary data collected from literature such as books, journals, reports, articles, official documents, and newspapers relevant to the phenomenon under study (Sugiyono, 2013). The analysis follows Siyoto and Sodik's three-stage process: sorting, presenting, and drawing conclusions or justifications from the data (Siyoto & M. Ali Sodik, 2015). Written materials, especially those from mass media, are organized into patterns and themes to provide an objective, detailed overview. The period analyzed is 2018–2022, selected because of the rise in dowry-related cases starting in 2018 and the worsening economic and social conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also employs the radical feminist perspective by Kate Millet (1970) to analyze how the dowry system is rooted in a patriarchal system that tends to eternalize male dominance over women, thereby normalizing inequality and domestic violence.

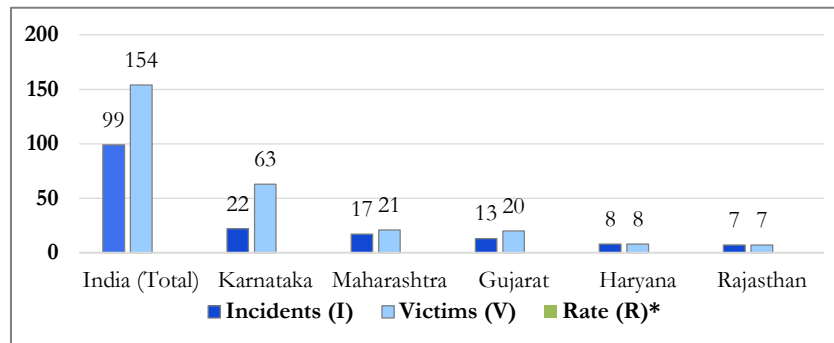
RESULT AND FINDINGS

A. Patriarchal Norms

Essentially, dowry-related deaths in India are a complex issue and constitute a form of gender-based violence that reflects the prevalence of patriarchal norms within the domestic sphere. The dowry tradition plays a significant role in Indian marriages, as it has become a cultural expectation that the dowry must be provided exactly as requested (Dwitama, 2023). In this context, men exploit women because the dowry process is considered essential for marriage. Originally, the dowry in India was a form of parental support for their daughter, particularly regarding marriage; however, due to a lack of education and economic dependence, women began to be viewed as a burden. Due to this perception, the dowry is then viewed as a means of validation and an obligation for women; if they are unable to provide a dowry, it can trigger violence from the husband and the groom's family (Varma, 2014).

The cruelty of the dowry tradition influences dowry demands, control over women's bodies, and women's behavior, as well as the normalization of violence—including domestic violence—and even murder and suicide (Oktaviani, 2018). One example of this influence, such as domestic violence, gives rise to cruel behavior, including physical violence, psychological impact, sexual violence, and economic threats (Sabri et al., 2022). The consequences of such violence are linked to patriarchal norms and have a brutal impact on women. The reason is that the dowry tradition serves as a trigger for murder or suicide, leading to these outcomes and becoming a cause of ongoing violence perpetrated by men, whether by the husband himself or his family.

Graphic 1.
Report on Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2022)



Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2022

From the data above, the number of cases recorded under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2022 was much lower. Nationally, only 99 cases involving 154 victims were reported, with an incidence rate of almost zero (NCRB, 2022). This low number cannot be interpreted as a lack of domestic violence, but rather indicates structural underreporting. Domestic violence is often resolved through non-criminal mechanisms such as mediation, protection orders, or civil proceedings, so it is not fully reflected in official crime statistics. Factors such as social stigma, the economic dependence of victims, and limited access to the legal system also contribute to the low number of cases reported under the PWDV Act.

The existence of the dowry practice itself is not merely a financial issue, but also a structural mechanism that positions men as the dominant party in marriage, thereby perpetuating the patriarchal system. Punishments for perpetrators in cases involving a woman's death are classified as lenient due to the low severity of the penalties. Only about one in six cases can be brought to court due to weak evidence resulting from pressure from the husband's side, leading to limited and inconsistent testimony and a slow trial process. Prison sentences for perpetrators are considered severe, with a minimum of seven years, which can be extended to life imprisonment. However, enforcement often fails to protect women, so deaths resulting from dowry traditions will continue to recur and patriarchal norms will persist (Bhattar, 2025). Of the three main factors identified, patriarchal norms emerge as the most significant root cause because they form the basis for unequal relationships between men and women. This phenomenon then becomes a social mechanism that reinforces these power dynamics, in which a woman's family is required to hand over goods, money, or assets as compensation for the "economic burden" deemed to be inherent to women. This normalization not only turns women into objects of exchange but also makes violence against them—including murder—socially normalized (Srinivasan & Lee, 2004). Marriage in India is viewed as a patriarchal institution because men are considered dominant or in control both within the family and in society.

