



Short Communication

When homes turn lethal: India's intimate partner homicide crisis

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Abstract

Intimate partner homicide (IPH), or domestic homicide, is the most severe manifestation of intimate partner violence (IPV) and is emerging as a significant yet under-recognized crisis in India. Recent high-profile cases, amplified by 24×7 electronic media and social platforms, have exposed the lethal convergence of cultural traditions, psychological vulnerabilities, and socioeconomic pressures within domestic spaces. Dowry disputes, infertility stigma, caste hierarchies, suspicions of infidelity, and financial strain are among the key underlying factors, often creating environments where coercive control, humiliation, and domination culminate in fatal violence. Legal frameworks such as the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita provide partial safeguards, yet concerns about misuse and delayed justice continue to complicate their effectiveness. In India, intimate partner homicide is less an eruption of passion than the predictable outcome of systemic failures and entrenched cultural contradictions. The complexity and delays inherent in current divorce laws often trap individuals in harmful relationships, exacerbating the risk of lethal outcomes. Preventing such violence requires reimagining marriage as a voluntary contract, simplifying access to no-fault divorce, strengthening survivor-centred legal and social support, and fostering a cultural tolerance of human frailty. Only by addressing these structural and legal barriers can India hope to reduce intimate partner homicides and transform homes from potential battlegrounds into spaces of safety.

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1. Introduction

Every few weeks, India is shaken by news of another grotesque domestic homicide. A wife strangled, chopped, and dumped in Hyderabad; a husband allegedly poisoned or dismembered by his partner in Meerut or Indore; a dowry-related killing in Noida. The details vary, but the underlying truth is the same; intimate relationships, meant to be an affectionate base, are increasingly turning into avenues of lethal violence.¹ While it may be tempting to frame intimate partner homicide as a recent surge in crime, its roots run deep within the fabric of Indian society.² What has changed is the frequency of their reporting, the intensity of their coverage, and the disturbing creativity with which methods are described. Social media and 24x7 news channels ensure that every gory detail circulates widely, creating both awareness and 'a risk of imitation'.³

Beneath these headlines lies a complex interplay of cultural, psychological, and economic forces that shape intimate partner violence in India. Sociologists point to the deep-rooted sanctity attached to marriage, which is often viewed as a lifelong, unbreakable bond. Divorce remains heavily stigmatized, 'no-fault' separations are rare with the legal proceeding sometimes taking a lifetime, and families frequently pressure individuals; especially women, to remain in 'toxic' unions.⁴ Forensic psychologists emphasize that intimate partner homicides are seldom impulsive; they typically represent the final, fatal stage of prolonged abuse marked by coercive control, humiliation, jealousy, and domination. Global research consistently shows that the most dangerous moment for a victim is when they attempt to leave.⁵

In the Indian context, intimate partner violence is shaped not only by interpersonal dynamics but also by culturally specific triggers. These include dowry-related disputes,

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intrafamily dynamics, infertility stigma, property issues, financial distress, suspicions of infidelity, forced marriages, familial rejection of love marriages, and substance abuse. Compounding these issues is the deeply entrenched notion of family honour, which, when intertwined with rigid social expectations and caste hierarchies, often turns marriage into a transactional institution. In such settings, dowry demands, and financial extortion are rationalized as tools for economic stabilization and social conformity.⁶ Together, these forces create a combustible environment where emotional despair, cultural shame, caste-based prejudice, and economic pressure collide; sometimes leading to self-harm, and at other times erupting into fatal violence against a partner.⁷ In some Indian arranged marriages, conflicts fuelled by hierarchical expectations, interference from both mothers-in-law and mothers of the bride, and pressures on sons-in-law can escalate into emotional or physical violence, deeply straining familial and marital relationships.

The law in India serves as both a shield and a point of contention in cases of intimate partner violence. Statutes such as Sections 85 and 86 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), which address cruelty by a husband or his relatives, and Section 80, which deals with dowry deaths, are central for preventing matrimonial offences against women. Yet concerns about misuse have led to judicial interventions, most notably the Arnesh Kumar judgment of 2014⁸ which curbed automatic arrests to prevent frivolous or vindictive litigation. In some instances, even the Calcutta High Court has described such misuse as ‘legal terrorism,’ citing high-profile cases where false allegations were weaponized; sometimes to extort, humiliate, or conceal extramarital affairs.⁹ There are also disturbing cases where women have colluded with lovers or accomplices to murder their husbands, exploiting legal protections to deflect suspicion. Still, data from the recent National Family Health Survey shows that one in three Indian women report some form of abuse, and NCRB homicide statistics consistently reveal that women are most likely to be killed by someone within their own household.¹⁰ The debate over misuse must be addressed with seriousness and alternative safeguards explored, but it should not be allowed to obscure the systemic and widespread nature of gendered violence.

