

# An Autopsy Based Study of Socio-Etiological Aspects in Dowry Death Cases

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## ABSTRACT

*Domestic violence has been an intrinsic part of the society we are living in. The most heinous form since ages is harassment for dowry finally ending up in death of the woman. Determining the reasons behind the dowry deaths helps the government in revising the laws from time to time to take a serious action against the accused of dowry deaths. The aim and objective of the study is to know the socio-etiological profile and other factors which lead to the death of the woman, and also the factors affecting alarming rise in the dowry deaths, so as to suggest the authorities to act further in eradicating this social evil. The study was conducted on 100 cases, at Guntur Medical College, Guntur. Most of the victims (85 %) were aged between 18 to 30 years. An unemployed female (76%) in the first 3 years of marital life (77%) was the major victim in our study. Suicidal burns (62%) was the most common method of dowry death. Framing of new rules and acts with time helps to decrease the incidence of crime against women, thereby morbidity and mortality.*

**Keywords:** *Bride burning, dowry deaths, domestic violence.*

## INTRODUCTION

'Dowry' means any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly (a) by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage; or (b) by the parents of either party to a marriage or by any other person, to either party to the marriage or to any other person; at or before or any time after the marriage in connection with the marriage of said parties<sup>1</sup>.

Marriages are made in heaven, is an adage. A bride leaves the parental home for the matrimonial home, leaving behind sweet memories there, with a hope that she moves to a new world full of love in her groom's house. But the scenario in most of the cases is turning down, because of the social evil dowry which is still prevalent in our society even though many laws were enforced to protect women. Harassment for dowry is present almost everywhere. Behind closed doors of homes all across our country, women are being tortured, beaten and killed for the sake of dowry<sup>2</sup>. It is happening in rural areas, towns, cities and in metropolitans as well. It is crossing all social classes, genders, racial lines and age groups. It is becoming a legacy being passed on from one generation to another. The Indian National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports that there were about 8083 dowry death cases registered in India in 2013<sup>3</sup>. India reports the highest total number of dowry deaths with 8,391 such deaths reported in 2010, 1.4 deaths per 100,000 women.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was conducted in Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Guntur Medical College, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. A total number of 100 autopsied cases of married woman within 7 years of marital life were studied from June 2008 to December 2010. The cases that were booked under sections 174Cr.P.C, 498 –A and 304-B IPC in which executive magistrate conducted inquest were included in the study. Details of medico - legal aspects, socio-cultural, economic and other factors were obtained from the investigating officer, friends, relatives, parents, husband or in-laws of the deceased; manner and cause of death from Postmortem examination and toxicological analysis reports. Proforma of the study was filled accordingly from the above details. Females who died as a result of natural causes, road traffic accidents and homicides unrelated to dowry were excluded from the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most dowry deaths occur when the young woman, unable to bear the harassment and torture, commits suicide. Most of these suicides are by burns, hanging, or by poisoning. Sometimes the woman is killed by setting herself on fire; known as "bride burning", and sometimes disguised as suicide or accident. Death by burning of Indian women have been more frequently attributed to dowry conflicts<sup>4</sup>. In dowry deaths, the groom's family is the perpetrator of murder or suicide.<sup>5</sup>

In the present study, married women of any age group up to 40 years were victims of dowry deaths. Maximum number of cases (49) were recorded in the age group between 18 – 25 years, followed by 26 – 30 years (36) , 31 – 35 years (12) and with least number of victims in the age 36 – 40 years (03) (Table 1). This suggests that no age group is an exception to harassment for dowry that finally lead to death of the individual.

With reference to duration of marital life (figure 1), in the first three years of marital life<sup>6</sup>, women were much more prone to dowry deaths (77%), out of which 29 cases were within first year; 32 in 1-2 years and 16 in 2-3 years. Only 5 cases after 5 years of marital life were studied. More number of victims in the early marital life can be explained by the stress the females face during adaptation in the in-laws house which gets aggravated by the harassment for dowry or any demand for extra money after marriage leading to quarrels in a peak time.

More number of victims (72%) were from the rural areas<sup>7</sup> than from the urban region (28%) (Table 2) which can be explained by the low educational status, unemployment and lack of awareness of the Government policies and approaching NGO's for support in cases of harassment related to dowry.

More number of female deaths<sup>6</sup> (57%) were reported from nuclear families. This can be explained by the fact that staying alone leads to repeated thinking about the arguments and quarrels that occurred for the sake of dowry, flight of ideas and nobody available to give assurance. This leads to commit suicide at a bad moment (Table 3).

Illiterate <sup>6,7</sup> (62%) and unemployed housewives <sup>6</sup> (76%) died more when compared to their counterparts (Table 4 and 5). These findings speak about the importance of female education and employment in our society, which could help to cope up with the pre and post marital pressure situations, economic burdens thereby helping the family.

