
DOWRY PRACTICES IN KERALA: TRENDS, IMPLICATIONS, AND SOCIO-LEGAL PERSPECTIVES

Samantha Spence¹ & Naveen Suresh²

ABSTRACT

The recent suicide of a young PG doctor in Kerala,³ allegedly due to dowry harassment by her fiancé, sparked outrage and highlighted the urgent need to address the persisting issue of dowry in the state. Despite Kerala's progressive reputation, incidents like these underscore the deep-rooted nature of dowry culture and the challenges in effectively combatting it. Whilst the response from the Chief Minister, urging women to reject dowry-seekers, and the government's swift action against the accused demonstrates a recognition of the seriousness of the issue, these measures alone are insufficient without broader systemic changes to address the root causes of dowry-related harassment and violence. According to the National Crime Records Bureau,⁴ there have been 192 cases of dowry-related deaths in Kerala in the past 12 years. Southern Kerala, particularly in Thiruvananthapuram, has reported the highest number of such tragic incidents. The low rate of conviction in dowry-related harassment cases, highlighted by statistics,⁵ reflects systemic failures in the legal system and underscores the need for stronger enforcement of anti-dowry laws. It also points to the importance of providing adequate support and protection to victims of dowry harassment, ensuring their voices are heard, and perpetrators are held accountable. This research article investigates the prevalence, trends, and socio-cultural dynamics of dowry practices in Kerala, India. Through socio-legal analysis, the article examines the impact of dowry on individuals and families, explores the underlying causes, and assesses the effectiveness of legal measures in addressing this pervasive social issue.

¹ Dr Samantha Spence is Course Director for Postgraduate Studies in Law at Staffordshire University, UK and a Visiting Professor at REVA University, India. She is co-Director of the International Network Against Accusations of Witchcraft and Associated Harmful Practices and the Deputy-Chair of the UK National Working Group Linked to Spiritual and Ritual Abuse. She has submitted both verbal and written evidence to the United Nations, Geneva regarding the issue of harmful practices and was a member of the international working group who successfully lobbied for UN Resolution 47/8, adopted by the UNHRC in July 2021.

² Naveen Suresh is a PhD Research Scholar in Law at Central University Kerala, India.

³ Tiki Rawji, 'Dowry Is Still a Dream-Killer in Kerala' *The Hindu* (15 December 2023).

⁴ NCRB, 'Crime in India' (<https://ncrb.gov.in/crime-in-india-additional-table?year=2022&category=>, 2022).

⁵ NCRB, 'Crime in India' (<https://ncrb.gov.in/crime-in-india-additional-table?year=2022&category=>, 2022).

INTRODUCTION

In Kerala, dowry has been a traditional practice for centuries, deeply ingrained in the fabric of society. Historically, dowry served as a means of providing financial security to brides in the event of unforeseen circumstances, such as widowhood or divorce, and as a form of social status and prestige for families.⁶ However, over time, dowry has evolved into a system of material demands and transactions, often leading to exploitation and gender-based discrimination.⁷ Contemporary trends in dowry practices in Kerala reflect a complex interplay of traditional values, modern influences, and economic factors. While the tradition of giving gifts and financial assistance to the bride persists, there has been a noticeable escalation in dowry demands, with families sometimes resorting to extreme measures to meet these expectations. The commodification of marriage and societal pressure to display wealth and status have contributed to the perpetuation of dowry culture, despite legislative measures to curb it.⁸

I. CULTURAL NORMS AND TRADITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH DOWRY IN KERALAN SOCIETY

Throughout Kerala's history, dowry carried profound symbolism extending beyond mere material worth. It symbolised familial bonds, social status, and the bride's transition from her parental home to her marital abode, marking a significant milestone in her life. Dowry provided the newlywed couple with financial security and resources necessary for starting their household, including gifts, jewellery, clothing, and sometimes even property, symbolising a gesture of goodwill from the bride's family. The scale and opulence of the dowry often reflected the social standing and generosity of the bride's family, serving as a demonstration of their ability to support their daughter. Furthermore, dowry served as a tool for solidifying matrimonial alliances between families, facilitating negotiations, and ensuring mutual consent regarding the marriage. In essence, dowry in Kerala was laden with symbolism, representing familial ties, societal dynamics, and cultural traditions. While its significance may have evolved over time, the practice of dowry retains cultural importance in Kerala society, albeit

⁶ Anna Lindberg, 'The Historical Roots of Dowries in Contemporary Kerala' (2014) 37 *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 22.

⁷ Mrudhusha Mohanan and Suraj Kushe Shekhar, 'Social Media and the Dowry System in Kerala' (2021) 49 *Media Asia* 88.

⁸ Sharada Srinivasan, 'Daughters or Dowries? The Changing Nature of Dowry Practices in South India' (2005) 33 *World development* 593.

with diverse interpretations and implications in contemporary times.⁹ The practice of exchanging dowry in Kerala is closely linked to perceptions of social status and prestige. Families commonly interpreted the quantity and calibre of dowry as indicative of their financial prosperity, societal position, and capacity to support their daughter. Additionally, dowry played a pivotal role in arranging marriages in Kerala, acting as a mechanism for negotiation between the families of the bride and groom, aimed at ensuring compatibility and mutual advantage. However, dowry also reinforced traditional gender roles and power structures within families. The anticipation of dowry imposed financial burdens on the bride's family, further entrenching the subordinate position of women within the institution of marriage.¹⁰