Women are seen as the weaker party and must submit to their perceived lower social status—including caste and early marriage—which are considered risk factors for dowry-related violence (Chander et al., 2020). The caste system, which serves as a guiding principle in India, also fuels the emergence of dowry traditions and reinforces patriarchy. Particularly driven by lifestyle changes aimed at elevating a family's caste status, women in India are pressured to marry men of a higher caste. This also influences societal attitudes, leading to the expectation that women should provide a dowry, which in turn fuels the rise of dowry-related deaths. As long as this tradition persists, the patriarchal system will continue to prevail (Oktaviani, 2018).

The brutality of the dowry system fuels dowry demands, control over women's bodies, and restrictions on women's behavior, as well as the normalization of violence—including domestic abuse, murder, and suicide. For instance, domestic abuse manifests as physical assaults,



psychological trauma, sexual coercion, and economic deprivation. The consequences of such violence are sustained by patriarchal norms and cause severe harm to women. The dowry system acts as a catalyst for murder and suicide, perpetuating cycles of violence carried out by husbands or their families.

In this context, patriarchy forms the underlying structure within which dowry deaths are perpetuated. Patriarchy establishes men as dominant and women as subordinate, within both political and social institutions such as marriage. This hierarchy reduces women's social value to their families' ability to fulfill dowry demands. Treating women instrumentally is not accidental; it is a deliberate feature of a social order that uses marriage to reinforce gender inequalities. The dowry has shifted beyond a culturally sanctioned practice. The expectation that the bride's family must transfer substantial wealth to the groom's family reflects and reinforces the notion that women are economic burdens—liabilities requiring compensation—rather than autonomous individuals of equal standing (Srinivasan & Lee, 2004).

Radical feminist analysis reveals that the domestic sphere operates as an enclosed arena where patriarchal dominance is enacted with little accountability. The theory argues that marriage, far from being merely a neutral social contract, operates as a patriarchal institution that perpetuates male authority over women's bodies, sexuality, and economic value. Deaths resulting from dowry demands, within this framework, are not merely anomalies but the most extreme manifestation of a system that treats women as objects of exchange. The annual figure, which has remained stagnant at around 6,000 dowry-related deaths in India, reflects the persistence of a structural condition that has not yet been dismantled, either culturally or legally.

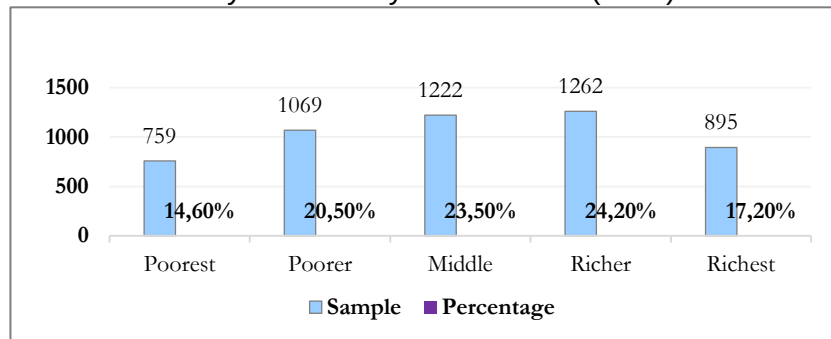
B. Socioeconomic and Cultural Determinants

The practice of dowry in India cannot be understood merely as a tradition, but as a problem rooted in the binding social, economic, and patriarchal cultural structures. Socio-economic factors, including the caste system, education and economic inequality, social stigma attached to marital status, and hierarchy in marriage, play an important role in perpetuating the practice of dowry to this day. The caste system is one of the most significant factors in the practice of dowries because caste also reflects the economic status of the bride's family, which encourages people to seek partners or arrange marriages with someone from the same or a higher caste (Anderson, 2001).

