

# Twisha Sharma: Why India's Wealthiest Women Are Still Dying In 'Respectable' Marriages

Data show that women belonging to the lowest and highest wealth quintiles have equally been exposed to physical violence.



Deepanshu Mohan, Srisoniya Subramaniam

Two tragic deaths have captured mainstream media attention over the last week. The stories of 33-year-old MBA graduate, Twisha Sharma, in Bhopal, and 24-year-old Deepika Nagar in Greater Noida, have jarred the national conscience. What is more concerning is the structural reality these highlight.

The two cases reveal a profound statistical paradox. In India, despite rising female educational attainment, courtships, and affluent urban societies, the data concerning fatal spousal violence is on an increasing high. There is a massive chasm between population-level prevalence surveys and actual administrative crime records.

## A Handful Of Registered Cases

Around 5,700 dowry deaths occur annually in India. As many as 31.9% of ever-married women in India experience physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence, as per NFHS-5. But only around 1.20 lakh cases are registered annually under "cruelty by husband or relatives".

Cross-referencing the population-level prevalence against the administrative records of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals an acute statistical anomaly. The NFHS-5 Help Seeking Behaviour Dataset points out that only 1% of the women who face abuse ever approach legal institutions. Therefore, NCRB data cannot be taken as a measure for dowry deaths or spousal violence. It does not track crime prevalence. It merely highlights institutional friction.

## Education No Bar

The Bhopal and Greater Noida incidents challenge the myth that capital, professional independence, or urban relocation can protect women from domestic fatalities. The stratification of data across geographic layers in the NFHS-5 Socio-economic Profile disproves this very narrative.

The data show that intimate partner violence is highly persistent across different landscapes. It stands at a rate of 34% in rural areas and 27% in urban centres. The margin between the two is quite narrow. This proves that urban migration does not offer drastic cultural immunity to victims. While relocating to new cities is often viewed as a path toward modernisation, it frequently cuts off immediate physical safety nets and familial protection, creating a localised panopticon of domestic control.

Furthermore, while the physical threat remains constant across economic classes, the financial mechanics scale up dramatically in wealthy circles. The shadow economy of marital transactions thrives under the guise of high-profile weddings. NFHS data shows that women belonging to the lowest (~13,270 women out of 72,056 surveyed) and highest (~13,276 out of 72,056 surveyed) wealth quintiles have equally been exposed to physical violence. It is pertinent to note that the Greater Noida tragedy involves a similar layer of severe, ongoing dowry harassment, which was tied to substantial financial demands. This shows that high educational backgrounds fail to alter deep-seated domestic prejudices.

## The Never-Ending Judicial Pipeline

The criminal justice pipeline is highly inefficient. A domestic violence survivor or a grieving family must wait for a long time to achieve legal redress. This is evident as per the NCRB Court Disposal Datasets, where only 2.03% of the total number of cases for trial were convicted in 2022. Some 6,160 dowry death cases were sent for trial in 2022, when 60,577 cases were already present for trial, which is massive. Out of these, only a minuscule 1,231 cases reached the conviction stage, and 2,189 cases were acquitted. No conclusive data exists regarding the status of the rest of the cases.

The trial court pipeline suffers from a crippling pendency crisis. This prolonged trial timeline acts as an administrative buffer for perpetrators. When perpetrators belong to highly influential social circles, they readily exploit these lengthy procedural windows. This class privilege is leveraged to deliberately delay the registration of First Information Reports (FIRs), manipulate medical and forensic reports, stall initial investigations, and secure anticipatory bail orders.

Dowry deaths claim around 5,700 lives annually, and such a national crisis requires a structural shift, which is not rooted in social media activism. There is a need to devise legislation to increase juridical oversight and establish specialised fast-track courts to clear a pending backlog. Additionally, the national criminal justice tracking architecture must be linked with municipal public hospital casualty registries. This would create automated triggers that flag recurring admissions for suspicious antemortem injuries, blunt force trauma, or fractures among married women. State safety networks could then intervene promptly before the pattern of abuses escalates. The gap between judicial accountability and hidden domestic violence acts must be bridged so that women can finally stop choosing between systemic torment and a fatal escape.

*(Deepanshu Mohan is Dean and Professor of Economics at O.P. Jindal Global University. He is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Oxford's Department of International Development and a Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics (LSE). Srisoniya Subramaniam is a research analyst with Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), O. P. Jindal Global University)*