



Men As victims of crime with special reference to section 498-A of Indian penal code

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Abstract

Section 498-A of the Indian Penal Code was enacted to protect married women from cruelty by their husbands or relatives. However, over the years, concerns have emerged regarding its misuse, leading to the false implication of men and their families. This article critically examines the growing discourse around male victimisation under Section 498-A, exploring judicial pronouncements, statistical trends, and the socio-legal impact on accused men. It calls for a gender-neutral approach to matrimonial laws while safeguarding genuine victims. The study suggests for balanced legal reform that ensures justice for all, regardless of gender, without undermining the original intent of the provision.

Keywords: Section 498-A, male victimisation, gender-neutral laws, misuse of matrimonial laws, Indian penal code

Introduction

The Indian Penal Code (IPC) added Section 498-A in 1983, which was a big change in Indian criminal law. Its goal was to stop married women from being abused by their husbands or in-laws. The rule was made because of the scary rise in dowry-related harassment and domestic violence, which often caused women to kill themselves or go through a lot of mental and physical pain. As long as a husband or his family members hurts an officially married woman, it is against the law. The part says that cruelty is any action that is meant to make a woman want to kill herself or seriously hurt her or put her life, limbs, or health in danger. It also includes harassing her for marriage claims (Indian Penal Code, 1860, § 498-A) ^[7]. The goal of this rule was good: to give women more power and stop cruel behaviour in marriage. But over the years, many lawyers, academics, and court officials have voiced worries about how Section 498-A is being abused, especially when it is used to make false or over-the-top accusations against men and their families. In *Sushil Kumar Sharma v. Union of India (2005)* ^[16], the Supreme Court of India agreed that the rule was meant to protect women but had sometimes been used as a tool against harmless men, doing a lot of harm. More talk about men being victims in these situations has led to a re-evaluation of how the rule is put into place, which has led to a call for more fair law protections. Male victims in 498-A cases often lose their image, have problems at work, go through mental stress, and have to go through long court cases without enough ways to get justice. The fact that the husband and his relatives, including old parents and even faraway cousins, were arrested without enough preliminary investigation makes things even more complicated (Verma, 2013) ^[19]. In *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar (2014)* ^[11], the Supreme Court tried to fix this problem by putting in place legal protections against random searches under Section 498-A. They stressed again how important it was to protect both the complainants and the accused.

The point of this piece is to look at Section 498-A IPC with a critical eye from the point of view of a male victim. It tries to look at the provision from the point of view of law, society, and the constitution, as well as how it works in modern India. The study looks into how bad the abuse is,

how the courts handle it, and the growing need for domestic violence rules that don't depend on a person's gender. The paper doesn't downplay the real and serious harm that many women go through in violent marriages. Instead, it calls for more fair laws that don't automatically assume blame based on gender. As part of its reach, the paper looks at important policy arguments, research studies, case law, and legal views. It tries to give a fair evaluation by looking at both the original purpose of the law and the unexpected effects of the rule. The main method used for this piece is doctrine, which means it looks at laws, court decisions, academic comments, and government reports. Evidence from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and studies from groups like the Law Commission of India are also used to back up claims when they are available. As lawyers work to make the justice system fairer and more open to everyone, it becomes clearer that Section 498-A needs to be looked at again with a more reasonable view. The parts that follow will go into more detail about the history of the law, current trends in the courts, the social and legal effects on male victims, and policy suggestions for change.

Kinds of Victims

The classification of victims extends beyond a single definition, acknowledging the diverse ways in which individuals can be harmed. A nuanced understanding of these categories is crucial for providing appropriate legal, social, and psychological support (Shortcuts TV, 2024).

Direct, Indirect, Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Victims

Victims can be classified based on their proximity and relationship to a criminal act. A direct or primary victim is the individual who directly experiences the harm, injury, or loss caused by a crime (CRI150, n.d.). They are the immediate targets of the offense, such as a person who is physically assaulted or robbed. In contrast, indirect or secondary victims are those who suffer harm as a result of their relationship with a direct victim, experiencing emotional distress, financial loss, or other negative consequences. This can include family members, friends, or dependents (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). A more

expanded classification includes tertiary victims, which refers to the broader community or society as a whole. This category recognizes that a crime's impact—such as a pervasive fear of crime or a loss of trust in the justice system—can extend far beyond the immediate individuals involved (CRI150, n.d.).