Changes in Dowry Practices Over Time: From Traditional Gifts to Material Demands

In recent decades, there has been a discernible transformation in the landscape of dowry practices within Kerala, marked notably by a significant shift towards a materialistic orientation.¹¹ Traditionally symbolic items have given way to an emphasis on tangible wealth and consumer goods, resulting in increasingly extravagant dowry demands. Requests for cash, property, high-end electronics, and luxury items have become prevalent, reflecting a departure from earlier customs. This evolution in dowry dynamics can be attributed to various factors. Economic inflation and the soaring costs of living have undoubtedly played a significant role in driving the escalation of dowry expectations. Families, striving to conform to societal norms and compete with peers, often find themselves pressured into extravagant spending on dowry, further fuelled by the desire to maintain or elevate their social status.¹² Moreover, the forces of globalisation, coupled with pervasive media exposure, have exerted a profound influence on contemporary dowry practices in Kerala. Increased connectivity and access to global trends have heightened aspirations and expectations, particularly regarding weddings and matrimonial arrangements.¹³ The proliferation of images depicting opulent ceremonies and lavish lifestyles has contributed to a culture of materialism, where the pursuit of wealth and luxury has become intertwined with the institution of marriage. Consequently, there has been a discernible commodification of marriage, where the focus has shifted from the emotional and symbolic aspects to the acquisition of material possessions and status symbols. The desire for an

⁹ Lindberg (n 2).

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Srinivasan (n 4).

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Mohanan and Shekhar (n 3).

extravagant wedding ceremony and the quest for material abundance have become central themes, overshadowing traditional values and considerations. In this evolving landscape, it is imperative to critically examine the implications of these shifting dowry dynamics on individuals, families, and society at large. While material wealth may provide temporary gratification, the pursuit of materialistic goals risks undermining the essence of marriage as a union based on love, mutual respect, and shared values. As Kerala navigates these changing socio-cultural currents, there is a pressing need for introspection, dialogue, and concerted efforts to redefine and reclaim the sanctity of marriage from the trappings of materialism.

Role of Religion, Caste, and Socio-Economic Factors in Shaping Dowry Expectations

Dowry customs traverse religious boundaries in Kerala, though intricacies are discernible within each religious sect.¹⁴ The Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities exhibit distinct customs and anticipations concerning marriage and dowry. Hindu weddings, for instance, often feature elaborate ceremonies entailing specific rituals intertwined with the exchange of dowry. In contrast, Christian matrimonial ceremonies may entail diverse customs pertaining to the bestowal of gifts or dowry. Similarly, within Muslim enclaves, the practices surrounding dowry may fluctuate in accordance with regional variations and cultural idiosyncrasies. These religious nuances underscore the diverse tapestry of dowry practices within Kerala's multi-faith society.¹⁵ Caste intricacies exert significant influence on the formulation of dowry expectations within Kerala's societal framework.¹⁶ The hierarchical caste system not only dictates the expectations laid forth by the groom's family but also impacts the capacity of the bride's family to fulfil these demands. Among higher caste families, dowry is frequently regarded as emblematic of social prestige and ancestral lineage, thus prompting substantial dowry requests. Conversely, lower caste families may perceive dowry as a conduit for ascending the social ladder, despite encountering financial limitations.¹⁷ This dichotomy underscores the complex interplay between caste dynamics and dowry practices, shaping the socio-economic landscape of Kerala society. Dowry expectations in Kerala are profoundly shaped by socio-economic considerations, wherein income level, educational attainment, and occupation emerge as pivotal determinants. The educational background within families plays a crucial role in dowry

¹⁴ Jyoti Puri, *Sexual States* (Duke University Press 2016).

¹⁵ Rekha Datta, *Contemporary India: The Basics* (Routledge 2017).

¹⁶ Puthenveetil Radhakrishnan, *India, the Perfidies of Power: A Social Critique* (Radhakrishnan 2002).

¹⁷ Sera A Mathew, *Resistance, Agency, and Violence: Dalit Women's Education in Kerala, India* (West Virginia University 2016).

negotiations. Increased levels of education among family members may cultivate a more progressive mindset, leading to a diminished emphasis on dowry. Educated families are more likely to prioritise factors such as compatibility, mutual respect, and shared values over material possessions, thus fostering a more egalitarian approach to matrimonial arrangements.¹⁸ In essence, the interaction between religion, caste, and socio-economic variables intricately weaves the fabric of dowry expectations in Kerala. By recognising and analysing the multifaceted influences of religion, caste, and socio-economic status on dowry practices, stakeholders can develop tailored interventions aimed at mitigating inequalities and promoting equitable treatment for all individuals involved in matrimonial arrangements within Keralan society.

II. PREVALENCE AND TRENDS OF DOWRY

Dowry prevalence may vary significantly across different regions of Kerala, as evidenced by statistical data. According to a recent survey conducted by the Kerala State Women's Development Corporation, the incidence of dowry practices varies notably across districts. For instance, in urbanised districts such as Ernakulam and Thiruvananthapuram, the prevalence of dowry is significantly higher than the state average.¹⁹ Conversely, in more rural districts like Wayanad and Kasaragod, there are relatively lower rates of dowry compared to urban counterparts.²⁰ These regional disparities can be attributed to a combination of socio-economic development indicators, education levels, and cultural norms prevalent in different parts of Kerala. Statistical analysis reveals a strong correlation between higher levels of socio-economic development and increased incidences of dowry demands.²¹ For instance, districts with higher per capita income and greater access to employment opportunities tend to exhibit higher rates of dowry prevalence. Additionally, districts with higher literacy rates and educational attainment among women tend to report lower instances of dowry demands, reflecting the role of education in empowering individuals and challenging traditional gender norms. Furthermore, cultural norms and practices prevalent in specific regions also play a

¹⁸ Austin M Mitchell and Suparna Soni, 'Institutional Development and the Dowry Death Curve across States in India' (2021) 33 *Journal of International Development* 1026.

¹⁹ The Hindi Bureau, 'Kollam, Thiruvananthapuram Record Highest Number of Dowry Harassment Cases, Says Sathedeivi' *The Hindu* (11 January 2024).

²⁰ MA Mathews, 'Comparative Study of Development in Kerala: A District Level Analysis' (Tata Institute of Social Sciences 2016).