With the rise of hyper-aspirational lifestyles and the dream of overnight success, cultural pressures in India are intensifying. Social media fuels a relentless need for validation and display, where couples showcase affection, luxury, and curated happiness; but when these facades crack, shame and rage often erupt into violence. India in the 21st century is a society of paradoxes. Indian society clings sanctimoniously to the fiction of lifelong monogamy, parading marriage as sacred and inviolable, even as its youth, armed with smartphones and global streaming platforms, experiment with premarital relationships, assert sexual autonomy, and explore diverse expressions of sexuality that make a mockery of these brittle traditions,¹¹ one that

venerates motherhood but stigmatizes infertility; that glorifies sacrifice while punishing ambition, especially in women. These contradictions create impossible standards, breeding resentment when relationships fail to meet idealized expectations. Meanwhile, media coverage of domestic violence tends to sensationalize the most gruesome cases, offering voyeuristic detail with little focus on prevention; contributing to what criminologists describe as a “copy-cat effect.”¹²

India’s sexual landscape is shifting fast, especially in its metros. Younger generations are exploring fluid identities, casual relationships, and pleasure-driven choices; often clashing with the conservative values of their families.¹³ When arranged marriages pair individuals from these opposing worlds, the result can be explosive. What one sees as autonomy, the other may view as betrayal. These mismatches breed control, resentment, and sometimes violence. Intimate partner abuse in such cases isn’t just personal; it’s the fallout of a society caught between tradition and transformation. Moreover, unfortunately, the present generation has shifted the focus away from considering marriage as an institution of mutual compromises and sacrifices for a happy coexistence.

Preventing intimate partner homicide in India demands targeted, ground-level reform. Arranged marriages ending up as emotional baggage must give way to courtship-based unions that prioritize consent and compatibility. Police, courts, and protection officers need training to identify coercive control, patterns of isolation, surveillance, and domination that often precede lethal violence. Protection orders under the civil law governing domestic violence must be swift and enforceable, with GPS tracking (Ankle monitors for offenders) where risk is high. Survivors need real support.¹⁴ in the form of shelters, cash transfers, housing, and legal aid.¹⁴ All stakeholders should attempt proper counselling for the alleviation of marital discord through professional evaluation and guidance from psychologists to the extent possible if the relationship is salvageable.

Legal systems must evolve to be efficient, and time bound. No-fault divorce should be accessible without proving cruelty, especially in abuse cases, and cooling-off periods must be shortened.¹⁵ NCRB must publish intimate partner homicide data transparently, moving beyond dowry death proxies. Media must adopt survivor-centred reporting; no lurid detail without context, and always with helpline resources.

Marriage must be reimagined as a voluntary contract, not a social compulsion. Divorce must lose its stigma, becoming a dignified option rather than a mark of failure. Schools and parents must teach young people about healthy relationships and consent, not just the rituals of matrimony. And society at large must accept that leaving a relationship peacefully is far better than enduring or inflicting coercion. Domestic homicide is not a “private matter” or a “family tragedy”; it is

a preventable crime, a public issue, and a reflection of the values we choose to uphold.

While socioeconomic conditions including caste and religion, cultural mindsets, and individual psychological factors remain uncontrollable variables in intimate partner violence, it is also a crisis of compatibility, understanding, and tolerance of human frailties. Infidelity and incompatibility are undeniably painful experiences, but they are also part of the spectrum of human frailty. In most societies, such lapses may prompt conflict, separation, or reconciliation; in India, however, where marriage is idolized as an unbreakable covenant and fidelity elevated to a marker of honour, they are often treated as catastrophic breaches demanding violent redress. The irony is stark: a culture that proclaims to value the sanctity of relationships ends up sanctifying violence when those relationships falter. Intimate partner homicide, then, is less about betrayal itself and more about a social script that refuses to accommodate imperfection. Until we learn to view human failings not as dishonour but as manageable realities, homes will continue to risk turning into battlegrounds.

At the same time, the present crisis is a clarion call to rethink and redefine our moral compass through proper education at the school level, focusing not only on sex education but also on building healthy relationships.

2. Conflicts of Interest

None.

3. Source of Funding

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