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Moving the Narrative Forward: Communication and Strategic Responses to Violent Dowry Conflict in India

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"Throughout the world, targets of unrestrained violence cry out for just peace." (Matyok, 2011, xxiii)

Dowry Conflict and Peace Building in India

Dowry has been illegal in India since 1961. Yet, extortive dowry practices—where the groom and his family continue to demand payment and goods after marriage with the threat or actuality of violence for the bride—are still common in certain regions and communities of India. Marriage "deals" are rarely fixed or final at marriage (Bloch & Rao, 2002; Srinivasan & Bedi, 2007; Srinivasan & Lee, 2004; Van Willigen, 1991). In fact, they are frequently subject to continued and often aggressive renegotiations by the groom and his family who can, and often do, assume the power to "change the deal" even after the deal is supposedly "done" at marriage. If new demands are not met, the bride is then subject to threats, violence, and/or other mistreatment. This may include abuse at the hands of her husband and members of his family. The violence or threat of violence, and more subtle emotional pressure, indignities, and abuses, are used to leverage, extort, and/or punish, discipline, and shame the woman and her family. This sometimes occurs in public displays of violence, and sometimes in hidden or private family spaces (note that as many as two thirds of the cases are estimated to go unreported) (Rew, Gangoli & Gill, 2013). Many women in such marriages endure and suffer in environments that are a long way from peaceful.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in 2005, approximately 7000 women were reported murdered over dowry disputes, and the bureau suggests that the real numbers (reported plus unreported) may be as much as 25,000 per year—indicating a dowry death every 77 minutes in India. In 2011 the NCRB reported 8,618 dowry harassment deaths in India and reiterated that the real numbers may triple this annually. This recent increase is supported by research that also indicates that cases are still on the rise (Srinivasan & Bedi, 2007). These statistics only take into consideration deaths related to dowry violence. Statistics on more everyday micro-aggressions and human indignities endured by women are much harder to come by or estimate. However, if the violent cases are the tip of the proverbial iceberg, then aggression and mistreatment are enormous problems that remain unknown for the most part.

Even though these statistics show that dowry conflict and violence are realities in many women`s lives, there are meaningful efforts to promote structural and systemic changes, as well as inspire changes to the symbolic and cultural environment that leads to such human rights violations in India around dowry (Katzenstein, 1989; Kellett, 2013; Shenk, 2007). Building on Matyok's assertion above, this paper explores how communication is at the core of *how* people cry out for just peace, and how people, communities, and the (Indian) society responds to those cries. Peace is a long way away for women caught in dowry conflict, but strategic communication is at the forefront of moving the narrative

forward in purposeful and integrated ways (Zelizer, 2013). Here, we examine three of these interrelated and interconnected areas of strategic communication: a) The engagement of shero narratives and their counter-narratives; b) the crucial role of new and social media in cultivating social-justice based change; and c) systemic changes brought about by the impact of the above two factors and the broader social movements for anti-violence and women's rights; (Singh, 2013).

Engaging Sheroic Narratives and their Counter Narratives

"My message to all you young girls is, 'don't give them a penny'" (Nisha Sharma, 2003)

In almost any movement for social change, including the discourse around dowry conflict in India, there are narratives of the extraordinary personal stories made public that embody and valorize superordinate virtue, fortitude, resilience, and even triumph (typically when the victim has survived to tell the tale) in the face of unbelievable suffering. Such stories can capture the attention of mainstream, as well as online and social media and global news coverage; they can provide publics with clear and personalized accounts of much more complex social forces and injustices, as well as relevant progress; they can galvanize public reactions in ways that cultivate and promote needed action and change; and they can mark important turning points in the progress of a discourse as they are taken up by the discourse. They may also become archetypical of a social problem to the extent that particular stories provide immediate and ready-made iconic images and catch phrases, like the one quoted above from Nisha Sharma, that audiences/publics can invoke and discuss on the broader topic of dowry conflict. In short, these stories can move the narrative forward in important ways. The current role of Malala Yousufzai in the parallel struggle for women's education in the face of oppression is a paradigm exemplar of a sheroic narrative.