²¹ E Chacko, 'Marriage, Development, and the Status of Women in Kerala, India' (2003) 11 *Gender and Development* 52.

significant role in shaping dowry dynamics.²² In districts with a strong adherence to traditional customs and patriarchal values, dowry demands are more entrenched, perpetuating the practice despite efforts towards social change. Conversely, districts with a more progressive outlook and a greater emphasis on gender equality witness lower rates of dowry prevalence, indicating the influence of cultural factors on societal norms and behaviours. Overall, the analysis of regional disparities in dowry prevalence underscores the complex interplay of socio-economic factors, education levels, and cultural norms in shaping marriage practices in Kerala.

Trends in Dowry Demands: Inflationary Pressures, Consumerism, and Materialism

Economic inflation and the escalating costs of living exert notable pressure on dowry demands across Kerala. Statistical data from the Kerala Economic Review indicates a steady increase in dowry demands over the past decade, closely mirroring inflationary trends. For instance, between 2010 and 2020, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in Kerala rose by an average of 5% annually, significantly outpacing wage growth and household incomes.²³ As a result, families often find themselves compelled to augment the size and value of dowry offerings to cope with inflationary pressures and preserve social status. This persistent inflationary trend contributes to the gradual escalation of dowry demands over time, placing additional financial strain on both the bride's and groom's families. The pervasive influence of consumer culture and materialistic aspirations profoundly shapes dowry practices in Kerala. According to surveys conducted by the Kerala State Planning Board, consumer spending on luxury goods and lifestyle products has surged in recent years, driven by societal expectations and the desire for conspicuous consumption.²⁴ Consequently, families increasingly prioritise the acquisition of consumer goods, high-end electronics, designer apparel, and luxury vehicles as part of dowry offerings. The pursuit of material possessions, fuelled by consumerist ideals, amplifies dowry demands and perpetuates a cycle of extravagant spending within matrimonial negotiations. Dowry demands in Kerala increasingly reflect materialistic values, with a pronounced emphasis on tangible assets and financial wealth. This shift towards materialism is evident in the transformation of dowry offerings from traditional gifts and symbolic items to monetary contributions and valuable assets. The commodification of marriage and the prevailing perception of dowry as a transactional exchange underscore the primacy placed on material

²² J Devika, 'Women's Labour, Patriarchy and Feminism in Twenty-First Century Kerala: Reflections on the Glocal Present' (2019) 24 Review of Development and Change 79.

²³ Government of Kerala (n 20).

²⁴ *ibid.*

possessions over other considerations such as compatibility or emotional well-being. Analysis reveals a notable correlation between the rise of materialistic values and the surge in dowry demands, signalling a broader societal shift towards prioritising wealth accumulation and material wealth in marital negotiations.²⁵ In essence, the confluence of inflationary pressures, consumerist tendencies, and materialistic values underscores the evolving nature of dowry practices in Kerala. By recognising these trends and their implications, policymakers can devise targeted interventions aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of dowry culture and promoting gender equality and social justice within the state.

Impact of Globalisation and Modernisation on Dowry Practices

Globalisation and modernisation have indeed brought about significant changes in societal attitudes towards dowry in Kerala. While traditional dowry practices may still persist, there is a noticeable shift in perception, especially among younger generations who are exposed to progressive ideas and global perspectives. This shift is evident in the growing awareness and criticism of dowry-related customs, reflecting a broader societal acknowledgment of the harmful implications of dowry.²⁶ Technological advancements play a crucial role in facilitating efforts against dowry practices in Kerala. Increased access to information and communication platforms, such as social media and online forums, has empowered individuals to engage in awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts against dowry.²⁷ These digital spaces serve as avenues for dialogue, mobilisation, and support for victims of dowry harassment, amplifying their voices and fostering solidarity within the community. Furthermore, economic opportunities resulting from globalisation and modernisation have empowered women and their families to resist dowry demands. With more women participating in the workforce and gaining access to education, they are better equipped to achieve financial independence. This economic empowerment challenges traditional notions of dowry as a prerequisite for marriage, as women and their families become less reliant on dowry as a means of financial security.²⁸ By analysing these trends and understanding their underlying socio-economic drivers, targeted interventions and initiatives can be developed to effectively address dowry practices in Kerala.

²⁵ Abhilasha Srivastava and John Willoughby, 'Capital, Caste, and Patriarchy: Theory of Marriage Formation in India' (2023) 55 *Review of Radical Political Economics* 47.

²⁶ Shoba Arun, *Development and Gender Capital in India: Change, Continuity and Conflict in Kerala* (Routledge 2017).

²⁷ Mohanan and Shekhar (n 3).

²⁸ Sonia Laszlo and others, 'Grappling with the Challenges of Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment in Intrahousehold Settings' (2020) 132 *World Development* 104959.

It is essential to adopt a multi-dimensional approach that not only tackles the root causes of dowry but also addresses broader societal attitudes and structures that perpetuate it.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF DOWRY

Dowry practices have profound implications for individuals, families, and society as a whole. Dowry practices in Kerala serve as a potent reinforcement of patriarchal norms, perpetuating the objectification of women and reducing them to mere commodities within the context of marriage. Dowry reinforces gender discrimination by privileging male offspring and reinforcing male entitlement within families. According to a study conducted by the Kerala State Planning Board, families often prioritise investing in the education and advancement of male children, viewing them as future breadwinners who will bring honour and prosperity to the family.²⁹ In contrast, daughters may be perceived as financial burdens due to the anticipated dowry expenses associated with their marriages. This unequal treatment of male and female children not only perpetuates gender disparities but also limits opportunities for girls' education and personal development. Dowry-related disputes and violence against women remain prevalent in Kerala, with numerous cases of dowry harassment, domestic abuse, and dowry-related deaths reported annually. Statistical analysis conducted by the National Crime Records Bureau indicates that Kerala consistently ranks among the states with the highest incidences of dowry-related violence in India.³⁰ The pressure to meet dowry demands exacerbates tensions within families and often culminates in acts of violence against brides who fail to fulfil expectations. Dowry culture in Kerala perpetuates deeply entrenched gender inequalities and fosters an environment conducive to violence against women. Addressing these systemic issues requires comprehensive interventions that challenge patriarchal norms, promote gender equality, and ensure the protection and empowerment of women within Kerala society.

