



# **The Dowry System: A booming economy with a booming rate of violence against women.**

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## **Abstract**

Dowry is a frequently practiced marriage ritual in India. Dowry is a wealth transfer from the bride's family to the groom's family. Clothing, appliances, automobiles, real estate, jewelry, money, and furniture are all examples. There have been numerous reasons for the development of this technology in the past. Because all of the family property was inherited by men, it was a legacy for the bride. It was designed to provide a safety net for the bride if something bad happened to her husband's home.

It was also a way of honoring the groom for his willingness to accept the bride as his wife in marriage, with gifts ranging from large sums of money to modest tokens of good wishes. The desire for dowry, on the other hand, has affected the majority of Indian families. Almost all violence against a married woman stems from this threat. The issue of dowry will usually arise after marriage. If the wife cannot provide everything that her husband and in-laws require, her life in the groom's house becomes miserable. She will be oppressed, and in some cases, she may lose her life.

There is the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, which has been enacted, and the laws have been made more stringent; namely, Section 304 B (dowry death) and Section 498 A (cruelty by husband or his relatives) have been incorporated into the Indian Penal Code (I.P.C.) and Section 113 B (presumption as to dowry death) have been incorporated into the Indian Evidence Act (I.E.A.) to eliminate or at the very least reduce the heinous act of the dowry system and related deaths.

## Introduction

Dowry is a deeply ingrained cultural phenomenon in Indian marriages that has been described as one of the most significant impediments to “confronting India on her road to economic and social justice” (Dreze and Sen). Indeed, one of India's most significant social failures is the country's exceptionally high degree of gender inequality and female destitution, which has lasted for decades because of cultural practices like dowry. The ritual is blamed for several issues affecting women in the country, including dowry abuse, bride burning, and wife murder. Despite being universally considered a perpetrator of social disadvantage against women by legislators and researchers, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, which prohibited the practice, has been astonishingly unsuccessful in lowering its frequency. Not only has the demand for dowry not been removed, but it has grown in popularity among the top echelons of Hindu society, where it began. It has expanded throughout India among numerous populations, including Muslims, Christians, and tribal tribes (Sheel 26). The failure of legislation to prohibit dowry payment in Indian marriages is most likely due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the practice's impacts and, more crucially, its causes.

## Economics of Dowry

Only within the context of economic theory on marriage can the economic origins and reasons of dowry be adequately comprehended. According to established economic theory, the marriage market is when people bargain for a mate who maximizes their utility gains from marriage (Becker). Traditional Hindu marriages in India can work within this framework, but there is one significant difference: these marriages are usually arranged by the prospective partners' families. Families look for ideal matches in the marriage market based on quantifiable factors such as age, caste, socioeconomic background, men's labor market wages, and home labor abilities for women (such as cooking, cleaning, and birthing). In the end, it is the family, not the individual, who makes the final decision about whether or not to marry. The concept of arranged marriage confounds the fundamental economic principles of individual choice in marriage to

some extent. Still, it is assumed that both the individual and their family have a single utility function for simplicity.

## The Indian Marriage Customs

Social and religious pressures have had a significant impact on Hindu marriage customs in India. Marriages are usually arranged by the families of the prospective spouses, as previously stated. This occurrence effectively eliminates any possible “love” weddings, as such unions are frowned upon by society, mainly if the bride and husband are of different castes and social levels. For women, other marital rules are incredibly severe. In most Indian tribes, there is an unofficial age restriction for young women to marry. Families that fail to marry their daughters by this age, which varies somewhat from area to region, face the worst criticism and disgrace. Aside from the obvious financial consequences of financially supporting an unmarried daughter for the remainder of her life, the social stigma that comes with such a circumstance also bears the weight of economic punishment. The guilty family frequently loses employees, consumers, and general market goodwill. Another consequence of ancient Indian custom is that once a girl marries, she becomes a member of her husband's family and must live with them. Any bride's labor market earnings and home skills become the husband's family's assets while sustaining costs become their obligation. Furthermore, the assets (such as income or dowry) and obligations (such as food, clothing, and shelter) of the bride are pooled with those of other family members, as is customary in Indian households. Following that, the in-laws make the ultimate decisions on how the money should be spent or saved. As a result, individual rights in the traditional Indian home are subordinated to those of the in-laws. The dominant cultural, social, and ideological forces that have led to the existence and persistence of dowry in Indian society are the social mandate requiring women to marry at a young age, the transfer of all financial assets and liabilities of a bride to the groom's family, and the household pooling of resources.

