

Some dowry accused are victims too

Harassment Laws Misused, Say NGOs; National Meeting In Goa To Step Up Campaign

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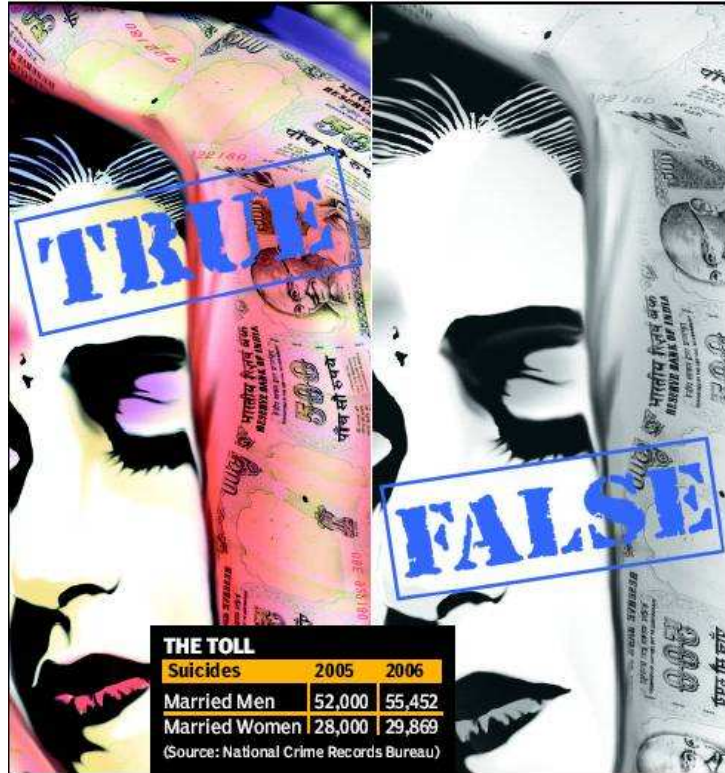
Bangalore: Laws on dowry harassment in the country are aimed to put out the fires triggered by the menace, rather than prevent them. They have become a tool in the hands of those eyeing compensation at the end.

While many see stricter laws as the solution, a few NGOs, like the Save India Family Foundation (SIFF), stress on modified rules that are gender-neutral. Laws shouldn't just be used as a reaction to complaints, it says. In an attempt to intensify the campaign, a national meet has been organized in Goa on September 27 and 28.

"We talk so much about dowry harassment, but have we ever insisted on the presence of a dowry-prohibition officer at any wedding, despite having 25 of them in the state?" asked an SIFF volunteer at the press meet on Thursday. In the past four years, close to 1,20,000 women — including mothers and sisters of the husband — have been arrested, many without proper evidence. Even under British rule, the highest number of women arrested was 17,000 in 1931.

Over the years, the government has formulated several laws to tackle the menace: the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code in 1983; and protection of women under Domestic Violence Act, 2005 that was passed the next year. But the NGO claims these laws are one-sided and extremely harsh on the husband and his family. While it's a crime to give and accept dowry, the woman's family often goes unpunished. SIFF adds that those who shout from the rooftops for more laws are strangely silent when extravagant marriages take place.

The NGO also expressed its dissatisfaction with Girija Vyas, chairperson of the National Commission for Women (NCW). Although the NCW has proposed several laws, they aren't implemented in true spirit, it claims.



Other face of suffering

After 10 years of marriage, Naveen Hegde has been suffering a long-drawn legal battle since November 2007. When his wife casually left their house for Diwali celebrations, little did he realize he would be booked under myriad laws on dowry harassment — Sections 498(A), 499, 503, 354, R/W 186 of IPC.

"There's just one dowry-harassment law under which she hasn't charged me," he says.

Problems started when he got to know of her alleged relationship with a colleague. "I warned her to be careful but it fell on deaf ears," he says.

As in many marital disputes, it's his 5-year-old daughter who's suffering. Caught in the crossfire of a custody war between her parents, she testified in the family court as a witness to her mother's affair.

Naveen says for this, her mother and grandfather tortured her in a dark room and she had to be admitted to hospital. "She's out now but her mental wounds are yet to heal," he says.

He's armed with ample proof to combat every claim of his wife — be it her transfer order or a forced abortion when she wasn't pregnant or late-night calls to her lover — but will a victim till justice is done.