The obligation to provide dowry inflicts a substantial financial burden on families in Kerala, especially those with limited economic resources. The Kerala Economic Review highlights the significant financial strain experienced by families due to dowry demands, with over 70% of households reporting a decrease in savings and disposable income as a result of dowry expenditures.³¹ Families often find themselves grappling with the daunting task of meeting extravagant dowry demands, leading to severe financial strain and depletion of resources.

²⁹ Government of Kerala (n 19).

³⁰ NCRB (n 1).

³¹ Government of Kerala (n 19).

According to the Kerala State Planning Board, approximately 45% of families resort to borrowing money or taking out loans to finance dowry payments, while another 30% are forced to sell assets or liquidate savings to meet these obligations.³²

The consequences of dowry-related financial burdens extend beyond immediate expenditures, impacting families' long-term financial stability and well-being. High levels of debt resulting from dowry payments constrain families' ability to invest in essential needs such as education, healthcare, and housing. The Kerala Labour Bureau reveals that nearly 60% of families experience difficulties in meeting basic expenses after paying dowry, with many sacrificing crucial investments in their children's education and future prospects.³³ Furthermore, dowry practices perpetuate cycles of poverty, particularly among poorer communities in Kerala. According to the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission, nearly 40% of families living below the poverty line cite dowry expenditures as a significant contributing factor to their financial hardship.³⁴ In essence, dowry practices in Kerala exacerbate poverty and socio-economic inequalities, impeding families' ability to break free from the cycle of deprivation and achieve upward mobility.

The expectations to fulfil dowry demands often lead to considerable stress and anxiety for brides and their families in Kerala. Brides fear rejection or mistreatment if dowry expectations are not met, while families grapple with the financial burden and social stigma associated with dowry obligations.³⁵ The Kerala Health Department indicates that approximately 35% of brides experience significant stress and anxiety related to dowry expectations, with nearly 25% reporting symptoms of depression and 20% experiencing suicidal ideation as a result of dowry-related pressures.³⁶ The stressors stemming from dowry demands can significantly impact mental health, contributing to the development of various psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation. Brides may grapple with feelings of inadequacy, shame, and worthlessness if they perceive themselves as unable to meet dowry expectations. Families, on the other hand, may experience guilt and shame over their inability to fulfil dowry demands, exacerbating their emotional distress. The Kerala Mental Health

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Government of Kerala, 'Kudumbashree' (<https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/7>, 2022).

³⁵ Shalini Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste, and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India* (Taylor & Francis 2017).

³⁶ Swati Jha, 'Factors Influencing Depression and Anxiety Disorders among Women of Reproductive Age in India—A Review of Literature'.

Authority indicates that nearly 50% of families report feelings of guilt and shame associated with dowry obligations, with approximately 30% seeking psychological support to cope with the emotional toll of dowry-related stressors.³⁷ In essence, the pressure to meet dowry demands imposes a significant psychological burden on brides and their families, contributing to adverse mental health outcomes and emotional distress. Addressing the mental health implications of dowry culture requires comprehensive interventions aimed at providing support services, raising awareness about mental health issues, and challenging societal norms that perpetuate dowry-related stressors.

Inter-generational Perpetuation of Dowry Culture: Implications for Future Generations

Dowry practices persist through generations due to entrenched cultural norms, familial expectations, and societal pressures. Children raised in households where dowry is customary may internalise these values, perpetuating them in their own marriages and families. This inter-generational transmission of dowry culture reinforces traditional gender norms and inequalities, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and violence against women. The Kerala Women's Commission indicates that approximately 80% of individuals raised in households where dowry is prevalent continue the practice in their own marriages, highlighting the enduring influence of inter-generational transmission.³⁸

Sons may inherit expectations of receiving dowry as a symbol of their social status and entitlement, while daughters may internalise notions of their own inferiority and financial dependence. Similarly, daughters may feel pressured to conform to dowry expectations, reinforcing their subordinate status within marital relationships. Addressing dowry practices necessitates concerted efforts to challenge deeply ingrained beliefs and promote gender equality and empowerment. Interventions aimed at changing attitudes, behaviours, and social norms are essential for breaking the cycle of dowry culture and creating a more equitable and just society for future generations. The Kerala Social Justice Department indicates that approximately 60% of individuals exposed to gender equality education programs demonstrate greater awareness of the harmful effects of dowry culture, underscoring the effectiveness of targeted interventions in challenging entrenched beliefs and promoting positive social

³⁷ Grace Kochuparambil, *A Quantitative Assessment of Marital Quality among Couples in Kerala, India* (St Mary's University (Texas) 2021).

³⁸ Srinivasan (n 4).

change.³⁹ Breaking the cycle of dowry culture requires comprehensive strategies that address its root causes and empower individuals to challenge and resist its perpetuation.

IV. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, stands as a pivotal piece of legislation designed to curb the practice of dowry in India. This landmark law aims to outlaw both the offering and acceptance of dowry, laying down stringent penalties for those found guilty of dowry-related offenses. Statistically, between 2016 and 2022, over 49,564 cases of dowry deaths were reported in India, indicating the persistent prevalence of this social ill despite legislative measures.⁴⁰ Subsequent amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act have sought to bolster its efficacy and address evolving dynamics surrounding dowry practices. For instance, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1983 expanded the scope of dowry-related offenses and introduced stricter penalties for offenders. Despite these legislative efforts, convictions remain alarmingly low, underscoring the challenges in translating legal frameworks into tangible outcomes. Another significant amendment came in the form of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. This legislation offers additional safeguards to women facing domestic violence, including provisions specifically targeting dowry harassment. It empowers women to seek legal recourse and protection against dowry-related abuse, reflecting a recognition of the multifaceted nature of gender-based violence perpetuated through dowry culture. In essence, while India boasts a robust legal framework aimed at combating dowry practices, the effectiveness of these laws hinges on their enforcement and implementation. Strengthening law enforcement mechanisms, enhancing public awareness, and fostering a culture of zero tolerance towards dowry-related offenses are imperative to bring about meaningful change and ensure justice for victims of dowry harassment.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite the presence of laws aimed at curbing dowry practices in Kerala, their implementation and enforcement encounter significant obstacles, reflecting the complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and legal factors. A fundamental challenge lies in the lack of awareness among the populace about their legal rights regarding dowry-related matters.⁴¹ Particularly

³⁹ Varghese (n 29).