This is often referred to as the "marriage market," which refers to how marriage functions as a tool for social and economic competition, in which brides, grooms, and their families choose partners based on caste, wealth, and gender roles. In the context of marriage based on a dowry, it is not merely a union between two individuals but also the establishment of social hierarchy and economic status. The bride's family seeks a suitable groom—a man with a higher education, a high income, land ownership, and urban residency—and these characteristics increase the groom's value in the marriage market. This mindset ultimately forces women to elevate their own status—whether through education or employment—so that they can, out of necessity, accumulate assets to provide to the groom's family (Srinivasan S. , 2004).

This process is closely linked to hypergamy, where families marry off their daughters to grooms of equal or higher social status in order to be viewed more highly. Over time, marriage in India has become a commercialized market where the dowry given is not limited to money but can also include vehicles, homes, or lavish wedding celebrations (Srinivasan S. , 2004). Social pressure is also a factor driving the continuation of this practice today, as many people believe that the larger the dowry, the better their family's reputation and standing. In this way, the marriage market reinforces caste hierarchy, consumerism, and patriarchy, while simultaneously treating women as economic responsibilities whose marriages require substantial financial investment (Dixit & Yadav, 2026).

Graphic 2.
Dowry Demand By Wealth Index (2021)



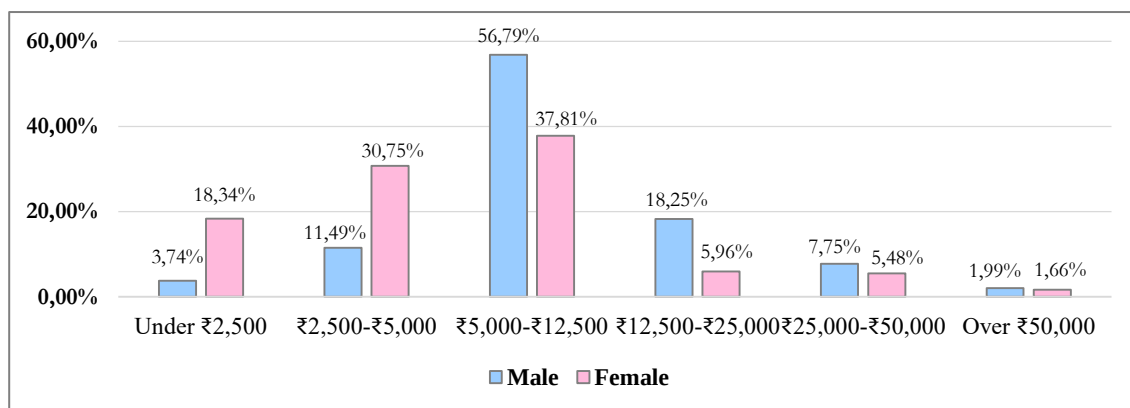
Source: Socio-demographic Profile of Married Adolescents (15–19years)

The data above illustrate the amount of dowry demanded by family economic status. In general, in the dowry tradition, the male party has the authority to accept a bride based on their economic status. The data shows that brides from wealthy families have a higher percentage (41.70%) compared to brides from middle-income (23.50%) and low-income (35.10%) families in terms of dowry demands, indicating that the male party tends to accept brides from wealthy families to obtain greater benefits (Srivastava et al., 2021). Brides who are unable or unwilling to pay the dowry will only get a low-quality groom.

Meanwhile, the groom has greater authority increase their prices based on social status, with the view that the payment of dowry also serves as compensation from the groom's family for raising and financing the groom's life before marriage (Srivastava et al., 2021). This dowry system has become a means for grooms to quickly and in large amounts acquire wealth. Not only that, if the bride's family is unable to pay the dowry demanded by the groom's family, the bride will experience violence, which is generally carried out not only by the groom but also by his family and relatives (Gupta, 2024). Additionally, this practice leads to dowry debt, in which the bride's family must take out loans to pay the high dowry amount (Newiak et al., 2024).