Shero narratives are usually told by women who have lived through them. But, they can also be told by others when the woman did not survive but showed enormous bravery in death, and made a meaningful contribution to the larger cause or express the voice of a broader group as part of a larger movement. In either case, the narratives become part of a conflicted discourse of struggle, survival, and triumph in progressing beyond the social and relational conditions creating the events represented in their stories. These women's stories are *sheroic narratives* and the women who tell them are called *sheroes* (Kellett, 2007, 2013, 2014; Labre & Duke, 2004; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003).

A shero is not necessarily bound by, derived from, or compliment the male form (as in hero/heroine) or the actions and character of a male hero in the story. It is not a supporting role to the man—actually it is quite the opposite. The sheroic narrative captures the actions and motives of women—often isolated in dangerous situations. Therefore, they embody specifically a woman's standpoint on conflict and violence, and on the character qualities and values that sheroes embody. Of course, there are some cross over on key virtues and qualities of heroes and sheroes. A shero may be a courageous warrior as much as a traditional male hero and more feminine qualities such as the perseverance and fidelity of the traditional heroine mayor may not be central to how a woman constructs herself, or is constructed by others, telling her story (Kellett, 2007, 2014). The differences and particularities

are, however, important to consider given that women are the overwhelming majority of victims in dowry conflict cases. Thus, we need a different vocabulary for narrative analysis of such personal stories starting with a different vocabulary—hence, our insistence on "shero," "sheroes," and "sheroic." In this section we discuss one sheroic narrative as an exemplar, and show how it is specifically *sheroic*. The impact of these narratives in shaping the broader discourse of the dowry conflict problem, as well as public reactions to it, is explored.

One case of particular note in showing the connection between sheroic narratives and their impact on moving the narrative forward is that of Shehnaz Bano (UNWOMEN.org, 2012). When Shehnaz married in 2009, she never suspected her life would be defined by dowry violence, although the warning signs were probably there from the start. Her in-laws were never satisfied with the dowry her family produced. Her family tried appeasement as a negotiation tactic—producing as large a dowry as they could at the time of the wedding. Soon, however, there was pressure for more. Demands increased until they were quickly unable to meet them. As a consequence, more explicitly abusive behavior began, which is a typical scenario. She essentially became a domestic slave. She was forced to do all of the domestic work in her husband's household. She catered full-time to the demands of the eight people who lived there. Because of her low dowry production she was punished by not being provided with any personal money and very little food. When she became ill from the physical brutality, she would have to ask her own family to take her to the hospital. She would return to find that she was locked out. Her in-laws would only let her back in the house after intervention from police or neighbors. There was little chance for her to escape from the situation due to the social stigma associated with leaving, and her lack of funds to support herself if she did. When her sister-in-law attacked her with a knife she knew she had to get out. The Lawyers Collective--a women's rights initiative (see www.lawyerscollective.org/) in accord with the 2005 Protection of Women from Dowry Violence Act--provided essential support and legal help for her to escape and to prosecute her ex-husband.

Today, she personifies success. She is living independently and is enjoying a violence free life. Through her story she promotes the need for women to overcome their fears, stand up for themselves, move on with their lives, and not blame themselves for circumstances beyond their control. She is sheroic in overcoming very difficult circumstances, focusing on moving forward, accepting and acknowledging help from others, and embodying strength and success on her own terms and in some ways against the cultural grain. Her story is retold often by others as part of a bigger narrative towards ending violence against women, encouraging the empowerment of other women, and the need for women to trust programs that are designed to help them. Her story is rhetorically invitational as it helps to tell the bigger-story as part of a broader social movement.

Sheroic stories can have a polarizing effect, especially in short term conflicted reaction sequences through the creation of counter-narratives that disrupt the conflict and peace-building discourse related to dowry conflict. Oppositional stories that are meant to attack the truth claims and rhetorical appeals of the sheroic narratives can emerge, as in this case. Shehnaz's ex-husband and in-laws have a very different story on her actions and on their own behavior. The most obvious counter-narrative strategy would be to create stories that portray the perpetrator (male and his

family) as a victim in some way, particularly if the woman can be portrayed as having less than sheroic motives. One person's shero can be another person's villain. Such narratives attempt to shift blame away from the man and typically vilify the female, or broader social forces (the impact of the dowry act laws, for example). These attempts to blame the other—*and not the self*--can be read as a simple reactive (often short term and localized) and projective pattern based on a polarized discourse in which the relational conflict between (ex) spouses is situated.