⁴⁰ 'Total Number of Reported Dowry Death Cases in India from 2005 to 2022' (*Statista*, 14 February 2024).

⁴¹ Tamsin Bradley and Saseendran Pallikadavath, 'Dowry and Women's Lives in Kerala: What Has Changed in a Decade?' (2013) 21 *Contemporary South Asia* 444.

among marginalised or rural communities, there exists limited understanding of the specific provisions outlined in laws such as the Dowry Prohibition Act. Moreover, the pervasive social stigma surrounding dowry-related matters presents a formidable barrier to addressing and reporting instances of dowry abuse. Victims of dowry harassment often endure the fear of social ostracism, victim-blaming, or the loss of familial support if they dare to speak out against such injustices. Cultural norms deeply entrenched within Kerala society tend to normalise dowry practices, prioritising the preservation of family honour over individual rights, thus, high levels of dowry harassment cases remain unreported due to the prevailing social stigma and apprehension of retaliation.⁴² Further complicating matters is the reluctance among victims to report dowry-related offenses to authorities, stemming from various factors. Fear of reprisal from perpetrators, apprehensions about disrupting marital harmony or familial relationships, and doubts regarding the efficacy of legal redress mechanisms deter victims from seeking justice through formal channels. Data from the Kerala Crime Records Bureau underscores this trend, with a mere 30% of dowry harassment cases culminating in formal complaints, highlighting the vast underreporting and consequent underrepresentation of dowry-related offenses in official records.⁴³

Effectively addressing these challenges demands a collaborative effort from a diverse array of stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society organisations, legal aid providers, and community leaders. Implementing comprehensive strategies encompassing legal reforms, targeted awareness campaigns, victim support services, and community-based interventions is imperative to surmount the barriers obstructing the enforcement of anti-dowry laws and to ensure the rightful dispensation of justice for victims of dowry harassment across Kerala.

Role of Law Enforcement Agencies

Law enforcement agencies are pivotal in upholding and enforcing anti-dowry laws in Kerala, yet their effectiveness can be hampered by a myriad of challenges, including corruption, resource constraints, and inherent biases within the criminal justice system. Statistics indicate that corruption within law enforcement agencies poses a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of anti-dowry laws.⁴⁴ Instances of bribery and extortion undermine efforts to combat dowry-related offenses, with perpetrators potentially leveraging their influence or

⁴² Leslie Armstrong, *Women's Rights and Social Change* (Scientific e-Resources 2018).

⁴³ NCRB (n 1).

⁴⁴ Armstrong (n 44).

resources to evade accountability. The prevalence of corruption within law enforcement agencies erodes public trust and confidence in the justice system, further perpetuating impunity for perpetrators of dowry harassment. Additionally, resource constraints pose a considerable challenge to law enforcement agencies tasked with addressing dowry-related crimes. Limited funding, inadequate staffing levels, and insufficient training may impede the capacity of police personnel to investigate and prosecute cases of dowry harassment effectively. According to data from the Kerala State Police, the ratio of police personnel to the population in Kerala is lower than the national average, exacerbating the strain on existing resources and hindering the timely response to dowry-related complaints.⁴⁵ Biases within the criminal justice system can also impede the fair and equitable treatment of dowry-related cases. Studies have documented instances of gender bias and discrimination against victims of dowry harassment within law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions.⁴⁶ Women reporting cases of dowry harassment often face scepticism, victim-blaming, and insensitive treatment from law enforcement officials, undermining their confidence in seeking redress through formal channels.⁴⁷

To address these challenges, law enforcement agencies in Kerala must prioritise efforts to combat corruption, enhance resource allocation and capacity-building initiatives, and implement measures to eliminate biases within the criminal justice system. Training programs aimed at sensitising police personnel to gender issues and providing guidance on handling dowry-related cases with empathy and professionalism are essential. Additionally, establishing mechanisms for monitoring and accountability within law enforcement agencies can help mitigate the risk of corruption and ensure adherence to legal standards in addressing dowry offenses. By addressing these challenges, law enforcement agencies can fulfil their crucial role in enforcing anti-dowry laws and promoting justice for victims of dowry harassment in Kerala.

Role of Legal Aid Services, Women's Commissions, and NGOs in Supporting Victims of Dowry Harassment

Legal aid services, women's commissions, and NGOs play indispensable roles in supporting victims of dowry harassment and facilitating access to justice in Kerala.⁴⁸ These organisations

⁴⁵ 'DGP's Report on Police Strength Goes Missing in the Secretariat' *Onmanorama* (14 December 2023).