Victims of Specific Circumstances

Beyond the general classifications, a victim's experience can also be defined by the specific nature of the harm they have endured.

- **Victims of Domestic Violence:** A victim of domestic violence is an individual who experiences a pattern of abusive behavior from an intimate partner or family member, used to gain or maintain power and control. This abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological, and it can affect people regardless of their age, race, or socioeconomic background (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.; UN, n.d.).
- **Victims of False Allegations:** Individuals who are wrongly accused of a crime also face significant victimization. The consequences of a false allegation can be severe, including damage to reputation, social stigma, and profound psychological distress. Victims of false accusations may suffer from depression, anxiety, and social isolation, and may also experience legal and financial hardships even if they are ultimately exonerated (Hoyle *et al.*, 2016; Oxford Academic, 2024)^[6].
- **Victims of Social Stigma:** The concept of social stigma refers to the negative labels and societal disapproval that are placed on individuals, often based on their experiences or characteristics (Wikipedia, n.d.). For victims of crime, this stigma can manifest as social rejection, discrimination, or a negative self-perception, particularly in cases of sexual assault or human trafficking. This can lead to further psychological harm and isolation, making it difficult for them to reintegrate into society (internationaljournalcorner.com, 2017).

Men as Victims

Despite the significant number of men who experience victimization, particularly in cases of domestic and sexual violence, the issue often remains invisible due to deeply ingrained societal norms and a lack of formal recognition and support systems (World Society of Victimology, 2014)^[22]. This invisibility creates unique barriers for men seeking help.

Social and Legal Invisibility

The traditional portrayal of men as dominant and aggressive figures has contributed to a social and legal invisibility of male victimization. Historically, research and media have focused primarily on women as victims of domestic and sexual violence, leading to a severe lack of resources and support tailored to men's needs (World Society of Victimology, 2014)^[22]. This often results in male victims not being believed by authorities, or even being falsely accused of being the perpetrator. The legal system in some jurisdictions may fail to view women who use violence against male partners as perpetrators due to gendered

expectations of the "perfect victim" (Wikipedia, n.d.). This creates a significant barrier for male victims who may be unable to file charges or seek restraining orders, reinforcing the idea that men cannot be victims of such crimes.

Societal Expectations and Stigma

Societal expectations of masculinity, which dictate that men should be strong, stoic, and self-sufficient, create a profound stigma for male victims. A man who experiences abuse may fear being perceived as weak or ridiculed if he discloses his experiences (RAINN, n.d.). These fears are often well-founded, as men may encounter disbelief or dismissal from law enforcement, family, and friends. This social stigma is particularly acute in cases of sexual assault, where the traditional view of male sexuality can make it confusing for men to understand and label what they have experienced as a crime. As a result, men may suffer in silence, leading to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other negative psychological effects (RAINN, n.d.; CDC, 2014).

Lack of Formal Recognition

The lack of formal recognition for male victimization is a significant barrier to effective intervention and support. A 2014 study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that approximately 1 in 21 men (4.8%) reported being made to penetrate someone else during their lifetime (CDC, 2014). Despite such data, research on the specific physical, psychological, and emotional impacts of abuse on men is limited, impeding the development of targeted support services and intervention strategies. This leads to a vicious cycle where underreporting and a lack of awareness reinforce the perception that male victimization is not a serious issue, making it harder to secure funding and resources for male-specific support programs (World Society of Victimology, 2014)^[22].