Peace is hard to promote in such polarized conditions until the desire for oppositional narratives and related blame dynamics can become neutralized. Movement towards neutrality, or even common ground, is more likely to happen when the counter-narratives are understood and engaged with as part of the same shared discursive pattern than if they are simply dismissed, ignored, silenced, ridiculed, or vilified. Divisive tactics exemplified in his counter-narrative perpetuate the warring pattern. A more engaged back and forth of stories and counter stories can be a path to enemy making or part of the movement towards a bigger narrative of progress. The intent and quality of the discourse and the willingness of opponents to listen to the stories and counter-narratives within their shared cultural context impacts the potential for change.

A case in point is that of Suhaib Ilyasi in 2000. In the Iliyasi case, the wife of well-known crime TV series producer, Ilyasi, was mysteriously stabbed to death—allegedly, the case was never proven in court--over her refusal to bend to harassment for more dowry payments from him and his family. He fought back, claiming that he was being extorted and abused by his in-laws through the anti-dowry law in order to get custody of their children (The law known as 498A). Ilyasi and his supporters from the legal community in India argue that women abuse the anti-dowry law in significant numbers, and that these abuses are underreported by a biased news media. According to this counter argument women who are unhappy with their new husbands use the hot button "dowry violence" issue to claim dowry harassment in order to get men arrested and, at the very least, publicly humiliated. Some men claim that the bride and her family use the law as a threat to extort money and goods from them. Hence, a culture of extortion can breed a back and forth of counter extortion. Despite the overwhelming number of abuses of women compared to men, the male victim story also exists and has its believers and passionate narrators and advocates. Iliyasi himself produced a film to capture his and various others´ experiences on the other side of the dowry law. This argumentative back-and-forth surrounding counter and oppositional narratives is a factor in the peacebuilding discourse.

Engaging Online and Social Media

In the contemporary global world, social media is becoming a significant (although uneven and imperfect) channel for voicing social problems, and for initiating and coordinating the energy and shape of social movements. The push for deeper systemic and social change relies on such media. Social media has led to citizen empowerment and the furthering of social movements such as the anti-dowry movement. Shero narratives, core to this discourse, are often communicated and talked about through online and social media. This pivotal role of media in contemporary change is illustrated by Olorunnisola and Martin (2013) as follows:

> […] The capability of marginalized groups to influence mainstream media coverage of their causes by strategically

using new media and the ability to enable open citizen-created journalism that, though participatory and communally-constructed means, could encourage democratic activity (p. 277).

The Arab Spring is an illustration of the power of online and social media to unify and amplify the ordinary voices of Middle Eastern citizens and to mobilize action (Chouliaraki & Blaagaard, 2013; Lindsey, 2013). According to Howard, et al. (2011), "after analyzing over 3 million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts, a new study finds that social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring" (Howard et al., 2011, p. 2). Social media's positive and influential effect on public opinion and its ability to disseminate news and information at a rapid pace will continue to be a central part of spreading messages on a global level (Lindsey, 2013).

In relation to dowry conflict in India, social media are significant forces in creating necessary conflicts by pushing positive transformation forward. Social media based communication often helps to highlight the individual, social, and legal dimensions of the lives of people, and therefore provide vivid—even sometimes viral-images, stories, and opinions relevant to social change (Porismita, 2008). The portrayal of dowry violence in mainstream news media routinely consists of simple crime stories that emphasize the macabre details of cases, with minimal social and cultural context (Kellett, 2013; Porismita, 2008). Online and social media based communication, by contrast, often promotes public knowledge of the lived reality and cultural context of dowry cases. Recent and emerging communication on Facebook and Twitter, promote the portrayal of dowry violence more frequently and consistently as a social evil and injustice that has immediacy in affecting real people close to everyone living in India.

