

Chastity belts and other violence against women common in Rajasthan, India

Asian Human Rights Commission

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When a lady was found bleeding from her thighs in a public bus in the north-western Indian state of Rajasthan, her fellow passengers took her to a hospital. The doctors who examined her found she was wearing a chastity belt; the bleeding was a result of injuries from the belt.

Rajasthan is known to be one of the prime tourist destinations in India. What is not known however, are the horrifying conditions of the women living there. The state, well known for its tourist attractions like the ancient forts and the Rajput culture, is a graveyard of women's rights. The practice of forcing women to wear a chastity belt is so common in Rajasthan that a website hosting advertisements of Indian industries boasts various designs of chastity belts, including those made from precious metals like gold and silver.

Forcing women to wear chastity belts is only one indicator of the violence against women exercised in Rajasthan. The demand and acceptance of dowries is widespread in the state, in particular amongst the middle class. Even highly educated women are married off to strangers against their will. One of the well known women's colleges in the state has a considerable number of dropouts in its higher degree courses, because the students are forced into marriages before they complete their studies. Once married, the woman is expected to remain at home and is confined to the four walls of her husband's house. Higher education for women is only considered useful as a means to bargain for less dowry.

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 prohibits the demand and acceptance of dowry in India. For the Act to be implemented and the practice of dowry to be rooted out however, what is needed is a functioning policing and criminal justice system. In a state where women are valued at par with cattle, the execution of the Act has clearly failed. The records of the National Crime Records Bureau speak for themselves: cases registered against the practice of dowry in Rajasthan are relatively low compared to the cases of violence against women reported across the country.

The Rajasthan legal system does not consider verbal, emotional and physical abuse of women within the home criminal acts. In fact, courts reject complaints filed by women on the grounds that a woman does not have the right to complain, particularly if the complaint is against her husband or relative. Inevitably, this encourages further abuse.

Women are often compelled to engage in drug trafficking and prostitution in Rajasthan. These women are abducted from rural villages at a very young age, trained in distant places and later forced into active service. Those who get caught by the law enforcement agencies at a later stage in their 'career' end up in state prisons without any recourse to legal or medical aid. Many are raped in custody. Not being able to complain about their situation, they end up as carriers of life-threatening and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The common excuse for the dismal condition of women in Rajasthan is the society's feudal mindset. While such a mindset does exist, the true blame for the uninterrupted violence against women lies in the failure of the state's law enforcement agencies to maintain effective rule of law. The police in Rajasthan are largely controlled by local political leaders. These leaders propagate an interpretation of Hinduism that denies women an equal status in society; women have no rights other than those granted them by their husbands. Under such inane misapprehensions, police blatantly refuse to register complaints by women. The few women who persevere are referred to the political leaders, and such referrals usually result in further abuse, often in public. This serves as a powerful deterrent to other would be complainants.

Continuing violence against a particular sector of society does not happen in a vacuum. Together with a politicized and corrupt police force, Rajasthan's justice system also includes a non-independent judiciary. These provide the legal sanctions for barbaric crimes against women. The religiously charged political ideology leading the state administration is just the veil covering a collapsed system that allows women to be persecuted within the confines of their own family.