Economic inequality is also a major factor influencing the development of dowry practices. Patriarchy limits women's economic access by restricting their educational opportunities, employment prospects, and access to financial resources. In a patriarchal system, men are prioritized in gaining access to education, employment, and more stable economic positions, whereas women are rarely prioritized for such access. This results in women having lower economic mobility and capabilities, as well as economic dependence on their families or husbands (Dar & Rather, 2017).

Graphic 3.
Gender Pay Gap in India (2019-2020)



Source: Gender Wage Gap in India: An analysis of PLFS 2019-20 Data



The data above shows the gender income gap in India in 2019-2020, with most women earning lower incomes than men. According to the data, women are more prevalent in jobs with incomes of ₹5,000 or less, equivalent to Rp. 932,000, while men are more prevalent in jobs with higher incomes, namely ₹12,500-₹50,000 or equivalent to Rp. 2,330,000-Rp.9,320,000 (Sattva, 2021). Those statistic not only shows the existence of income inequality but also the fact that the job market tends to be more profitable for men than women. This economic inequality shows how the practice of dowry has become an arena of structured exploitation that benefits men and increases women's vulnerability to domestic violence.

This situation also demonstrates that economic inequality does not occur naturally but is shaped by a patriarchal social structure that benefits men. On the other hand, the dowry system places a significant economic burden on the bride's family, as they are required to provide a sum of money, goods, or assets to sustain the marriage. This burden often leads to economic pressure and even family debt, particularly among low-income communities. The article states that "The burden of providing large dowries for daughters perpetuates gender inequality," and women are frequently viewed as an economic burden (Sunita et al., 2024).

Several studies have found that although women's workforce participation has increased, most still end up in informal or unpaid jobs that offer low wages. Women working in the informal sector generally face wage inequality and a lack of social protection, which limits their access to job opportunities and undermines their economic stability (Anukriti et al., 2022). At the same time, families with daughters face the financial burden of dowries, despite the fact that women earn less than men. This economic pressure can push families toward bankruptcy or debt, leading to long-term financial insecurity, particularly among lower- and middle-income families. Economic inequality then drives women into economic dependence on men due to their lack of access to land ownership, savings, and independent income (Sunita et al., 2024).

In radical feminist theory, the patriarchal system is a system that oppresses women; in terms of economic inequality, women do not receive equal opportunities in obtaining jobs and positions commensurate with their skills (Millet, 1970). This also reflects how this system benefits only men and how jobs that should be performed by women are reserved exclusively for men. This inequality also demonstrates how the economic system can function as a tool of material control in establishing a hierarchy within family relationships—how men are often praised for their sacrifices as the family's breadwinners, even though women can also serve as the family's breadwinners, yet do not receive the same level of recognition as men.

Not only that, but due to this inequality, society has come to normalize the oppression of women by men, whether verbal or physical. Radical feminism also emphasizes that patriarchy operates through ideology and social conditioning that normalize women's subordinate position. This creates a system in which women's value is measured by marriageability and dowry rather than by personal autonomy or economic capability. Consequently, economic inequality and dowry practices work together to sustain male dominance, increase women's dependence on men, and expose women to greater risks of exploitation and domestic violence.

However, deaths resulting from dowry demands cannot be reduced solely to economic inequality. Rather, these cases stem from a patriarchal system that treats women as objects of exchange in marriage. In other words, the economy functions as a material medium for the operation of male dominance, not as the primary source of violence. Patriarchy creates a gender hierarchy that in turn gives rise to an unequal economic structure, where women are reduced to commodities, dowries become instruments of control, and violence becomes a disciplinary mechanism. In this context, economic inequality is not the cause of dowry-related deaths, but rather part of the structural outcome that enables violence to occur and persist (Banerjee, 2014).

C. Institutional and Structural Failures in Law Enforcement

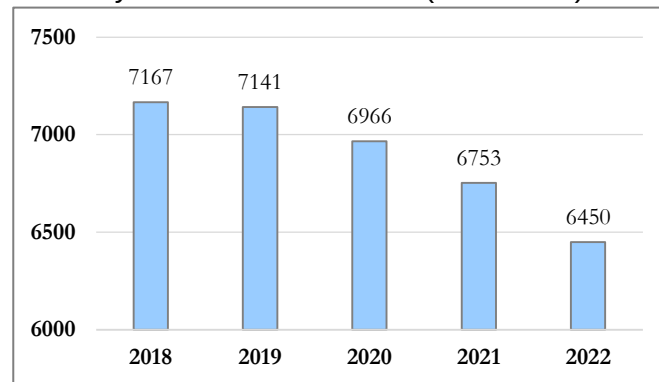
India's legal framework is essentially quite comprehensive. The Dowry Prohibition Act (DPA) of 1961 explicitly prohibits both the giving and receiving of dowry, while Section 304B of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) prescribes a prison sentence of at least seven years up to life