## Causes of Dowry

The economic theory views the marriage market as one in which people negotiate for a spouse to maximize their marriage benefits, combining with the reality of different social factors, presenting an exciting

perspective on the reasons behind the existence of the dowry system in India. Under the assumption of a perfectly competitive marriage market with perfect information, dowry can be seen as the combined result of several different forces.

## The 'squeeze' on marriages and the oversupply of women:

Marriage Squeeze is that situation of disparity between the population of marriage-aged men and women. In simpler words, the ratio between the men and women interested in marriage is not favorable. For instance, the ratio men: women; 4:5 implies that 5 women for 4 men make the ratio unfavorable.

Economists' theoretical work on the marriage transaction has postulated that 4,444 dowries are likely to occur when the equilibrium conditions leading to supply exceed 4,444 women wanting to marry and enter the marriage market (Grossbard Shectman). The excess supply of women or the relative scarcity of men in the marriage market can be balanced by using the cost of marriage as a dowry. In theory, the monetary cost of dowry increases as the supply of women in need of marriage increases, shifting the supply curve enough to equalize the demand for wives.

Some scholars have argued that the argument of supply over demand is questionable in Indian society because the gender imbalance in the country notably favors fewer women than men rather than women. not vice versa (Sen 80). The country's female-to-male ratio fell from 972 women per thousand men in 1901 to more petite than 927 women per thousand men in 1991 (Dreze and Sen). However, a fundamental error in considering the total sex ratio as an indicator of the relative supply of women in marriage markets is divided due to certain social customs of society. Men and women.

In India, Hindu marriage based on social and religious beliefs allows men to marry at almost any age, while women must marry at a much younger age. Although the maximum age limit for marriage varies for women in different parts of India, the central belief is that a girl remains single after the age is determined by social shame, financial responsibility for their livelihood, and a kind of economic sanctions owed to the rest imposed by the community. The most important implication of such an ideology is that the Indian marriage market is divided into an older male group and a much younger female group. Therefore, the actual sex ratio in the marriage markets in India cannot be detected in the total sex ratio of

the country or even in the sex ratios of the same age group or the same period. Instead, the relative number of 4,444 of the younger female cohort versus the older male cohort would determine the actual proportion of eligible males and females wishing to marry at 4,444. This particularity of 4,444 leads to critical insights on the rising cost of dowry, as India's marriage market structure is heavily influenced by one of the country's most significant obstacles to social and economic progress: population growth.

Recent empirical studies have shown that India's extreme population growth over the past years has led to a situation of "forced marriage (Rao 666)". In theory, "marital coercion" means that a population with a declining death rate and a rising birth rate would be younger than an older population. Because women tend to marry older men in Indian society, women who qualify in the Indian marriage market will be younger and older. Essentially, strong population growth will result in a marriage market sex ratio characterized by a surplus of women. The amount of this surplus will depend on the actual rate of economic population growth. Thus, the "marriage squeeze," by causing an increase in the supply of women in the marriage market, would also cause an upward displacement of the dowry necessary to equalize the market of this school.

## Socio-economic Factors

Dowry has become a mode of climbing the ladder of social status. The bride's family always strives to fulfill every groom's demand and family to maintain their social status. It is also detrimental to the reputation of the bride's family if they lose a hand in marriage due to the lack of fulfillment of the demands. This situation poses a threat to the bride's future concerning marriage; in India, losing a hand in marriage due to the said reason is an invitation to criticism by the society and questions the financial stability of the bride's family, entering her name in the denylist for marriages. The bride's family tries their best to avoid this circumstance by volunteering to fulfill the demands of the groom's family.