Men as Victims of Section 498-A IPC

In India, Section 498-A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) was introduced in 1983 with the noble intention of protecting married women from dowry-related harassment and cruelty by their husbands and in-laws. The law defines "cruelty" to include any willful conduct that is likely to drive a woman to suicide or cause grave injury, as well as harassment with the intent to coerce her or her family to meet unlawful demands for property (Devgan.in, n.d.). While the provision was a necessary step to combat a serious social evil, it has also become a subject of intense debate due to its alleged misuse, which has led to men and their families becoming victims of false allegations.

Nature and Scope of the Law

Section 498-A is a powerful piece of legislation, classifying the offense as cognizable (allowing for arrest without a warrant), non-bailable, and non-compoundable (meaning the charges cannot be dropped through a mutual compromise). The scope of the law is broad, covering the husband and his relatives who subject the wife to cruelty. However, this breadth has been criticized for being easily misused, as it allows for the implication of the entire family, including elderly parents, unmarried sisters, and even distant relatives, often without specific allegations against each individual (MHA, n.d.).

Statistics on Misuse and Low Conviction Rates

Concerns about the misuse of this law are supported by data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) prior to 2021. Statistics from 2012, for instance, showed a high rate of charge-sheeting (93.6%) but an alarmingly low conviction rate of only 15%—one of the lowest across all crime categories (Shankariasparliament.com, n.d.). The Ministry of Home Affairs itself noted in a 2015 press release that between 2011 and 2013, over 10,000 cases each year were found to be "false" or a "mistake of fact or law" after police investigation (PIB, 2015) ^[11]. These figures highlight a discrepancy between the number of complaints filed and the number of convictions, suggesting that a significant portion of cases may be unsubstantiated.

Legal Consequences and Harassment

The legal consequences for a man and his family can be severe and immediate. The non-bailable nature of the offense means that the accused can be arrested and jailed, even if the allegations are vague. The Supreme Court of India, in landmark judgments such as *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* (2014) ^[1], acknowledged the misuse of the provision and cautioned against the practice of making arbitrary arrests without proper investigation. In the case of *Rajesh Sharma v. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2017), the court went further by issuing guidelines to prevent misuse, such as the formation of a Family Welfare Committee to review complaints before an arrest is made. These judicial interventions underscore the reality that men and their families face significant harassment, including public humiliation, financial strain from legal fees, and immense psychological distress, even if they are ultimately exonerated (ResearchGate, n.d.; MyAdvo, n.d.).

Laws Relating to Harassment Against Men

The Indian legal framework, while progressive in many aspects of women's protection, has been criticized for its lack of gender-neutral provisions, leaving men with limited specific legal recourse when they are victims of domestic harassment. The primary legislation addressing domestic violence, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA), is explicitly gender-specific. Its very title and provisions are designed to protect "women" and the "aggrieved person" is defined as a woman who is or has been in a domestic relationship with the respondent, who is an adult male. This statutory exclusion of men from the scope of the Act means they are unable to seek protection orders or other remedies available under the PWDVA, creating a significant legal vacuum.

In the absence of a comprehensive gender-neutral domestic violence law, men who are victims of false allegations or harassment must rely on a fragmented set of legal remedies under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). These remedies are often reactive and punitive rather than protective. For instance, a man can file a defamation suit under Section 500 of the IPC if a false allegation has caused significant harm to his reputation. He can also file a counter-case under Section 182 IPC, which deals with furnishing false information to a public servant with the intent to cause him to use his lawful power to the injury or annoyance of another person. Another option is Section 211 IPC, which pertains to making a false charge of an offense with the intent to cause injury. However, these counter-cases are often difficult to prove, as they require demonstrating the

malicious intent of the accuser. The process is lengthy, financially burdensome, and does little to mitigate the immediate legal and social harassment faced by the man and his family, which often begins with a non-bailable arrest under Section 498-A. This highlights the urgent need for a unified and comprehensive gender-neutral law that provides protection for all victims of domestic violence, regardless of gender.

Psychological Impact on Men

The psychological toll of being a victim of false allegations, particularly under a law like Section 498-A, is profound and often goes unrecognized. Men, who are traditionally expected to be stoic and emotionally resilient, may experience a range of severe psychological and emotional effects. These include intense feelings of trauma, anxiety, and depression. The shock of being arrested and the public humiliation of the accusation can lead to chronic stress, and in some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The legal process itself is a source of immense anguish, as men and their families are subjected to a lengthy and often biased judicial system.