imprisonment for causing death related to dowry. Additionally, Section 498A of the IPC holds husbands or their families accountable for acts of cruelty. However, Millett views the law as often merely a formalistic tool that fails to address the structure of sexual power (Millett, 1970).

Despite the existence of laws, state institutions continue to operate within a patriarchal framework that views men as having a right to resources (mahar) and women as obligated to comply. The effectiveness of the Dowry Prohibition Act is highly dependent on the commitment of law enforcement officials. The existence of regulations does not automatically guarantee protection for victims. Weak implementation is not merely a technical issue but a reflection of the internalization of patriarchal ideology. The gap between regulations and implementation indicates that the root of the problem lies not only with individual perpetrators but with the institutional structures that allow violence to occur without accountability.

Graphic 4.

Dowry Death Cases in India (2018-2022)

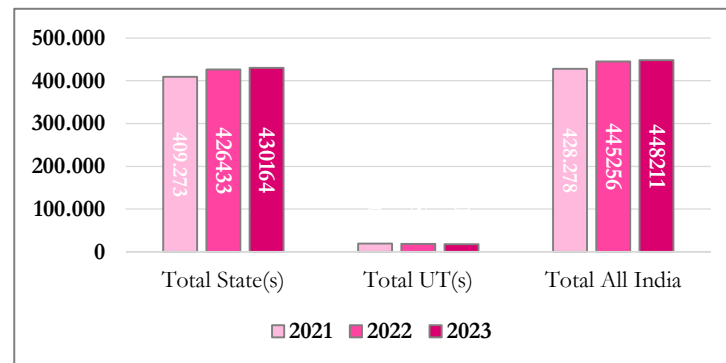


Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2022

NCRB data shows that deaths related to dowry have decreased only marginally by about 10%, from 7,167 cases (2018) to 6,450 cases (2022) (NCRB, 2022). This figure remains extremely high, with more than 6,000 lives lost each year. This implementation gap is not merely a technical issue, but a reflection of deeply entrenched structural problems within India's law enforcement system. From the perspective of structural violence, these high figures occur because state institutions are not functioning effectively to protect women. Law enforcement agencies often treat gender-based violence as a domestic issue rather than a clear-cut criminal offense.

From the total 445,256 cases of crimes against women in 2022, the largest proportion (31.4%) was "Cruelty by Husband or Relatives" (Section 498A) (NCRB, 2023). The dominance of this category over rape (7.1%) confirms Millett's theory that the greatest threat does not come from strangers, but from the patriarchal structure within the household itself. Millett emphasizes that framing "The Personal is Political" as a "private matter" is a patriarchal political strategy to limit state intervention in male authority. The 4.0% increase in total cases compared to the previous year (2021) further reinforces the indication that existing legal mechanisms, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act or IPC Section 498A, have not been effective in providing adequate deterrence (NCRB, 2023).

Graphic 5.
Crime against Women (IPC+SLL) - 2021-2023



Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2023

This data provides that domestic violence in India is no longer merely an interpersonal issue, but rather a systemic human rights crisis that demands more aggressive legal reform and deeper state intervention in the private sphere. The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 explicitly prohibits the giving or receiving of dowries, while Section 304B of the IPC stipulates a minimum prison sentence of seven years to life imprisonment for anyone who causes the death of a woman in connection with a dowry. In addition, Section 498A of the IPC provides a legal basis for prosecuting husbands or husbands' families who commit violence against women. However, the existence of existing regulations does not automatically guarantee protection for victims.

Table 2.

