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Mrudhusha Mohanan & Suraj Kushe Shekhar

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MEDIA ASIA COMMENTARY

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Social media and the dowry system in Kerala

MRUDHUSHA MOHANAN AND SURAJ KUSHE SHEKHAR

Dowry has been an old practice of gift transaction at a wedding from the bride's family to the groom's family. It is a conditional gift in the form of money, valuables, or properties. Many studies show that dowry has always boosted sex-selective behavior (Bhalotra et al., 2018) resulting in domestic violence against women (Vogl, 2013). The Dowry Prohibition Act was enacted in India on May 20, 1961 to prevent dowry during marriages. Even though dowry is deemed punishable by law (Lodhia, 2009), it has not been strictly enforced in India throughout the years.

The dowry system is so firmly ingrained in Indian culture that it is considered a custom. The dominance of the institution of marriage is a critical cause for its prevalence. In Indian families, a woman's marriage is a major concern. The ubiquity of gender inequity makes a bride's parents feel obligated to meet the dowry demands of the groom who has "accepted" the responsibility of looking after their daughter. From the perspective of Indian culture, dowry is not considered a crime if a woman's marriage requires dowry in exchange for a secured married life. Many educated families go with the practice of dowry, either voluntarily or unwillingly, to escape being criticized for not adhering to tradition (Rudrani, 2021). Indian parents believe that giving dowry ensures safety and security of their daughter at the in-law's home. If the dowry expectations are not met, they fear that their daughter will not live peacefully in her new house. Hence, even if dowry transactions are illegal, the government cannot strictly execute the law because of the enormous impact of culture and tradition in India (Anand, 2021).

The role of social media as pressure groups to protest atrocities against women are noteworthy. In India, a Self-Help Group (SHG) recently urged people to change their profile pictures on Facebook with a black dot amid rising sexual assault cases in India. The black dot was a symbol of protest (Chitra, 2016). The "#MeToo" campaign also motivated Twitter users to denounce gender inequality, abuse, and harassment. Those incidents were not reported in the mainstream media but were prominent in digital spaces like Twitter (Sarah et al., 2020). People's outrage against dowry, domestic violence, rape, abuse, and the like were expressed through content creation, hashtagging across social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Today, social media platforms have become tools to bring various atrocities to the public's and government's attention.

Kerala, a southern state of India, ranks highly in terms of social and human development indicators. The female literacy rate in Kerala is the highest compared to other states. It also has an improved sex ratio. Even though the state's progress and accomplishments are good, gender-based

Mrudhusha Mohanan is a Teaching / Research Assistant at the Vellore Institute of Technology, India.
Suraj Kushe Shekhar is an Assistant Professor Senior at the same institute.
Corresponding author: Mrudhusha Mohanan. Email: mrudhusha.mohanan@vit.ac.in

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abuse seems to be still widespread (Neetha, 2021). More than 15,000 cases of harassment over dowry have been documented in Kerala for the past five years (On Manorama, 2021). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence cases increased 10 times (Radhakrishnan et al., 2020).

The media reported several cases of suicide in Kerala. In turn, social media became venues for denouncing the injustices. Online content that exhibited extremist and unlawful acts started circulating on social media. This commentary analyzes selected recent cases that happened in Kerala that caused widespread social media outrage. These incidents became viral on social media as many users could relate to the agony of the victims and their families. The heated discussion and constant pressure from social media led to the speedy intervention of authorities to investigate the cases.

News

Vismaya, a final year student in Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery, committed suicide in her marital home. She was allegedly tortured several times, both mentally and physically, over the issue of dowry (Arpan, 2021). She had no other option but to kill herself after a clash. Another similar case that immediately got reported was of a 24-year-old girl named Archana. She was set on fire by her husband. After being married in 2020, he demanded more dowry and then tortured her (Bobins, 2021). Another shocking case that flooded social media was that of Suchithra, a 19-year-old homemaker who was found dead in her in-law's house. The victim was married to a soldier named Vishnu. Her family claimed she suffered dowry harassment which caused her death (*The Hindu*, 2021b). Almost similar was the case of a 25-year old woman named Uthra who was found dead. She died of a snake bite which later turned out to be her husband's planned murder for dowry (*The Hindu*, 2020).

During the pandemic, the use of social media has been massive in India (Shekhar, 2021). In all the instances mentioned, the victims' relatives and friends released pictures, videos, WhatsApp chats, and other evidence showing brutal torture of the deceased. Social media shared chat history, sufferings, and critical videos that the mainstream media did not report. The gravity of social media content was so disturbing that people did not tolerate the victims' suffering. This led to protest actions in the legislative assembly by the opposition parties, pressuring the Kerala government to act.

In the wake of atrocities and pressure from social media, the Kerala government decided to strictly implement the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. It issued a circular requiring all male government staff to fill out a declaration form a month after marriage, stating that they have not taken any dowry (*The Hindu*, 2021d). To resolve rising crimes, an online complaint portal Aparajitha (Unconquerable woman) was launched by Pinarayi Vijayan, the chief minister of Kerala. He said that primary education system should educate children about gender equality (*The Hindu*, 2021a). Vijayan also posted in his official social media accounts that those involved in dowry-related cases will be dismissed from the government service. He added that the state will not tolerate injustices. He asked the people to use social media in exposing such problems and raising their voices against social evils.

Strategies

The SHG and non-government organizations (NGOs) should maintain official social media accounts in handling cases of harassment or violence. They may provide free counseling or online counseling services in regional languages to help distressed women. Government can request people to follow these official accounts to get accurate public policies or norms. Posting socially relevant advertisements that denounce dowry, violence, abuse, or harassment should also be done more regularly. The Pink Police Patrol mechanism, an initiative of the Kerala police to enhance the well-being of women and children, launched a new project called Pink Protection Project in the wake of escalating dowry deaths. Similar projects like Pol-

App and Nirbhayam App can benefit women in the long run (*The Hindu*, 2021c).

Social media platforms may provide a 24/7 chatbot or telebot assistance to report abuse, harassment, violence, or offensive acts. The texts or calls can be directed to the police and organizations like the National Commission for Women (NCW). Social media platforms for teens and kids like YouTube Kids, Grom Social, or Kidzworld can be used to teach gender equality and promote respectful relationships with the opposite gender. Such techniques will help in child development. Contents that convey women empowerment, gender equality, girl power, and success stories of women can be disseminated more often on social media to change the misogynistic mindset.

Government should not just be confined to informing, educating, and spreading awareness on anti-dowry culture. It should also introduce new strategies for women's welfare. Government officials may employ strategies to minimize the dowry menace like providing free education for women, raising the allowable age of marriage, making hospitalization and delivery of newborn girls free, giving annual incentives for girls during their schooling, imposing high taxes on big weddings, and imposing a minimum imprisonment of 10 years on those who give or take dowry.

Such approaches could raise the status of women and minimize gender inequality. As a result, society may gradually transcend old discriminatory social norms. These may further boost the nation's happiness index. Since India has a federal system, implementing, monitoring, and controlling these strategies are challenging. However, giving more autonomy to the state government could help in this regard. There is a need to ensure sustainability so that dowry-related cases will still be addressed accordingly even when social media attention dissipates.

Conclusion

This commentary outlines the role of social media as a pressure group to curb dowry-related domestic violence in southern India. Social media publicizes the idea that a civilized society should take an uncompromising stand against any social evil. As a dynamic communication medium, social media holds immense power to act on growing injustices and spread awareness about intolerance.

Disclosure statement

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ORCID

Mrudhusha Mohanan http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2177-8404
Suraj Kushe Shekhar http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5987-3848

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