Beyond the legal and personal trauma, men also face significant social ostracism. Friends, neighbors, and even extended family may distance themselves, believing the accusations, which are often amplified by sensationalist media coverage. This social isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and helplessness. The mental health discourse in India is also heavily influenced by gender bias. There is a general societal and institutional reluctance to acknowledge men as victims, and mental health professionals may lack the specific training or awareness to address the unique challenges faced by men in these situations. This bias often prevents men from seeking help, as they fear being ridiculed or not being taken seriously. Many expert psychological opinions and studies have highlighted that men who are falsely accused of domestic violence often suffer from a loss of self-worth and an overwhelming sense of injustice and betrayal. The prolonged mental anguish, fueled by the slow pace of justice and the lack of a support system, can lead to serious health issues and, in some cases, suicidal ideation.

Loss of Employment and Social Standing

False allegations of domestic abuse and dowry harassment can have devastating consequences for a man's professional life and social standing. The mere filing of a complaint under Section 498-A, which is a cognizable and non-bailable offense, can trigger an immediate and irreversible chain of events. The reputational harm begins the moment the accusation becomes public knowledge, damaging a man's image in his community and workplace. This is often magnified by media reports, which tend to sensationalize such cases without waiting for a legal outcome. The public perception of guilt, even before a trial, can lead to severe social stigma and the loss of respect from peers and colleagues.

The legal process itself directly impacts a man's employment. An arrest, even if brief, can lead to suspension or, in many cases, outright termination from his job. The stigma of being a criminal accused of domestic violence can make it nearly impossible to secure new employment, regardless of the final court verdict. A man may be ultimately acquitted, but the tarnished reputation and gap in

his employment history can have a long-term impact on his career and personal life. The financial strain of legal fees, coupled with the loss of income, can push a family into a state of economic crisis. The psychological distress caused by the loss of one's career and social standing can be as damaging as the legal battle itself, leaving men with a profound sense of failure and hopelessness.

Attempted Suicides by Falsely Accused Men

The profound psychological toll of being a falsely accused man in India is starkly illustrated by the tragic phenomenon of attempted suicides. As studies have shown, the combination of legal harassment, public humiliation, financial ruin, and the emotional betrayal from a partner can lead to a state of extreme hopelessness. Reports and case studies, often highlighted by men's rights organizations and media, document instances where men, unable to cope with the immense pressure, have attempted to take their own lives. These attempts are often a desperate cry for help, a last resort when all other avenues of justice and support seem closed.

The lack of adequate legal and psychosocial support for men in these situations is a critical contributing factor. While there are numerous support systems for women who are victims of domestic violence, there are very few, if any, resources tailored to the specific needs of falsely accused men. This absence of a safety net, coupled with the social stigma that discourages men from discussing their struggles, creates a perfect storm of emotional distress. The feeling of being "invisible" to the justice system and society can lead to a sense of powerlessness, where self-harm seems like the only way to escape the ongoing psychological and social torture.

Suicides Resulting from False Accusations

While attempted suicides are a grim reality, an even more tragic outcome is the number of men who successfully take their own lives after being falsely accused. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and various media outlets have repeatedly highlighted that a significant number of suicides among married men are attributed to family-related issues, including false cases of dowry and domestic violence. In many of these heartbreaking cases, suicide notes or testimonies left behind detail the reasons for their actions: the pain of public disgrace, the inability to bear the legal harassment, the sense of injustice, and the anguish of having their elderly parents or other family members implicated in the case.

The absence of accountability for filing false accusations is a major point of contention. The legal system, while providing some avenues for punishment, often fails to adequately deter frivolous complaints. The low conviction rates in Section 498-A cases are often cited as a testament to the high number of unsubstantiated allegations, yet the accusers are rarely held accountable for the immense suffering they cause. This lack of legal deterrents and the enduring social stigma against male victims contribute to a vicious cycle, where the fear of false accusations is pervasive and the consequences are devastatingly real, sometimes ending in the ultimate tragedy of suicide.

