Case Report

Burned for a price: A Case Study on Dowry-Associated Violence

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ABSTRACT

Dowry-related violence remains a critical medico-legal issue in developing countries, with burn injuries among its most severe outcomes. We report the case of an 18-year-old married woman admitted with 60% total body surface area burns after alleged dowry harassment, who died within 12 days. Autopsy findings indicated ante mortem, intentionally inflicted flame burns. This case highlights the importance of forensic medicine in revealing the circumstances of such deaths and calls for stronger cooperation among healthcare, forensic, and legal professionals to prevent violence and support vulnerable women. Public awareness must be raised against these acts.

Keywords: Dowry, burn injury, forensic medicine, homicide, gender-based violence, medico-legal investigation.

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Introduction

Dowry, once a cultural tradition, has transformed into one of the most insidious forms of gender-based violence across South Asia. It often subjects women to continuous harassment, humiliation, and fatal assaults when financial expectations are unmet. Reports indicate that thousands of women die each year from dowry-related violence, and burn injuries remain the most common mechanism used in such crimes.[1,2] Forensic medicine plays a pivotal role in differentiating homicidal, suicidal, and accidental burns.[3] Detailed examination of burn patterns, soot deposition, and injury distribution not only establishes the cause and manner of death but also reveals broader social injustices. This case report describes the forensic evaluation of an 18-year-old woman who died following extensive burns due to a dowry-related assault, shedding light on both medical and societal dimensions of this preventable tragedy.

Case Presentation:

An 18-year-old newly married woman arrived at the emergency department with approximately 60% flame burns covering her face, neck, trunk, and limbs. Her in-laws' claim that her saree caught fire while she was cooking with kerosene was directly contradicted by the injury patterns. Witnesses reported ongoing harassment for additional dowry, specifically for cash and a motorcycle. On the day of the attack, screams were heard before the kitchen ignited. Despite aggressive resuscitation and infection control, she developed septicemia and multi-organ failure, dying after 12 days. This case is a clear example of dowry-related violence resulting in death.

Forensic Examination:

Autopsy revealed deep dermal and full-thickness burns over 60% of her body, sparing the scalp, axilla, and perineum. The absence of soot in the airways and lack of respiratory injury made it clear she was either unconscious or dead at ignition. Toxicology definitively ruled out sedatives or intoxicants. Both burn patterns and circumstances leave no doubt that forced ignition with an accelerant—an act of homicide—occurred.[4,5]

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Ethical Clearance:

This case report was approved by the DMCH ethics committee prior to submission.

Discussion:

Dowry-related burn deaths are among the most brutal demonstrations of gender-based violence in South Asia.[6,7] In these cases, forensic evidence is the decisive witness, transforming social injustice into legal proof. Studies confirm that 60-70% of female burn deaths in India and Bangladesh are directly tied to domestic disputes or dowry demands.[8,9] Common forensic features confirming homicide include sparing of self-protective areas, absence of inhalation injuries, and contradictory testimonies. [10]The societal burden of dowry culture is evident in every such tragedy. Forensic medicine is not merely technical; it carries moral authority—restoring justice and dignity to silenced victims. All medical officers must be trained in gender-sensitive autopsy reporting, and agencies must coordinate to deter and achieve justice.

Conclusion:

This case powerfully illustrates the fatal impact of dowry-driven violence. Forensic examination categorically demonstrated homicide, dispelling false claims of accident or suicide. The evidence demands recognition of forensic medicine's critical role in exposing truth, delivering justice, and preventing gender-based violence. Investigate every dowry-related burn death rigorously to compel accountability and systemic reform, with both scientific precision and moral determination.

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Authors' Contributions:

Data gathering and idea owner of the study: Tamanna Tasmin

Study design: Tamanna Tasmin

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Writing and submitting manuscript: Tamanna Tasmin, Nasreen Akther

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