Dowry Deaths and Domestic Violence Cases in each region

Region	Dowry Deaths (Sec. 304B IPC)	Domestic Violence – Cruelty by Husband (Sec. 498A IPC)
Total India	6,450	140,019
Uttar Pradesh	2,138	20,371
West Bengal	406	19,650
Rajasthan	451	18,847
Maharashtra	180	11,367
Madhya Pradesh	518	8,486
Bihar	1,057	1,850

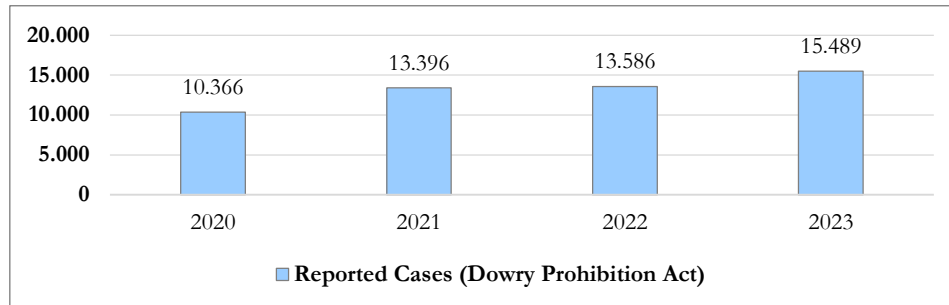
Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2022

The table shows that the number of cases of domestic violence (140,019 cases) is 21 times higher than the number of deaths due to dowry (6,450 cases). Those statistics indicate that although dowry deaths often receive international media attention, daily physical and mental violence in the home (non-fatal) is a far more endemic and widespread form of crime against women in India. There is a striking data anomaly in the state of Bihar. Bihar ranks second highest for dowry deaths (1,057 cases), but its reporting of domestic violence cases is very low (only 1,850 cases) compared to other states such as West Bengal (19,650 cases) (NCRB, 2022). This reveals that violence does not always take the form of beatings or direct killings, but through the absence of protection, institutional bias, administrative barriers in state institutions, and a patriarchal culture that keeps women trapped in dangerous situations.

The effectiveness of the Dowry Prohibition Act in India has proven very weak, revealing a worrying systemic failure of law enforcement. Between 2020 and 2023, reported cases under the Dowry Prohibition Act surged from 10,366 to 15,489. This increase has indirectly undermined claims of the success of state intervention (NCRB, 2023). This fluctuating trend is not merely a statistic. However, a reflection of deep-rooted structural obstacles in the form of patriarchal bias and corruption among officials, where initial reports from the victims' families are often ignored or

manipulated into "kitchen accidents" due to pressure from the influential families of the perpetrators (Gondal, 2015). Women there are likely only recorded in the legal system when the violence has resulted in death (fatal outcome), while everyday violence is not reported to the police.

Graphic 6.
Dowry Prohibition Act Cases Trend



Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2023

The surge in cases reported under the DPA—from 10,366 (2020) to 15,489 (2023)—highlights the failure of state interventions. Investigators often overlook suspicious burn patterns or other signs of homicide in order to close cases quickly (NCRB, 2023). Therefore, India requires bureaucratic reform in the form of mandatory investigative procedures that require the involvement of independent forensic experts in every domestic death of a woman under seven years of marriage. This is crucial to breaking the chain of corruption and evidence manipulation at the local level. Poor investigations indicate that women's lives are considered to have lower political and social value than the stability of patriarchal family structures. Low gender sensitivity within legal institutions affects case handling. This lack of sensitivity stems not only from ignorance but also from a social upbringing that positions women as subordinates.

Law enforcement officials often hold a "corrective violence" bias, in which torture is viewed as a legitimate means of "disciplining" a wife. The failure of this perspective often leads to secondary victimization, where the victim's family or the survivor themselves experiences additional trauma due to intimidating interactions, victim-blaming, and unempathetic legal procedures (Campbell & Raja, 1999). To address this, strict sanction mechanisms are needed through FIR Audits managed by an External Oversight Agency to ensure audits are not conducted solely by fellow police officers, and to increase the quota of gender-sensitive female personnel. Police officers found to have ignored initial reports of violence (Section 498A) before the case escalated into a dowry-related death (Section 304B) must be held legally accountable.

