

Scars and Screams

Category: Scars

written by Nidhi Lal | April 28, 2024

When I think of scars, my mind drifts back to my rotation in the Burn Unit as an intern in Mumbai, India. We were conducting trials on the use of a plant-based calendula gel on burn dressings. As an intern, I would attend to each patient throughout my entire twelve-hour shift. My patients were young women, some even younger than myself at the time, usually between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, all victims of burns.

These young women silently endured the painful procedures of my work: the unwrapping of their wounds; the application of the salve; and, the re-dressing of their injuries. Most of them were given enough pain medication to be unaware of the process, but some screamed when we touched them.

It pains me to admit that all of these women were victims of a heinous custom: dowry. Their burns were not accidental; they were deliberately inflicted by their greedy husbands and in-law families.

Despite the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, which renders the practice illegal, dowry demands persist in many parts of India. In some cases, this leads to extortion and violence against the wife. These women were burned for the sake of money and wealth, most commonly by their own cooking stoves, using their sarees as fuel. The narrative was always controlled by the husband's family. The victim was either too traumatized or too injured to speak for herself. Even if she recovered, the truth remained buried. Our role was to apply the salve to their wounds, aiding in their healing and minimizing scarring.

The only visitors these women received were their mothers, who wept alongside their daughters' silent tears and prayed fervently for their recovery. Sadly, many of these women succumbed to their injuries, carrying their scars and screams to the grave. Those who did recover often returned to the homes of their abusers, and some returned to us only in shrouds.

Their scars and screams of pain linger in my memory, a constant reminder of the injustice and cruelty they endured. I bear these scars, and when I revisit them, my heart bleeds.

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