Every parent wants to give their daughter a financially able and decorated husband. They want to find a groom with a reputed source of income, which ensures a happy and comfortable life ahead. To put it in simpler words, the dowry paid to the groom's family in liquid or kind is to compensate for the upbringing and qualifications of the groom but also the comforts/luxuries which will be utilized over time by the groom



and his family. This incentive of the bride's family also induces the groom's family to pose heavier demands that will prove to be a burden on the bride and her family; however, it will also prove to be a mutual benefit to both parties. The bride family gets their fame, and the groom family gets their riches, putting both families in a state of equilibrium at the end of the deal.

## Other factors that encourage dowry transactions

*Illiteracy:* Lack of education is one of the root causes of dowry. It has been a drawback for this economy and threatens the growth of society in crucial matters like the eradication of dowry. Statistical analysis provided by the government shows that dowry is still a standard practice in rural areas, where the reach or impact of education and rights are minimal.

*Traditional:* Indians are left with a rich legacy of traditions that have been followed unequivocally, but with the light comes the shadow. In Indian rituals, Dowry is the shadow, the critical factor for its prolonged survival: desperation and greed. Development and modernism in the country led to a fall in the value of rituals in the 21st Century. Desperate for the survival of traditions, Dowry seemed to be the apt option as it is merely a settlement and transaction, sometimes the payment being in kind. The greed for climbing the social ladder for both parties also fuels the desperation for participating in this ritual, making it a prominent social evil in the developed and modern country.

## Effects of Dowry

The practice of dowry, which assumed the form of an institution over the years, has caused many hardships to a large number of people in Indian society. At one time, dowry was given willingly by the bride's parents, and the groom's family was accepting it as a kind of voluntary gift. Nevertheless, today, dowry has come to be "demanded." In the marriage negotiations, dowry considerations often become primary ones, and all other considerations become secondary. The groom's party demands dowry without taking into consideration the paying capacity of the bride's party. Hence in many low-income families, the birth of a child is very much despised. From the day of the girl's birth, the problem of dowry haunts the

parents' minds. Dowry had virtually become a menace in Indian society. Its practice leads to various evil consequences, among which the following may be noted.

- 1. Dowry places a significant financial strain on the bride's family:** Dowry has become a significant financial burden for middle and lower-middle-class households. People in these classes spend their money on preserving family standards such as supplying essentials of life, educating children, and meeting different societal commitments. These people rarely save money since they live from hand to mouth. As a result, to arrange their daughters' marriages, they must borrow money, sell a section of their property, or mortgage significant family heirlooms. This has a significant impact on children's socialization. In a middle-class family, males are prioritized above girls regarding food, clothing, medical care, and education. Boys are more likely to receive preference in education than females, especially when the family income is meager. Dowry is thus a significant hindrance to the advancement of females' education. Without higher education, ladies have difficulty gaining high-level roles that will help them advance in their careers. Dowry reduces women's standing in another way. Because each marriage delivers significant financial benefits, one would ordinarily be tempted to enter into a second and third marriage solely for financial reasons. The boy who receives a large dowry may consider himself more dignified because he has a higher rank, prestige, and respect than the girl. The married lady may develop a sense of inferiority as a result of this.
- 2. Dowry Influences Child Marriage:** The dowry system is one of the significant elements that contribute to the practice of underage marriage. Many individuals plan for their daughters' marriages during their childhood, that is, before puberty, to avoid dowry. When the boys reach adulthood, they frequently find it challenging to adjust to their wives. Even now, underage marriages are not entirely prohibited.
- 3. Dowry causes harassment and murders:** In the name of dowry, women are mistreated, degraded, abused, tortured, and subjected to various cruelties. The tragic consequences of the dowry system can be witnessed, with freshly married girls constantly being the victims of harassment, violence, murder, and suicide. Dowry is requested as though it were an essential prerogative of the

bridegroom. Physical assault, emotional neglect and torture, verbal abuse, lack of enough food, and other forms of violence are used against women who bring little or no dowry. Although dowry is illegal, it is nevertheless practiced. Dowry demands have even resulted in dowry fatalities.

