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Marriage of women with mental illness: An overview

Background: Marriage is important social institution. Hindu religion mandates that all persons must marry. In patriarchal societies, such as India, it is difficult to marry women without paying “dowry”, the bride price. Women with mental illness face more problems relating to marriage, than men, which are greatly influenced by the prevailing socio-cultural norms.

Aim: This paper will present the scenario with respect to women, marriage and mental illness in India. It will focus on various stages before, during and after marriage. The paper will highlight the socio-cultural and legal factors relating to the same.

Result: Results of this study are: Solemnization of marriage of women with mental illness is difficult because of disability resulting from mental illness and social stigma; most women with mental illness get married. Arranged marriage, concealment of prior history of mental illness from the prospective party and offer of handsome dowry facilitate the solemnization of marriage; after marriage when mental illness is discovered in the women, rejection is common, especially if the mental illness surfaces within two years of marriage; various marriage laws (e.g., Hindu Marriage Act, Special Marriage Act, etc.,) have put some restrictions on marriage of persons with mental illness; making the marriage voidable if illness is severe, chronic and disabling; many married women with mental illness become victims of domestic violence; a vicious circle sets between domestic violence-mental illness-marriage; the Dowry Prohibition Act, protection of women from Domestic Violence Act and of cruelty by husband and relatives of husband (498A), are often involved from the women’s side for restitution of conjugal rights, not for divorce. This is the “Indian paradox”; significantly larger number of women are separated/divorced and do not receive maintenance/alimony; parents are more worried about the marriage than by the mental illness; most separated/divorced husbands remarry. The 2nd marriage, even when illegal has social approval and; remarriage of separated/divorced women with mental illness, rejected by is not uncommon.

Conclusion: Mental illness affects both men and women, but the effect of severe mental illness is more devastating in married women than in men. There is an urgent need for mental health education regarding acceptability of mental illness.

Biography

Indira Sharma has completed her MBBS, MD in Psychiatry, PhD in Forensic Medicine, Diploma in Yoga and Certificate Yoga “Practices in Daily Living”. She is a Vice President at Indian Association of Social Psychiatry. She was a Professor Head of Department of Psychiatry & Head of the Child Psychiatry at Department of Psychiatry, Institute of Medical Sciences, Banaras Hindu University, India. She was an Associate Professor at University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Professor of Psychiatry, BP Koirala Institute of Medical Sciences, Dharan, Nepal; President of Indian Psychiatry Society; President at SAARC Psychiatric Federation; President of the Indian Association of Child & Adolescent Mental Health; Editor of the Journal of Child & Adolescent Mental Health; Editor of the Indian Journal of Behavioural Sciences. She has 125 publications in national and international journals (including 2 books and 17 chapters).

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