

# Breaking through the cycle of exploitation in relationships

By **Acharya Prashant** - January 19, 2025



Our society embodies a stark contrast between its proclaimed life-affirmative ideals and the underlying suffering that prevails. Relationships, especially marriage, are often transactional and materialistic arrangements rather than expressions of love and understanding.

While marriages in developed countries witness high divorce rates but less systemic exploitation, India boasts of low divorce rates but struggles to contain exploitation resulting in mental health problems, physical violence and even death. Both genders are entrapped in outdated norms and traditions. In India, while approximately 20 women lose their lives daily to dowry-related violence, men face silent suffering, exemplified by tragic cases.

In any relationship built on desire rather than love, the roles of exploiter and exploited inevitably blur and switch. Aggression and cruelty are not gender-specific attributes; women can be as exploitative as men.. Historically, men have been the primary perpetrators of violence and exploitation, but changing economic, social, and legal conditions have made women equally capable of such acts.

If we look back, we sought a legal solution to the long-standing social issue of dowry. In 1961, with the enactment of the Dowry Prohibition Act, dowry was declared a malpractice and a crime. Despite this, by the 1980s, there was a dramatic rise in dowry deaths, with 5,000 dowry deaths reported every year. Even after the enactment of Sections 498A (1983) and 304B (1986) of the Indian Penal Code, which were introduced to combat dowry-related offenses, the number of reported dowry deaths in India remained alarmingly high. For instance, in 2008, there were 8,172 reported dowry deaths, marking a 14.4% increase over the 1998 figure of 7,146. More recently, in 2021, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 6,589 dowry deaths across the country—approximately 20 deaths every day. Notably, the conviction rate under this law

is the lowest among IPC offenses. By 2012, around 200,000 people had been arrested, yet only 15% were found guilty. In 2018, the conviction rate was approximately 13%, a decline from 21.9% in 2006. In 2020, out of 18,967 cases tried in courts, 3,425 led to convictions, indicating a conviction rate of about 18%.

When these laws were formulated, women were not significantly empowered, and even today, the disparity persists. Women in India still face challenges: their literacy rate is 15% lower than men's, based on a National Statistical Office (NSO) survey conducted in 2017-2018. Fifty-seven percent of women aged 15-49 are anemic (National Family Health Survey, conducted between 2019 and 2021), and they receive about two years less schooling than men (UNDP, 2021-22). Based on the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2022-23), women's representation in the workforce is around 37%, and their representation in Parliament remains below 15%. While some progress has been made, the overall status of women has seen limited improvement since 1984, when Parliament participation for women was 8%.

The misuse of Sections 498A and 304B has been a longstanding issue addressed by the Supreme Court in the 2014 Armesh Kumar vs. State of Bihar case. The court criticized the rigid, non-bailable nature of these laws and emphasized the need for balanced enforcement, instructing officers to verify claims before filing FIRs. Failure to comply could result in contempt charges.

Rising male suicides, often linked to the misuse of such laws, underscore the need for reform. While originally designed to combat dowry-related violence, societal changes have led to instances of reverse exploitation, with men facing stress, public humiliation, and financial strain. According to NCRB data for 2021, the male-to-female ratio of suicide victims was approximately 72.5% to 27.5%. The Supreme Court's guidelines aim to curb misuse while protecting vulnerable groups.

Our societal values often reflect hypocrisy. While ideals are celebrated outwardly, materialism and exploitation dominate beneath the surface. Marriage frequently turns into a transaction, with parties focusing on personal gain. For instance, alimony laws sometimes lead to men being financially drained and unable to remarry due to ongoing obligations. At the same time, some women misuse these provisions to avoid working, relying on sustained financial support.

While alimony is legally available to both genders, societal norms make it shameful for men to rely on women financially. If a man were to demand alimony from a woman, it carries a social stigma. Conversely, when a woman demands alimony, the law provides robust support, assuming that her economic prospects were sacrificed for the marriage. This assumption theoretically equates marriage with economic partnership, presuming equality, even if one partner, typically the woman, did not earn but managed the household instead. Principally, this equation is justified. However, when people marry in their youth, they seldom bother whether their partner is an economic equal or even an intellectual equal, let alone a spiritual equal. Wisdom takes a backseat. The emphasis, in the moment, is more on physical attraction, romance and feelings. However, the law hardly admits feelings. It is presumed that both persons have made a rational choice. When, after divorce, the burden of alimony falls on one of the partners – typically the man in India – it is painfully discovered that no rational or wise choice had been made. The law is then frequently blamed, but the fault actually lies in the lack of wisdom in

choosing the partner.

We must ask why most marriages are based on superficial factors like appearance, caste, or family approval rather than deeper considerations. When things fall apart, the consequences must be faced. Marriage works best when built on wisdom and awareness rather than a pursuit of security, which can lead to dependency and exploitation. Ignorant decisions can turn marriage into an irreversible trap that dictates one's life. India's challenges in addressing exploitation within marriages and relationships stem from deeply rooted societal norms and inadequate legal implementation. While legal reforms are necessary, the ultimate solution lies in societal transformation. And societal transformation means reforming the individual.

Individuals, whether men or women, who lack inner growth and self-awareness are likely to misuse power when it is given to them. Empowering a person without fostering wisdom and clarity can lead to abuse of power. Just as men have historically misused their rights and privileges, women could do the same if granted power without the awareness to use it wisely. The solution is not to revoke women's rights or return unchecked power to men but to ensure that both men and women are nurtured with self-awareness and wisdom to wield power responsibly.

The true and only solution is that we need to instill mental depth in society, and self-knowledge is the only path. We need to create a society where both boys and girls are raised with good education and strong inner character. They should be taught dignity and integrity so deeply that the idea of exploiting or harming another person becomes unthinkable.

In relationships, both partners should have enough understanding to recognize when the relationship is no longer sustainable with dignity. Instead of resorting to conflict, blame, or legal battles, they should be able to part ways amicably, ideally as friends, or at least without hostility.

This would prevent situations where relationships devolve into physical or emotional fights or long, draining legal disputes.

Empowering society isn't just about granting rights or privileges. It's about fostering a culture where every individual, regardless of gender, is equipped to handle those rights responsibly and with integrity. Only through self-awareness and wisdom can we nurture that culture which will pave the way for a harmonious and loving society.

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