4. **Dowry as a Cause of Immorality:** Dowry is not only illegal but is also considered immoral. According to Mahatma Gandhi, requiring dowry as a condition of marriage disrespects women and humiliates his nation, education, and womanhood. As a result of this practice, various immoral practices emerge.
  - a. To avoid the threat of dowry, some unmarried women take on small jobs to earn money to improve their financial situation. They are frequently duped sexually by young lads who make bogus pledges to marry them. These girls become pregnant, are socially shamed, and then commit suicide.
  - b. Some parents, unable to pay a hefty dowry to a boy of their choosing, are forced to offer their daughter in marriage to an older man, a disabled man, a diseased man, or a divorcee. Many girls may be miserable for the rest of their lives as a result of this.
  - c. The dowry system elevates the status of male children at home. As a result, female children are ignored and subjected to a variety of problems.

## Dowry Violence Caused by In-Law Parents

The majority of in-laws, according to the participants, will want dowry. The husband tries to persuade his parents not to push for dowry, but they continue to instigate verbal assaults. In-laws may mock the wife for borrowing home items if she does not bring dowry. A wife will be subjected to verbal abuse from her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. If the agreed-upon dowry is not sent, in-laws may become hostile towards their daughters-in-law, subjecting them to verbal and emotional abuse.

Even if a wife brings dowry, she will be accused of not bringing enough. If their parents do not provide them with the correct items or of the right quality, their daughters-in-law will be taunted for the rest of their lives. If their daughters-in-law do not receive gifts on the appropriate occasions, in-laws may



disparage them. Some participants even stated that daughters-in-law are constantly violated by their in-laws, regardless of whether they provide dowry or not.

## Dowry Violence Causes Psychological Issues or Death

Oppression in the form of not having any control over financial contributions to the marriage puts much strain on the wife's mind. Physical and mental abuse can produce significant psychiatric difficulties in the woman, necessitating hospitalization. Lack of dowry, or unhappiness with the amount of dowry, can be a motivation for parents-in-law to be violent against their daughter-in-law, even causing her death by burning and attempting to frame it as suicide.

According to the participants, dowry presented by a daughter-in-law during her wedding is occasionally used primarily by the in-laws for their comfort. The wife may not have access to or control over the money she brought with her. It can then be utilized to oppress people when a wife is forced to leave her marriage; whether by divorce or hospitalization, she is not entitled to the money she brought to her wedding. One participant shared the experience of a woman whom her in-laws abused. She is hospitalized as a result of the abuse. In-laws' taunting and violence may also cause a wife to have suicidal thoughts and perhaps commit suicide.

When a daughter-in-law fails to meet her parents-in-expectations law for bringing dowry, the in-laws may try to divorce her and remarry their son. A participant spoke about women who leave their husbands owing to dowry-related problems and wind up living alone and selling sex to make money.