Social media can play a role in shifting the agenda of the mainstream media. Since social media has become progressively popular and increasingly used as a news medium, dowry violence stories have attained noticeably larger coverage on the mainstream media agenda. Media are said to be the backbone of India's culture because they play such a crucial role in the promotion of civil rights and liberties of its citizens (Nandi, 2011). According to *The Global Media Journal*, "Power of press can also be understood in the basis of how the people respond and react to the news" (Nandi, 2011, p. 8). Understanding and maximizing the agenda-setting function of mainstream media, as well as online and social media, is crucial in promoting the goals of the anti-dowry movement and building support for change that results in more peaceful marital and familial relationships (Rees, 2013). In order to achieve changes in public awareness and behavior, the appropriate forms of media have to be used. People between 18-34 years of age prefer to use the internet and social media as their source of information (Griffin, 2012, p. 378). People in this age bracket are probably most concerned with the values, practices, and mores of relationships and marriage. Online and social media provide access to immediate and current information about dowry and violence, and they also provide the discursive space where the necessary transformations of thinking and behavior are being engendered.

Even a brief analysis of recent communications concerning dowry conflict and violence on Twitter and Facebook reveals that their impact is significant, and its reach is potentially global. On just one twitter site, there are several groups that have been formed that tweet multiple times

a day and offer information, real life photos, and the hash tag (#) symbol, accompanied by words or phrases such as #dowry or #victim. The site promotes further discussion and critical investigation of the issue. The discussions and hash tag marks encourage the formation of groups or "followers" to become active and emotionally invested in the cause; Justice For Women, 50 Million Missing: Stop Female Genocide, and SAY NO UNiTE are just a few of the many groups that, when combined, embody hundreds of thousands of followers.

Facebook also offers a context platform for discussion and global connections of people around the dowry issue. There is a page dedicated solely to the war on dowry. This page is an anti-dowry club that spreads the word on the violent issue and even goes as far as to raise pledges against the act. Other pages focus on specific target demographics such as Dowry: Crime Against Humanity, Youth against dowry, and Stand against dowry. As illustrated by these sites, social media not only makes it possible to globalize issues, but also has the ability to organize and mobilize specific groups of people around dowry issues, and anti-dowry goals. How and to what extent this impacts practices and policy changes is yet to be examined and determined, but the signs of impact are promising.

In India, it is hard to analyze the impact that mainstream news media stories about dowry conflicts have on the public (Steinberg, 2012). They are not typically oriented towards collective change, but rather, the arrest and punishment of individual perpetrators. Online sites, in particular Facebook and Twitter do, however, seem to compensate for the limited availability of information in conventional news media (Steinberg, 2012). These online entities provide the advantage of anonymity to both the author of the information and its consumers. Currently, there are several Twitter sites dedicated solely to dowry violence and all of its atrocities. This has helped bridge the void represented by much of mainstream media coverage. The realization that victims of this social evil could be your friend, your sister, or your neighbor, has helped to frame it as a global and local issue instead of casting it as a domestic crime problem that is far away.

Several forms of online and social media are responsible for cultivating and energizing public opinion in regards to dowry violence and crimes against women. As stated by Nandi (2011) of the Global Media Journal, "Over the years, media has helped to form public opinion and has been quite successful in this role" (p. 1). The Priyadarshini Mattoo's rape and murder is an important case in point. Her case and related trial lead to the realization of the significant power of new media. Mattoo was a college student who was attending a party. Later during the party, she was first raped then brutally murdered by a male who beat her over the head with a motorcycle helmet until she died. The case went to trial and was ultimately dropped due to "lack of evidence" and failure to provide enough information which led to the murderer not being found guilty (Nandi, 2011). This verdict created severe backlash and eventually earned the case an appeal. The backlash was organized via online media and helped the information and facts of the case reach "transnational audiences and circumvented traditional top-down hierarchical" communication patterns (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013, p. 277). The original verdict was overturned, and the killer was found guilty (Nandi, 2011). In relation to this story of legal and social victory, Anna Rees of RESET claims media coverage of violence against women has been a key to encouraging women who have been threatened or abused by their husbands in relation to dowry to report it (Rees, 2013).

