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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Legal Responsibility of the Media in Addressing the Issue of Dowry

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

Marriage is regarded as one of the most significant legal institutions in Iranian law, with 'mahr' (Dowry) constituting one of its principal financial consequences. Beyond its contractual nature, 'mahr' serves economic, social, and protective functions within the family. In recent decades, however, socio-economic transformations, coupled with the expansion of mass media and digital platforms, have rendered 'mahr' a contentious public issue. Media organizations increasingly shape public perceptions of 'mahr' by emphasizing particular narratives-such as excessive dowries, the imprisonment of debtors, and family disputes. While the media enjoy the constitutional principle of freedom of expression, this freedom is not absolute and may give rise to civil liability when unlawful media content causes legally recognizable harm. Despite extensive scholarship on family law, media law, and civil liability, few studies have specifically examined whether media representations of 'mahr' may result in civil liability under Iranian law. The present study aims to address this gap.

Method:

This research is fundamental-applied in terms of purpose and adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were collected through documentary and library research, including Iranian statutes, jurisprudential sources, legal textbooks, scholarly articles, and communication theories. In addition, a qualitative review of selected media content-comprising newspaper reports, news agency publications, television programs, and social media content concerning 'mahr' - was conducted to identify dominant patterns of media representation. Rather than empirically measuring media effects, the study analyzes the legal implications of these representations within the framework of Iranian civil liability law.

Findings:

The findings indicate that media representations of 'mahr' can generally be classified into four dominant patterns: (1) 'mahr' as a source of family and social crisis; (2) 'mahr' as an instrument of pressure within marital disputes; (3) 'mahr' as the wife's statutory financial right; and (4) mahr as a socio-economic phenomenon influenced by broader economic and cultural developments. These patterns are effectively explained through Agenda-Setting and Framing theories. Agenda-Setting demonstrates how repeated media attention increases the perceived importance of particular aspects of mahr, whereas Framing explains how selective presentation influences public interpretation. Nevertheless, the study also finds that media representations constitute only one of several factors affecting public attitudes toward mahr and should not be regarded as the sole determinant of social or legal consequences.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that media representation of mahr does not, by itself, establish civil liability under Iranian law. Civil liability arises only where all legal elements-including wrongful conduct, legally recognizable damage, causation, and fault-are established. Accordingly, media organizations may incur liability only when inaccurate, misleading, or distorted representations of mahr violate professional standards and directly cause provable harm. Therefore, a balanced approach that simultaneously protects freedom of expression and safeguards individual rights against harmful media content is more consistent with the principles of Iranian civil liability law.

Data Availability Statement.

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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