## Conclusion

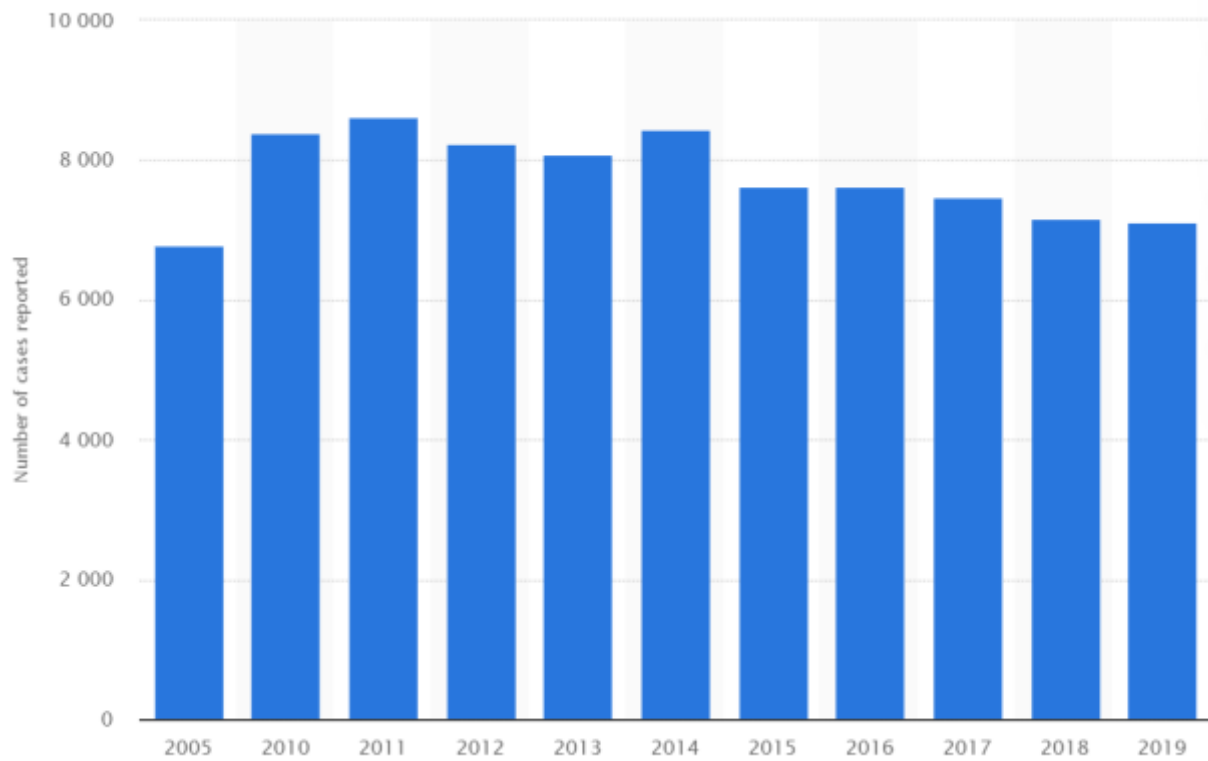
For dowry to be eradicated and the detrimental influence it has on Indian social welfare, a two-pronged system of policies must be implemented. We must eliminate domestic violence and female infanticide caused by the dowry practice, first and foremost, by enforcing laws like the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 that prohibit dowry in its entirety. Forcing dowry-related criminals to face harsher punishments might help to reduce dowry-related crimes. Second, because dowry-related crimes are based on dominating social, religious, and ideological factors in India,

the eradication of dowry will only be complete when these social and religious attitudes are changed.

There's more to dowry demand than just the family's inability or unwillingness to pay. It's an issue of the interconnectedness of psychological, social, and economical elements. If you take a look at the stories of individual women and families, you'll see that there's little or no knowledge and sometimes no drive among them to curtail the practice and bring about a much-needed societal change.

Women's under-accumulation of market-specific human capital, as well as the surplus supply of women in the Indian marriage market, have been identified as the two major reasons for the prevalence of dowry. Before we can put an end to the dowry custom and its accompanying societal problems, we must first equalize the relative benefits of marriage between men and women. Changing Indian societal attitudes on marriage and women is the only way this can be achieved. The existing requirement that brides give all future assets to in-laws must be altered so that parents may rely on daughters as well as boys in their old age, and lastly, the government must take persistent action to eliminate employment and pay discrimination against women in the labor market. Unfortunately, there is a long lag between the time when requests for social change are really made and the time when cultural ideas and habits actually begin to shift. Dowry is still an acceptable and logical part of the Indian marriage market today. Efforts to raise awareness among Indian communities about the negative effects of dowry, programs and government sanctions that promote education and employment for women of all ages, and a fundamental shift in the attitudes of Indian peoples will be necessary to make real progress in eliminating the dowry system.