Commissions in Favour of Men

The issue of misuse of gender-specific laws, particularly Section 498-A, has been a subject of review by several

government and judicial bodies. The Malimath Committee on Reforms of the Criminal Justice System, in its 2003 report, was one of the first major bodies to acknowledge the serious implications of the misuse of Section 498-A. The committee noted that the law, while well-intentioned, was often used as a tool for harassment and that its non-bailable and non-compoundable nature made reconciliation between couples nearly impossible. The report recommended making the offense bailable and compoundable to prevent the unwarranted arrest of husbands and their families and to facilitate reconciliation.

Similarly, the Law Commission of India has also made observations on the matter, acknowledging that Section 498-A, while having a "lofty social purpose," was being filed with "oblique motives" and that "a new legal terrorism can be unleashed" by its misuse. The Commission recognized the trauma caused by the immediate arrest of family members and advocated for a more cautious approach by the police. These recommendations from official commissions and bodies, along with growing activism from men's rights organizations in India, have played a crucial role in bringing the issue to public and judicial attention. These groups often highlight the need for a balanced approach that protects women from genuine violence while safeguarding men and their families from false allegations.

Judicial Pronouncements in Favour of Men

Indian courts have, over the years, delivered landmark judgments that have sought to curb the misuse of Section 498-A IPC. These judicial pronouncements have been instrumental in providing a degree of protection for men and their families.

- *Preeti Gupta v. State of Jharkhand* (2010): The Supreme Court, in this case, expressed serious concern over the "phenomenal increase in matrimonial disputes" and the tendency to implicate the husband and his entire family in vague and general allegations. The court observed that the law was being misused as a "weapon rather than a shield" and cautioned against the continuation of such cases without specific and cogent evidence. The judgment highlighted the need for courts to use their inherent powers to quash such frivolous complaints at the initial stage itself to prevent the abuse of the legal process.
- *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* (2014) ^[1]: This judgment is a watershed moment in preventing arbitrary arrests under Section 498-A. The Supreme Court acknowledged that the non-bailable nature of the offense was being exploited to make routine arrests without proper investigation. The court issued a series of specific directions to police officers, making it mandatory for them to provide a checklist of reasons before making an arrest. It mandated that a magistrate must satisfy himself with the reasons for the arrest before authorizing it. This judgment effectively curtailed the power of the police to make automatic arrests, thereby protecting men and their families from immediate custody.
- *Rajesh Sharma v. State of U.P.* (2017): In a bid to further prevent the misuse of the law, the Supreme Court issued a set of guidelines, which included the formation of a Family Welfare Committee in every district to review complaints before any police action could be initiated. While this particular directive was

later withdrawn by a larger bench, the court's intent to prevent the harassment of innocent family members was clear. The judgment emphasized that the law was a "potent weapon" but should not be "misused to settle scores" and reiterated the need for caution and proper investigation before an arrest.

These pronouncements collectively represent the judiciary's efforts to bring a degree of balance and fairness to the implementation of the law, ensuring that while the protection of women remains a priority, the rights of the accused are also safeguarded.

Comparative International Perspective

The issue of male victimization in domestic violence is not unique to India, and many other countries have adopted a more gender-neutral approach in their legal frameworks. This comparative perspective offers valuable insights for potential reforms.