The power of online and social media is illustrated by the way in which the public reacts to it, how people`s opinions and actions are shaped and coordinated by it, and what kind of change results from it. Policies and laws relating to dowry violence, as well as public understanding of the issue, have changed in recent decades. Media coverage has been a significant force in shaping this cultural change. In terms of the dowry conflict and violence problem, there is still a long way to go in India. The recent global coverage of gang rapes in India is one example that illustrates this problem. Yet, social media plays a significant role in much needed social change that moves the narrative forward in important ways.

Engaging Systemic Community Action and Change

Shero narratives and the use online and social media have contributed enormously to the rhetorical and narrative energy for systemic social change. They are part of a bigger whole in which change occurs and which, in turn, impacts the lives that women live and the stories they tell. Dowry conflict and violence, though peaking as a public issue in India in more recent decades, has been a problem that has victimized women over a considerable span of history. It continues today in communities across India even though dowry has been illegal in India since 1961 (Shenk, 2011). As such, violent dowry conflict can be defined partly as a systemic cultural, legal, and community problem. Thus, changes at these levels are crucial.

For decades the feminist and other women's movements have been working through grassroots campaigns often spurred on by gruesome cases that capture and channel public outrage through various media in India. Such activism has helped to create resistance to the demeaning behaviors and the cultural practices surrounding dowry conflict. Activism has also helped to bring about important legal and systemic changes relevant to dowry.

In the last two decades, as illustrated by the recent cases such as those discussed above, media coverage involving online and social media has impacted the discourse of dowry conflict and violence. Many Indians, have participated in protests aimed at forcing policymakers to act on the issue. Through protest and awareness building campaigns, as well as political pressure through strategic media use, the framing of the public conversation on this issue has started to shift from one of mundane or normalized "crime" into one of gendered violence within a social justice framework that is more typical in current thinking (Gupta, 2009). At a grassroots community level, structural changes to policies and practices have brought important changes to the problem of dowry conflict and violence. One fascinating example of impactful recent change has been the creation of all female police stations in many larger urban Indian communities.

Police stations are primarily staffed by male officers even though women constitute half of the population. In India, women currently make up a mere 6.5% of police station staff (Mandhana, 2013). Given this imbalanced ratio, it is no wonder that women have traditionally been reluctant to report sex crimes and other related violence. They often face insensitivity and additional abuse when approaching male officers in regards to sexual assault. In 1992, all women police stations (AWPS) were created in India as an effort to counteract this attitude (Kandaswamy, 2004). These all women battalions were created in order to focus heavily on crimes against women—of which dowry violence is a significant part. According to Chief Minister Jayalalitha, "Since women constitute half the

population, their problems could better be understood by policewomen" (Kandaswamy, 2004, p. 58). This innovation has promoted female empowerment and resulted in an estimated 23% increase in the reporting of crimes committed against women. Further, as the conviction rate for dowry related violence has increased, so has the reporting of it (Kandaswamy, 2004).

Currently there are 188 AWPS's across India. Support for women has been expanded beyond the stations in the construction of a toll free help-line, *Women in Distress*. This help-line takes anonymous complaints and pursues them at the same priority level as regular complaints (Kandaswamy, 2004). In response to the help-line, Deputy Commander Kamini says "We have more women coming forward to report crimes against women and against society in general […] Response to women's commando companies has been extremely positive" (as cited in Kandaswamy, 2004, p. 58).

There are important recent legal developments of note aimed at improving responsiveness once crimes have been reported. Specifically, on March 21st of 2013, India passed a Sexual Offense bill that mandates that all complaints of rape, stalking, and other sex crimes, must be taken by female officers. This bill is the result of decades of activism. It was also inspired by the mounting realization that the culture and attitudes of responders needed to change. These attitudes are captured by the dismissive words of a senior male Police Officer who was quoted as saying, "Who will rape such an old woman" in response to an official complaint that was made by a 34 year old woman (as cited in Mandhana, 2013). In order to implement this bill effectively, new goals are currently being set that include having a woman in every police station and working to place skilled volunteers from non-governmental agencies in close contact and accessibility to victims (Mandhana, 2013). The overall aim of these changes is to support women in their reporting of dowry related crime. To have women constitute 33% of the police force versus the current 6.5% is an important evolution in supportiveness, and a change that will be impactful (Greenwood, 2013).