# Statistics

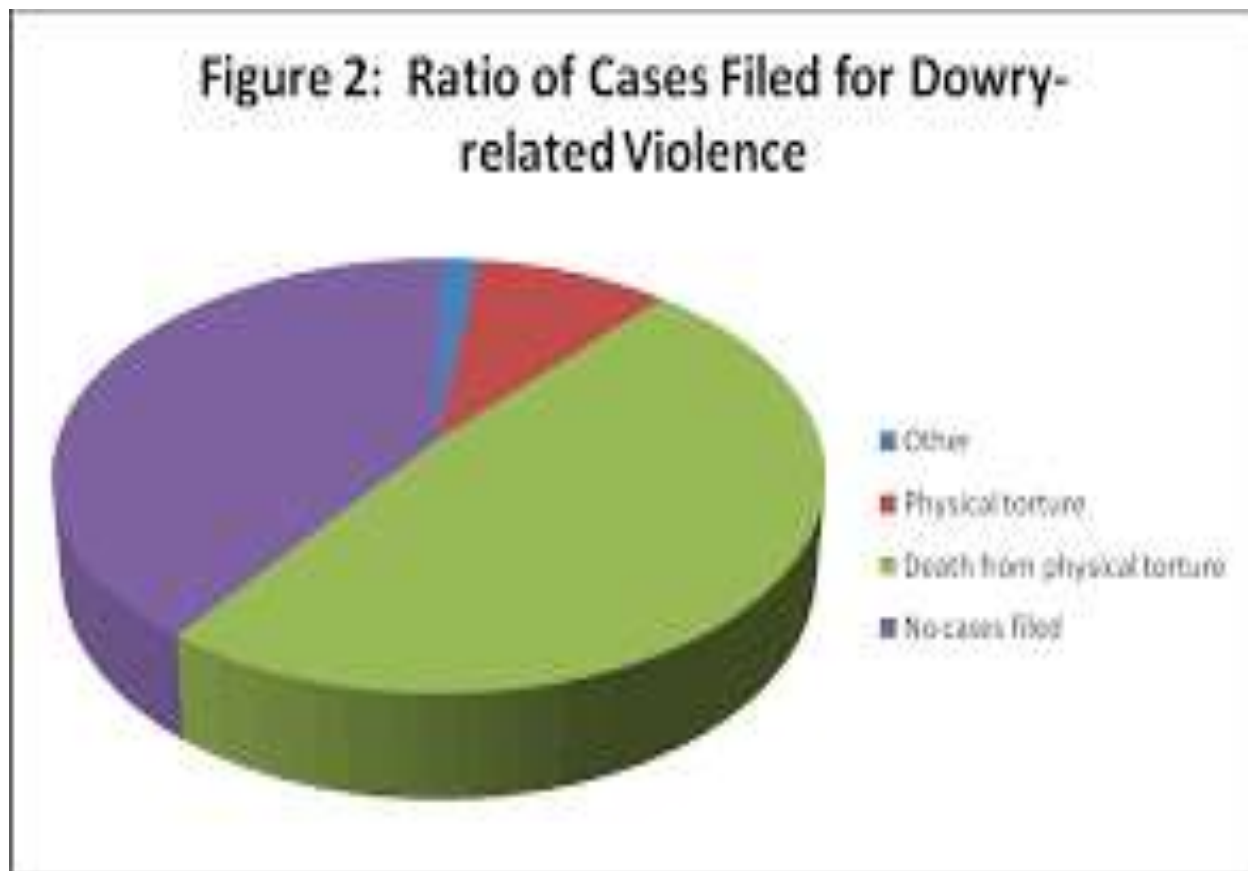


**Figure 1**

**Total number of reported dowry death cases in India from 2005 to 2019**

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/632553/reported-dowry-death-cases-india/>