Many victims do not report incidents due to family pressure, social stigma, and fear of reporting. The stigma of "shame" associated with divorce is a way society forces women to remain in oppressive power dynamics to preserve the family's "honor" and the man's caste status. Millett argues that patriarchy operates through psychological control, causing women to accept domination because it is culturally "accepted." Furthermore, the fear of reporting to law enforcement places pressure on victims. In India alone, in 2013, there were a total of 1.66 million police officers, of whom 97,000 were women, representing nearly 12% (11.75%) (Bureau of Police Research and Development, 2013). Despite this increase, reporting gaps persist.

Sexual politics arise because key positions of power are held by men (Millett, 2000). The scarcity of women in the police force and the courts means that the policies produced will always be biased toward men's interests. A significant number of women are needed—not merely as a symbolic gesture, but to overhaul the "masculine" perspective that has long dominated the interpretation and enforcement of law in India. The statistical data presented reflect that without radical reforms regarding police independence and forensic procedures, the law will continue to fail. The persistence of dowry-related deaths is not because the law does not exist, but because the law does not function due to administrative and ideological patriarchal barriers that legitimize the subordination of women.



This phenomenon is also closely linked to the weak enforcement of the law in India. Although regulations such as the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 and Sections 304B and 498A of the Indian Penal Code exist, their implementation has been very weak. Many cases are reported as accidents or suicides without adequate and sustained forensic investigation, while law enforcement officials often view dowry-related violence as a private matter. Patriarchal biases and low accountability among officials reinforce perpetrators' impunity, thereby failing to provide effective protection for victims. These weaknesses in law enforcement interact with patriarchal-economic social norms that normalize dowry and violence, allowing dowry-related deaths to persist. Thus, dowry-related deaths result from the interaction between patriarchal-economic social structures and the failure of legal institutions, where existing regulations are unable to curb violent practices that have been legitimized by culture and reinforced by economic inequality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, dowry in India is a product of patriarchy that functions as a mechanism of social control over women. The persistence of dowry-related violence is shaped by the interaction of three major factors—patriarchal norms, socio-economic and cultural inequality, and institutional failure—which all originate from and reinforce patriarchal structures. These factors do not operate separately; rather, they strengthen one another in maintaining women's subordinate position within society and marriage.

First, patriarchal norms form the ideological foundation that legitimizes women's subordination. Within patriarchal society, marriage is constructed as an institution where men hold authority and women are expected to obey social and familial expectations. Women's value is often measured through their ability to fulfill domestic roles and provide dowry, while daughters are viewed as economic burdens and sons as economic assets. Through the perspective of radical feminist, patriarchy operates by normalizing male dominance in both public and private spheres, particularly within the family as the "key institution of patriarchy." As a result, dowry becomes a socially accepted tool that reinforces control over women's bodies, labor, and social status.

Second, socio-economic and cultural inequality strengthen the continuation of dowry practices. The caste system, marriage market, consumerism, and gender wage gap create structural pressure that positions women as dependent on men. Patriarchal systems limit women's access to education, property ownership, and stable employment, causing many women to remain economically vulnerable and concentrated in low-paying informal-sector jobs. At the same time, families with daughters are burdened by the high costs of dowry demands to secure socially desirable marriages. This transforms marriage into an economic transaction in which women are treated as objects of exchange and symbols of family honor. Consequently, economic inequality becomes a patriarchal instrument that sustains women's dependence and increases their vulnerability to domestic violence and exploitation.

Third, institutional and legal failures allow dowry-related violence to continue with limited accountability. Although India has legal protections such as the Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 and Sections 304B and 498A of the Indian Penal Code, implementation remains weak because state institutions often operate within patriarchal frameworks. Law enforcement officials frequently treat domestic violence as a private family matter, while victims face social stigma, fear of reporting, and limited access to justice. Weak investigations, corruption, lack of gender-sensitive procedures, and low representation of women within legal institutions further reinforce impunity for perpetrators. From a radical feminist perspective, this demonstrates that legal systems are not neutral but are shaped by patriarchal ideology that prioritizes the preservation of male authority and family honor over women's safety and autonomy.

Therefore, dowry-related violence in India should be understood not simply as a cultural practice but as the result of interconnected patriarchal structures operating through ideology, economics, culture, and law. Patriarchal norms create the foundation for women's subordination, socio-economic inequality reinforces women's dependence, and institutional failure allows



violence to persist without effective punishment. Together, these three factors sustain a system in which women continue to experience discrimination, exploitation, and violence within the institution of marriage.

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