The passing of this law and the subsequent changes are the result of decades of social activism surrounding the deeper root causal issues. As far back as the 1970's and 1980's, a wave of Indian feminism erupted, demanding attention from mainstream media and the culture around dowry and women's issues more generally. This was known as the beginning of the women's movement in India. The movement focused on the status of women in India, and devoted itself partly to reshaping the public conscience around sexual violence against women—including dowry related violence (Gupta, 2009). The Committee on the Status of Women in India led to the formation of new autonomous women's groups that even further promoted women's activism (Gupta, 2009). Their substantial presence is evidenced by, among other things, the redefinition of the term "rape." For years before, this term in India was considered simply to mean a violation of a women's integrity. This definition fails to illustrate the violence and the pain of this crime, so women joined together, creating a movement incorporating both women and men who sought change. The social movement had an identity around anti-capitalism, anti-patriarchy, and the promotion of equality for women. Dowry conflict and violence has deep connections to each of these movements (Gupta, 2009). The feminist movement was viewed as successful because it meshed together jurisdiction, economy, marriage, and violence against women as an integrated set of issues. The far reaching and integrated set

of ideals of this social movement has been central to public responses and its impact on law, policies, and practices.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, the activism has focused on more targeted and specific incidents, often as a result of mainstream media reporting that sparked localized outrage. It was not uncommon during this time period for activists to organize confrontations focused towards specific harassers face to face. Kishwar (2005) explains:

Our engagement spontaneously took the form of holding protest demonstrations outside the house of the murdered or dead woman, calling for a social boycott of the family, which had tortured the family or driven her to suicide. Each such demonstration would then move on to the local police station, either protesting against their complicity or demanding that they take appropriate and swift action in booking culprits (p. 3).

Outside of police stations, demonstrators often demanded legal action and protested against connivance (Kishwar, 2005). These and other more specific methods of confrontation led to significant steps forward for women in the 1980's and beyond. It is believed that contemporary and future forms of protest and activism will rely more and more on evolving modes of communication such as social media, as well as cultural media such as film, television, song, and dance (Kishwar, 2005). Even daily television serials, which are extremely popular, can be impactful. Several of the very popular serials (Diya Aur Baati Hum, for example) focus on women's rights and related contemporary issues. It will be interesting to trace the interconnections of communication, media, culture, and changes to dowry practices in India from here forward.

Conclusion

Understanding how communication and media work in accord with legal and other cultural and systemic shifts to propagate and cultivate changes to dowry practices is crucial and timely. Such systemically thick and difficult cultural changes require cultivation through strategic and sustained communication. Online and social media in particular are playing, and will continue to play, a vital role in propagating change to the dowry discourse. As Palkar (2003) rightly cautioned us a decade ago, there still is a long way to go. The robust presence and interconnection of personal (shero and other survivor) narratives, opinions, comments, virtual discussions, and related communication through Twitter and to a lesser extent through Facebook, as well as online media forums and sites, is encouraging in suggesting that changes are being cultivated at grassroots levels among interested publics (Kellett, 2013, 2014). The narrative is being pushed and pulled along, albeit as a long-term struggle for change within a political environment, which may or may not be supportive.

A more detailed analysis of multiple survivor and shero narratives would be useful in understanding their appeal and impact. There are also change narratives that have yet to be captured. For instance, men have changed their perspective on dowry, and approach marriage as the negotiation of peaceful and productive relationships. These narratives would be extremely valuable to collect and examine. Exploring the close connection between strategic communication, broader social movements, and emerging legal and cultural/community changes would be valuable. Another area for research would be to explore what really happens in female constabularies that makes them so different and invitational. Finally, the continued evolution and impact of online and social media on public awareness, opinion, behavior, political pressure, and

policy relating to this and other significant conflicts calls out for more detailed case analysis and longitudinal studies of discourse changes.

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