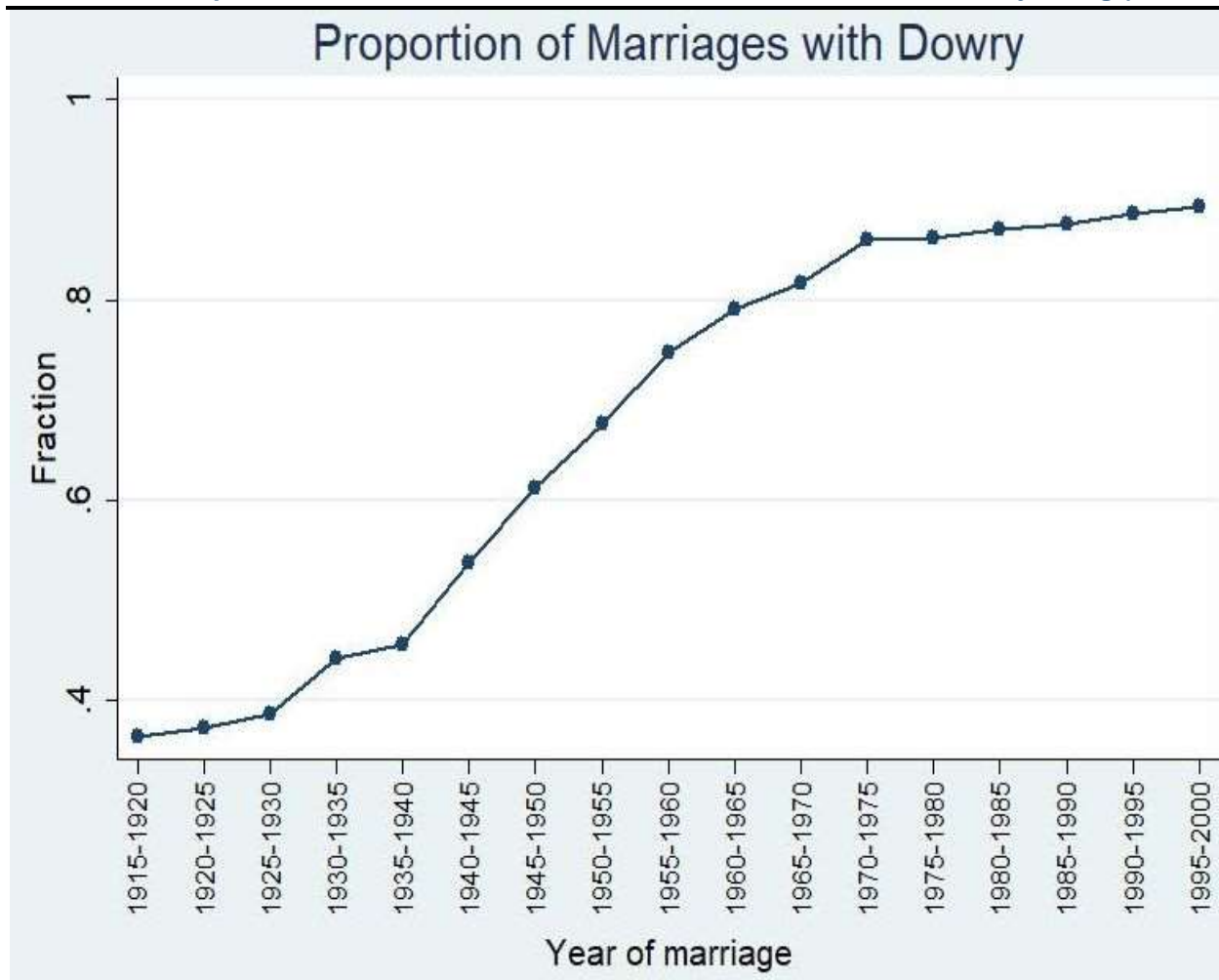
*From figure 1 , it can be inferred that there has been no significant reduction of dowry deaths, despite the Dowry Act being implemented in 1961 (58 years before 2019).*



**Figure 2**

Source : <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1002.6943&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

*From the above figure, we can conclude that approximately 50% of the crimes involving dowry have resulted in deaths and a sizable number of cases have gone unfilled.*



**Figure 3**

Source : <https://www.ideasforindia.in/topics/social-identity/prevalence-and-evolution-of-dowry-in-india.html>

*The figure above states that there has been a massive surge in the number of marriages with dowry, since 1915.*

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