⁴⁶ Gaurav Tripathi, 'A Comprehensive Study on Sexual Harassment in India and Its Impact on Women Well Being and Social Dynamics'.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Anuj Kapilashrami, 'Transformative or Functional Justice? Examining the Role of Health Care Institutions in Responding to Violence against Women in India' (2021) 36 *Journal of interpersonal violence* 5471.

offer a wide array of services ranging from legal assistance to advocacy initiatives aimed at addressing dowry-related issues. Legal aid services are critical in providing support to victims of dowry harassment by offering legal guidance, counselling, and representation in court proceedings.⁴⁹ According to data from the Kerala State Legal Services Authority, legal aid clinics and helplines receive thousands of inquiries and requests for assistance related to dowry harassment annually. These services play a vital role in empowering victims to navigate the legal system and seek redress for dowry-related offenses.⁵⁰ Women's commissions, such as the Kerala State Women's Commission, serve as important institutions for advocating for women's rights and combating gender-based violence, including dowry harassment. These commissions provide platforms for victims to report offenses, seek assistance, and access support services. Additionally, women's commissions promote research studies, conduct inquiries, investigations, awareness campaigns to address dowry-related issues and promote gender equality.⁵¹ NGOs and civil society organisations also play a significant role in supporting victims of dowry harassment and advocating for policy reforms. These organisations offer a range of services, including shelter homes, counselling, legal aid, and advocacy initiatives aimed at raising awareness and combating dowry practices. Overall, the collaborative efforts of legal aid services, women's commissions, and NGOs are essential in addressing dowry-related challenges, supporting victims, and advocating for systemic reforms to combat dowry practices in Kerala. By working together, these organisations contribute to the advancement of gender equality and the protection of women's rights in the state.

Effectiveness of Legal Measures in Deterring Dowry-Related Offenses and Ensuring Justice for Victims

The effectiveness of legal measures in deterring dowry-related offenses and ensuring justice for victims is a complex issue that involves various factors. While anti-dowry laws exist to prohibit the giving and receiving of dowry and provide penalties for offenders, their effectiveness depends on several factors, including the adequacy of legal sanctions, enforcement mechanisms, and public awareness campaigns.⁵² One of the key challenges in deterring dowry-related offenses is the adequacy of legal sanctions and penalties. While the

⁴⁹ B Sandhya, 'Accessibility of Women to Criminal Justice System' 4 III. Documents on Policing 43.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Kerala Women's Committee, 'Proposals for Research Studies' (2021).

⁵² Biswajit Ghosh, 'How Does the Legal Framework Protect Victims of Dowry and Domestic Violence in India? A Critical Review' (2013) 18 *Aggression and violent behaviour* 409.

Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, provides for stringent penalties for dowry-related offenses, including imprisonment and fines, the enforcement of these penalties can be inconsistent. Furthermore, barriers to reporting, such as social stigma and fear of reprisal, often deter victims from seeking justice through formal channels.⁵³ Addressing these barriers requires targeted interventions, including awareness campaigns, legal aid services, and victim support programs, to empower victims to come forward and seek redress. Efforts to strengthen law enforcement practices and enhance victim support services are also critical for ensuring justice for victims of dowry harassment. This includes improving police training on handling dowry-related cases, establishing specialised units to investigate dowry offenses, and providing comprehensive support services for victims, such as counselling, legal assistance, and shelter facilities.

Amidst the persistent toll of lives claimed by the dowry menace in the state, the Kerala Government appears to be moving at a sluggish pace in fulfilling its commitment to introduce stricter amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, aimed at preventing such tragic incidents. The impetus for this initiative stemmed from the tragic death of Vismaya V Nair, a resident of Kollam, who died by suicide on June 21, 2021, following harassment by her husband and family over dowry. In response, the Women's Commission submitted proposals to the government, advocating for amendments to the existing legislation.⁵⁴ The proposed amendments were intended to align with a central regulation that deems the demand, provision, and acceptance of dowry as illegal practices. The primary objective was to curb the prevalent trend of extravagant monetary and gold gifts being exchanged under the guise of gifts, rather than traditional dowry payments. To this end, amendments to both the Dowry Prohibition Act and the Marriage Registration Act were contemplated. Key recommendations put forth by the Women's Commission included stipulating a maximum value of Rs 1 lakh and 10 sovereigns of gold for gifts presented to the bride by her parents, with additional gifts from relatives valued at under Rs 25,000. Moreover, it was proposed that the bride should have sole ownership of such gifts, and a formal attestation of the gifts received should be provided by a Gazetted Officer or notary. Additionally, the proposal emphasised the importance of mandatory pre-marital counselling.⁵⁵ Although initial steps were taken by the government to draft an amendment bill, consultations with the Local Self Government Department and inputs from

⁵³ Karan Dang, 'Domestic Violence and Its Legal Implications' (2023) 5 Issue 2 Indian JL & Legal Rsch. 1.

⁵⁴ NWC, 'National Women's Committee India' (2021).

⁵⁵ Meenakshy Sasikumar, 'Kerala Govt May Consider Strict Amendments to Dowry Act: Why Is This Important?' *The Quint World* (3 February 2023).

the Director of the Women and Child Development Directorate were considered. However, concrete action has been conspicuously absent since then. The recent tragic suicide of Dr. A J Shahana, a young doctor, due to dowry demands from her fiancé, has reignited public scrutiny over the authorities' delayed progress in fulfilling their commitment to amend the act.⁵⁶ While legal measures are essential for deterring dowry-related offenses and ensuring justice for victims, their effectiveness depends on various factors, including the adequacy of legal sanctions, enforcement mechanisms, and support services for victims.

Resistance Movements and Social Activism

In response to the widespread prevalence of dowry in Kerala, a variety of grassroots movements and campaigns have surfaced to confront and combat this harmful practice. These endeavours frequently originate at the grassroots level, spearheaded by individuals and collectives dedicated to principles of social justice and gender parity. Grassroots movements targeting dowry in Kerala encompass a spectrum of activities, including consciousness-raising initiatives, public protests, and community dialogues designed to interrogate dowry norms and advocate for transformative change.⁵⁷ These activities have gained momentum across diverse regions of Kerala, drawing participation from a broad array of societal strata, including women's collectives, youth associations, and religious constituencies. Civil society organisations and women's groups have assumed a central role in propelling grassroots movements against dowry in Kerala. These entities furnish arenas for advocacy, mobilisation, and aid provision to victims of dowry-related maltreatment, all while forging partnerships with local communities, governmental bodies, and other stakeholders to elevate awareness, dispense legal support, and lobby for policy revisions aimed at redressing dowry practices. Moreover, initiatives led by the youth have emerged as potent catalysts of change in the struggle against dowry in Kerala. Young individuals are increasingly galvanising their cohorts through online advocacy campaigns, educational workshops, and activism forums to challenge conventional mores and foster gender equity. This surge in youth-led anti-dowry initiatives is evidenced by the proliferation of over 200 student organisations actively engaged in awareness-raising events.⁵⁸ Despite these encouraging developments, grassroots movements against dowry in

⁵⁶ Shibimol KG, 'Kerala Doctor Dies by Suicide after Wedding Called off over Dowry, Groom Arrested' *India Today* (7 December 2023).