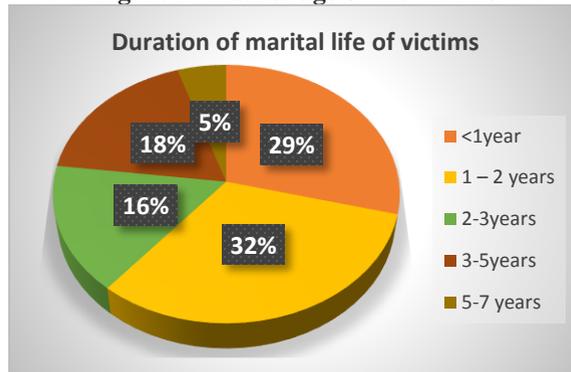
Burns was the cause of death in majority (66%) <sup>7,8</sup> followed by hanging (10%), head injuries (10%), poisoning (8%) and strangulation (6%) (figure - 2). Kitchen burns were more common due to easy access to inflammable materials. Manner of death was suicidal in majority of cases (64%), homicidal (16%) and doubtful/ inconclusive in rest of the cases (Figure - 3). Females generally are more sensitive, staying alone at home after heated arguments committed suicides.

Even though the Government of India has passed the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961 <sup>1</sup>, till today this social evil was not totally eradicated from our society and has become a major issue of unnatural female deaths.

**Table 1: Age distribution of unnatural female deaths**

Age group	Cases
18 – 25	49
26 – 30	36
31 – 35	12
36 – 40	03

**Figure 1: Marital age of the victims**



**Table 2: Rural to urban areas**

Locality	Cases
Rural	72
Urban	28

**Table 3: Type of family**

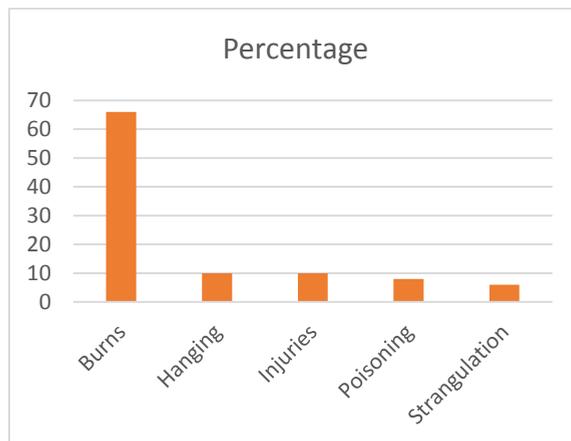
Type of family	Cases
Nuclear	57
Joint	43

**Table 4: Education**

Educational status	Cases
Illiterate	62
Literate	38

**Table 5: Occupational status**

Employment	Cases
House wife	76
Employed	24



**Figure 2: Cause of death**

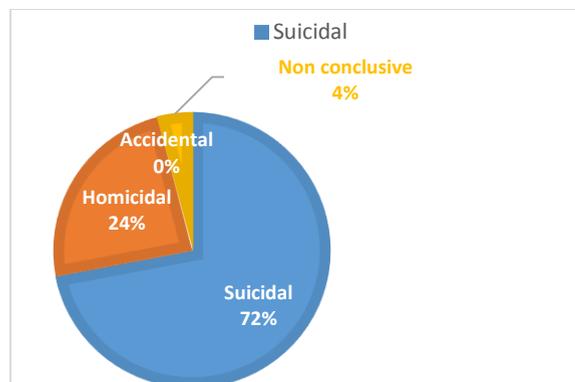


Figure 3: Manner of death

### CONCLUSIONS

• The present study identifies that the married female has more risk of death in the following situations:

1. Illiterate, unemployed, with a low socioeconomic status in the age group of 18-30 years.
  2. Facing financial problems like dowry.
  3. Staying in a nuclear family with an alcoholic husband.
  4. In the first three years of marital life.
  5. Arguments in house in evening or nights.
- Suicidal burns were the common cause of death.

### LEGAL ASPECTS

The different legislations to protect females from dowry deaths include Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961<sup>1</sup>; Sec. 498 (A) IPC, Sec. 304 (B) IPC, Sec. 113 (A) and 113(B) of IEA<sup>9</sup> etc. Constitutionally, women were provided special protection under Article 21 and Article 14<sup>10</sup>. Supreme Court of India extended the ambit of Article 21 and held that mere existence is not the right to live, it is the right to live with dignity. The Government of India passed a Domestic Violence Bill, 2001, "To protect the rights of women who are victims of violence of any kind occurring within the family and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto"<sup>11</sup>.

### SUGGESTIONS

The above conclusions suggest that

1. A female will be in a better position when she is educated, employed, living in semi urban / urban areas.
2. Marriage registrations must be made mandatory seeking information about the employment/business of husband, mental status, age, criminal background of person and family.
3. If the couple is not having financial support, it is better to postpone marriage until one of them gets employment/business opportunity.
4. If any previous married female unnatural death in family is reported, the male should not be

allowed to go for next marriage unless the judiciaries gives a clean chit.

5. Staying in a joint family at least for a period of 3 –5 years after marriage can save quite good number of female lives.
6. Newly married couples staying away from parents must be under vigilance when family disharmony has been observed/ reported in police stations/ panchayats.
7. Awareness programs about Dowry Prohibition Acts, punishments for violence and crime against women in mass media systems like television, movie theatres may help society in bringing down crime rate against women.
8. Introduction of syllabus regarding Indian marriage traditions, different problems that may come across in post marital life, acts and laws regarding marital life problems in graduate education may bring awareness in the society.
9. Pre and post marital counseling regarding different aspects of marital life by establishment of family counseling centers at villages/rural/ urban areas helps to bring down the married female deaths.
10. In line with already existing anti dowry cell-separate courts can be established at each district headquarters in line with already existing fast track courts in order to speed up the trial and dispose dowry death cases.

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