

## **Dowry: An Overview**

Dowry is the transfer of parental property or wealth, at the time of a daughter's marriage, to the groom or his family. It does not refer to the voluntary giving of gifts from one family to another, but is rather what is extracted from the bride and her parents at the time of marriage.

It differs from dower or bride price, in that **bride price** is a payment made *by* the groom's family to the family of the bride; while **dower** is a property settlement made by the groom on the bride, at the time of marriage, which remains under the ownership and control of the bride herself.

Being a custom as ancient as the temples in India, the origins of the dowry system predate all known records of the practice. However, the practice continues in full force as dowries are expected –and even demanded – as a condition to accept marriage proposals. It is said that dowries were initially used to differentiate between Muslim and Hindu marriages in the subcontinent (as dowries are not allowed in Islam); dowries were also used to differentiate between different castes within Indian society.

Also, dowry was practiced mostly by the upper classes in Indian society, whilst the lower classes would indulge in the custom of bride price to make up for the loss of family income. This is probably due to the exclusion of the woman from the economy in the upper echelons of Indian society.

However, it is important to note that the system of dowry has not always been in the Indian Subcontinent alone. Dowries were a custom in Irish, Greek, Roman and Chinese marriages along with specific European societies; until the dawn of the modern civilization. In the modern era, the prevalence of the dowry system varies depending on class or geographical location.

The system of dowry can play an important role in violence against women. Disputes related to dowry can result in acts of violence against the bride – sometimes even the groom. These acts include killing and acid attacks, among others.

### **System of Dowry in the Indian Subcontinent**

The system of dowry is seen in patriarchal societies, which expect the bride to live with or near her husband's family. Known as *Jahez* in Arabic, *Joutuk* in Bangladesh and *Aaunpot* in eastern parts of India, the dowry system has been known to put great financial burden on the bride's family. In India, dowry is a major reason why selective sex abortion is common to avoid having to raise a girl child. Such customs are usually found in South Asian countries (ranging from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan to Indonesia and Sri Lanka) and the Persian Gulf region (Iran).

According to Nalini Singh, an Indian Sociologist, the system of dowry results from the unequal status of women in society. Societal perception of women being less productive compared to men, leads to brides being considered *deficient* as human beings and less important in the family's political structure. Dowries are seen as a way to make up for this deficiency, and are a convenient way to extort money from the bride's family. It must be noted, however, that dowry is just one of

the many different ways new brides are maltreated in the in-laws' houses, as a result of their inferior political status within the family structure.

Other factors which promote the system of dowry include

***(a) Economic factors***

The unequal power distribution between both sexes results in weak legal institutions that do not work to correct the inheritance systems which put women at a disadvantage. Unable to inherit a substantial amount, unlike their male counterparts, women are left dependent upon their husbands and in-laws; who in turn keep the dowry the bride brings with her.

This system can also be seen as a pre-mortem inheritance method, where once dowry has been given to the women, she may be cut off from further inheritance from the family estate.

Prior to 1956 (including during the British Raj) daughters had no right of inheritance in the subcontinent. In 1956, India officially recognized the daughters' claim to inheritance and gave them legal status under the Hindu Succession Act. Unfortunately, the system of dowry still continues to this day as an age-old custom; and can leave the family of the bride destitute in their efforts to meet the demands of the groom's family.

***(b) Social factors***

In South Asian countries, especially those included in the Indian subcontinent, the patrilocal and social structure of marriage is responsible for contributing to the dowry system. Traditional customs and rituals – including parents' expectations of dowry – are also important factors to consider.

Another reason for the custom of dowry to continue is that the parents of the bride also approve dowries, as it provides them with the opportunity to showcase their opulence and “love for their daughter”. Instead of spending money on their daughters' education, parents prefer to save that money in order to be able to provide an adequate dowry at the time of her marriage.

*The subordinate status of women in the family ensures that dowry is a way to make up for the woman's deficiencies. Women's education, income and health are just some of the factors which play into the dowry system, along with how much control the woman has over her marriage.*

It is unfortunate that women also play a part in propagating the tradition of marriage. Conveniently forgetting that their daughters will be subject to the same maltreatment one day, most mothers-in-law even taunt the new brides for bringing with them insufficient dowries; thus playing into the system.

***(c) Religious factors***

While there is no justification in any religion regarding the dowry system, some Muslims justify the practice in terms of *jahez-i-fatema*. In Muslim communities that continue this practice, the dowry is

separate from the payment of Maher (which is paid to the bride by the groom), or the dowry (which is required by Shariah law). It exceeds often exceeds the cost of the marriage arrangements, which are usually shouldered by the bride's family.

The culture of dowry is seen only in Muslims living in the subcontinent, and is not prevalent in Muslims living in other parts of the world. This custom is so prevalent in Muslim families in the subcontinent that they continue with this custom even after moving abroad.

The concept is also widespread among Hindus and other religious groups.

### **Dowry Related Violence**

The dowry system has been known to instigate violence against women. Dowry deaths, bride burnings, etc are just some of the violent acts related to dowries. These acts do not result from any mismatch between gifts demanded and those received, but rather are a result of absolute zero standing of the woman in her new family.

Dowry deaths are deaths of young women who are murdered or driven to suicide, by continuous torture or harassment at the hands of the in-laws in an effort to extort increased dowry. Such deaths include suicides by hanging, poisoning or fire.

According to the Indian National Crime Record Bureau, India has by far the highest number of dowry deaths globally. A total of **24,771** dowry deaths were recorded in India in the last three years (2012, 2013 and 2014), with a maximum of such deaths occurring in Uttar Pradesh. This means that a *bride is burned every 90 minutes* in India. However, if adjusted for population size, Pakistan has the highest number of dowry related deaths in the world today.

Over 95% of all marriages in Pakistan involve the transfer of dowry. Over **2000** dowry-related deaths take place in the country each year. According to the Progressive Women's Association, 300 women are burned each year in Pakistan in dowry related cases. These incidents are almost always portrayed as accidents, such as an 'exploding stove'.

The patriarchal system is so strong that the police most times refuses to register First Information Report regarding dowry cases and in turn harasses the victim. Since no proper records/statistics are maintained, it is difficult to say how many more women are actually killed or violently hurt in the name of dowry.

Women need to understand that a hefty dowry will never get them a meaningful relationship based on mutual love and respect. Instead, they will only attract the sort of vile people they find repugnant. Dowry is a social custom which can only be scrapped completely once it becomes socially unacceptable, regardless of the laws of the country. Change starts with you. Say no to dowry.