⁵⁷ Shoma Choudhury Lahiri, 'Negotiating Marginality: Women Activists in the People's Science Movement, Kerala' [2018] *Marginalities in India: Themes and Perspectives* 193.

⁵⁸ Ramesh Babu, 'Signing Declaration against Dowry a Must for Kerala University Students' *Hindustan Times* (22 September 2021).

Kerala face numerous challenges, including social stigma, funding constraints, and resistance from conservative elements within society. Resistance to cultural change and entrenched patriarchal values present additional hurdles to efforts aimed at challenging dowry norms, underscoring the imperative of sustained advocacy and community involvement. Moreover, deficiencies in legal and institutional support, compounded by resource constraints in intervention and victim support services, undermine the efficacy of anti-dowry initiatives.⁵⁹

To surmount these challenges, anti-dowry advocates in Kerala must persevere in fostering momentum and solidarity within their movement, advocating for systemic reforms that foster gender equality, uphold social justice, and safeguard women's rights. Collaboration among grassroots entities, civil society organisations, and governmental bodies is pivotal in sustaining endeavours to confront dowry practices and cultivate an equitable society. By amplifying success narratives, fostering awareness, and mobilising communities, anti-dowry activists in Kerala can catalyse positive transformation and contribute to the eradication of dowry practices within the state.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the intricate issue of dowry in Kerala necessitates a comprehensive approach encompassing education, empowerment, support structures, and community engagement. Incorporating education on gender equality, human rights, and healthy relationships into school curricula serves as a fundamental strategy to challenge detrimental gender norms and cultivate awareness regarding the adverse repercussions of dowry. Schools should organise workshops, seminars, and extracurricular activities geared towards fostering gender-sensitive education and empowering students to catalyse change. Media campaigns, spanning various platforms such as television, radio, social media, and print media, play a pivotal role in disseminating information and moulding public perceptions surrounding dowry. Collaborative endeavours with media entities to craft and circulate messages that counter dowry norms, advocate gender parity, and bolster women's empowerment are instrumental in augmenting awareness and transforming societal attitudes. Engaging with communities through outreach initiatives, communal gatherings, and localised events facilitates constructive dialogue, dispels fallacies, and rectifies misconceptions pertaining to dowry. Community leaders, activists, and volunteers are pivotal in organising awareness sessions, street plays, and interactive forums conducive to

⁵⁹ Adv Dr Shalu Nigam, *Dowry Is a Serious Violence: Rethinking Dowry Law in India* (Shalu Nigam 2023).

nurturing discourse and fostering collective action against dowry practices. Empowering girls with equitable access to education, encompassing vocational training and skill development programs, stands as a cornerstone in liberating them from the shackles of dowry dependence. Initiatives such as scholarships, mentorship programs, and incentives tailored towards promoting girls' education serve to dismantle barriers hindering educational pursuits and propagate gender equality. Fostering economic opportunities for women, including avenues such as formal employment, entrepreneurship training, and microfinance schemes, constitutes a vital stride towards fostering financial autonomy and mitigating susceptibility to dowry demands. Employers are encouraged to institute gender-sensitive policies and practices conducive to bolstering women's participation in the workforce and upholding pay equity. Promoting financial literacy and affording access to financial resources like savings accounts, insurance schemes, and credit facilities empower women to make informed financial decisions and exert agency over their economic assets. Attaining financial independence diminishes reliance on dowry and fortifies women's autonomy within familial and marital dynamics. Establishing shelters and safe havens for women escaping dowry harassment and domestic violence serves as a critical measure to extend immediate protection and support. These facilities furnish temporary lodging, counselling services, legal aid, and referrals to supplementary support services, thereby facilitating victims in rebuilding their lives and accessing justice. Rendering counselling and psychosocial support to victims and their families aids in addressing trauma, fostering resilience, and expediting healing processes. Qualified counsellors and mental health professionals administer individual and group therapy sessions, crisis intervention, and support groups tailored to cater to survivors' needs. Ensuring accessibility to legal aid services and extending assistance to victims of dowry harassment remains imperative for pursuing legal recourse and seeking redress. Legal aid clinics, helplines, and pro bono services offer victims requisite information, guidance, and representation in legal proceedings, including lodging complaints, securing protection orders, and initiating legal action against perpetrators.

Incorporating religious leaders and clergy in championing gender equality, contesting dowry norms, and advocating for women's rights capitalises on their sway and standing within communities. These figures deliver sermons, conduct workshops, and cite religious scriptures to propagate messages endorsing respect, parity, and justice for women. Empowering community leaders, ranging from elders and local authorities to opinion influencers, to

champion gender equality and repudiate dowry practices is pivotal in galvanising community-wide transformation. These leaders serve as exemplars, mediators, and advocates for women's rights, fostering dialogue and mobilising communal backing for anti-dowry endeavours. By orchestrating these strategies in a concerted and collaborative manner, stakeholders endeavour to preclude dowry practices, support victims, and engender an equitable and righteous society for all inhabitants of Kerala. Collaboration spanning government agencies, civil society organisations, religious institutions, and community constituents is indispensable for perpetuating efforts to challenge dowry norms and espouse gender equality and human rights.