- **United States:** Many states in the U.S. have gender-neutral domestic violence laws. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994, while initially focused on women, has been updated over the years to include gender-neutral language, and some of its provisions apply to all victims of domestic violence. State-level laws and protective orders are often available to both male and female victims, recognizing that men can also be perpetrators or victims. This legal framework, coupled with state-run programs, provides a broader scope of protection.
- **United Kingdom:** The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 provides a statutory definition of domestic abuse that is explicitly gender-neutral. The Act defines domestic abuse as a pattern of behavior between two people who are "personally connected" and includes physical, emotional, and economic abuse. It recognizes children as victims if they witness the abuse. The law and the accompanying guidance apply to all victims, regardless of gender, and are a significant step towards creating a more inclusive and equitable legal response to domestic violence.
- **Australia and Canada:** Both Australia and Canada have legal systems that recognize and provide support for male victims of domestic violence. Laws are framed in a gender-neutral manner, and there are specific services and resources available for men who are victims of intimate partner violence. Men's rights organizations and advocacy groups in these countries have played a crucial role in raising awareness and pushing for legislative changes and support systems. This international trend toward gender-neutrality demonstrates a global shift in understanding domestic violence as a human rights issue, not solely a gendered one.

Suggestions

To address the documented issues of legal harassment and the lack of protection for men, a multi-pronged approach involving legislative, judicial, and social reforms is necessary.

Neutralization of Section 498-A

The most prominent suggestion for legal reform is the neutralization of Section 498-A. This can be achieved either by making the provision gender-neutral, thereby allowing men to file complaints of cruelty, or by amending the law with robust safeguards. Proposed safeguards include making the offense bailable and compoundable, which would prevent immediate arrests and foster a climate for reconciliation. Additionally, requiring a preliminary inquiry or a Family Welfare Committee review before an FIR is registered would help filter out frivolous complaints and protect innocent family members from immediate legal harassment.

New Laws for Protection of Men and Elderly

There is a pressing need for comprehensive, gender-neutral domestic abuse legislation that replaces the current fragmented legal remedies. A new law should define domestic violence in a way that includes all genders and all types of abuse (physical, emotional, economic). Such a law would not only provide a formal avenue for men to seek protection but also ensure that elderly parents and other relatives who are often falsely implicated in such cases are also protected. This would create a single, unified legal framework that offers protection to all victims of domestic violence, irrespective of their gender.

Punishment for Filing False Cases

To deter the misuse of laws, there is a strong case for strengthening legal deterrents against false accusations. While provisions like Sections 182 and 211 of the IPC exist, they are rarely invoked or successfully prosecuted. It is crucial to create a more effective mechanism to ensure that those who file malicious and unsubstantiated cases are held accountable. A more stringent application of these laws, coupled with judicial directions, would act as a powerful deterrent against using the legal system as a tool for personal vendetta. The possibility of punishment for perjury would also encourage honest testimony and reduce the number of false cases.

Time-bound Trials in Matrimonial Offences

The prolonged litigation in matrimonial disputes is a form of harassment in itself, often causing severe psychological and financial distress. Implementing time-bound trials and establishing specialized fast-track courts for matrimonial offenses would ensure that justice is delivered in a timely manner. This would not only reduce the burden on the accused but also provide swift justice to genuine victims. It would prevent the use of prolonged legal battles as a tool of revenge and would help both parties to move on with their lives more quickly.

Conclusion

The conversation that surrounds victims of crime is undergoing a transition, shifting from a singular aspect of knowledge to one that is more complex and all-encompassing. The current legal framework in India, particularly in the context of matrimonial disputes, presents a substantial challenge for males who are the victims of fraudulent allegations. Despite the noble intention of laws such as Section 498-A to safeguard women from maltreatment, their misuse has resulted in a new category of victims: men and their families.

The analysis of the psychological and social impacts on men, from emotional distress to the loss of employment and social standing, paints a grim picture. The high number of suicides and attempted suicides among falsely accused men serves as a tragic testament to the severity of this issue. Landmark judicial pronouncements have acknowledged this reality and have taken steps to curb the misuse of the law, but they are not a complete solution.

The need for gender-neutrality in the legal discourse and in the legal system as a whole is paramount. An equitable justice system must protect all victims, regardless of their gender, and hold false accusers accountable for their actions. This requires a balanced approach that maintains the protective spirit of existing laws while implementing safeguards to prevent their misuse. By adopting a comprehensive, gender-neutral legal framework and strengthening deterrents against false cases, society can work towards an equitable system that provides genuine justice for all.

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