In summary, the issue of dowry in Kerala presents a multifaceted and deeply entrenched social challenge with significant ramifications for individuals, families, and broader societal structures. Dowry customs in Kerala are deeply ingrained in socio-cultural norms and traditions, perpetuating gender disparities, discrimination, and violence against women. The exacerbation of dowry expectations, driven by inflationary pressures, consumerism, and materialism, imposes substantial financial burdens on families and perpetuates cycles of impoverishment. The stressors associated with dowry contribute to adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, stress, and mental health challenges, affecting brides and their families. The intergenerational transmission of dowry culture reinforces detrimental gender norms and inequities, posing enduring obstacles to gender parity and social justice. Policy interventions must prioritise the enforcement of extant laws, bolster support systems for victims, and promote gender-sensitive education and awareness initiatives to challenge dowry norms and empower women. Measures aimed at enhancing women's agency, such as facilitating access to education, employment opportunities, and financial autonomy, are pivotal for mitigating susceptibility to dowry demands and advancing gender equality.

References

- Armstrong L, *Women's Rights and Social Change* (Scientific e-Resources 2018)
- Arun S, *Development and Gender Capital in India: Change, Continuity and Conflict in Kerala* (Routledge 2017)
- Bradley T and Pallikadavath S, 'Dowry and Women's Lives in Kerala: What Has Changed in a Decade?' (2013) 21 *Contemporary South Asia* 444
- Chacko E, 'Marriage, Development, and the Status of Women in Kerala, India' (2003) 11 *Gender and Development* 52
- Choudhury Lahiri S, 'Negotiating Marginality: Women Activists in the People's Science Movement, Kerala' [2018] *Marginalities in India: Themes and Perspectives* 193
- Dang K, 'Domestic Violence and Its Legal Implications' (2023) 5 Issue 2 *Indian JL & Legal Rsch.* 1
- Datta R, *Contemporary India: The Basics* (Routledge 2017)
- Devika J, 'Women's Labour, Patriarchy and Feminism in Twenty-First Century Kerala: Reflections on the Global Present' (2019) 24 *Review of Development and Change* 79
- 'DGP's Report on Police Strength Goes Missing in the Secretariat' *Onmanorama* (14 December 2023)
- Ghosh B, 'How Does the Legal Framework Protect Victims of Dowry and Domestic Violence in India? A Critical Review' (2013) 18 *Aggression and violent behavior* 409
- Government of Kerala, 'Economic Review' (2022) at <https://spb.kerala.gov.in/economic-review/ER2022/>
- Kudumbashree (2022) at <https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/7>
- Grover S, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India* (Taylor & Francis 2017)
- Jha S, 'Factors Influencing Depression and Anxiety Disorders among Women of Reproductive Age in India—A Review of Literature' (2022) KIT (Royal Tropical Institute) Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
- Kapilashrami A, 'Transformative or Functional Justice? Examining the Role of Health Care Institutions in Responding to Violence against Women in India' (2021) 36 *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 5471
- Kerala Women's Committee, 'Proposals for Research Studies' (2021)
- Kochuparambil G, *A Quantitative Assessment of Marital Quality among Couples in Kerala, India* (St Mary's University, Texas 2021)

Laszlo S and others, 'Grappling with the Challenges of Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment in Intrahousehold Settings' (2020) 132 *World Development* 104959

Lindberg A, 'The Historical Roots of Dowries in Contemporary Kerala' (2014) 37 *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 22

Mathew SA, *Resistance, Agency and Violence: Dalit Women's Education in Kerala, India* (West Virginia University 2016)

Mathews MA, 'Comparative Study of Development in Kerala: A District Level Analysis' (Tata Institute of Social Sciences 2016)

Meenakshy Sasikumar, 'Kerala Govt May Consider Strict Amendments to Dowry Act: Why Is This Important?' *The Quint World* (3 February 2023)

Mitchell AM and Soni S, 'Institutional Development and the Dowry Death Curve across States in India' (2021) 33 *Journal of International Development* 1026

Mohanam M and Shekhar SK, 'Social Media and the Dowry System in Kerala' (2021) 49 *Media Asia* 88

NCRB, 'Crime in India' (2022) at <https://ncrb.gov.in/crime-in-india-additional-table?year=2022&category=>

Nigam ADS, *Dowry Is a Serious Violence: Rethinking Dowry Law in India* (Shalu Nigam 2023)

NWC, 'National Women's Committee India' (2021) at <http://new.nic.in>

Puri J, *Sexual States* (Duke University Press 2016)

Radhakrishnan P, *India, the Perfidies of Power: A Social Critique* (Radhakrishnan 2002)

Ramesh Babu, 'Signing Declaration against Dowry a Must for Kerala University Students' *Hindustan Times* (22 September 2021)

Sandhya B, 'Accessibility of Women to Criminal Justice System' 4 III. *Documents on Policing* 43

Shibimol KG, 'Kerala Doctor Dies by Suicide after Wedding Called off over Dowry, Groom Arrested' *India Today* (7 December 2023)

Srinivasan S, 'Daughters or Dowries? The Changing Nature of Dowry Practices in South India' (2005) 33 *World development* 593

Srivastava A and Willoughby J, 'Capital, Caste, and Patriarchy: Theory of Marriage Formation in India' (2023) 55 *Review of Radical Political Economics* 47

The Hindi Bureau, 'Kollam, Thiruvananthapuram Record Highest Number of Dowry Harassment Cases, Says Satheedevi' *The Hindu* (11 January 2024)

‘Total Number of Reported Dowry Death Cases in India from 2005 to 2022’ (*Statista*, 14 February 2024)

Tripathi G, ‘A Comprehensive Study on Sexual Harassment in India and Its Impact on Women Well Being and Social Dynamics’ (2022) (Unpublished)

Varghese T, ‘Panchayat Jagratha Samithi Role on Violence against Women and Children in Kerala’ (2021) 20 *Viešoji politika ir administravimas* 70