
“DOWRY” - THE COST OF BEING A DAUGHTER

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ABSTRACT

A centuries-old patriarchal norm of society, “dowry” places a financial and emotional burden on brides and their families, often leading to severe mental distress and long-term socioeconomic harm. The continuance of this practice reflects societal acceptance and a failure to enforce legal provisions effectively. This article explores the underlying causes and effects regarding the continuation of dowry, including social pressure, gender inequality, and cultural traditions. It highlights the urgent need for collective action, empowering women, and spreading awareness to dismantle this harmful tradition. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study highlights how systemic change, legal literacy, and community involvement can play a major role in eliminating dowry and advancing gender justice.

Introduction

For generations, dowry has been seen as a mandatory practice in marriages, Based on the outdated belief that a woman is a liability. It was once considered a gesture of goodwill by the bride's family to ensure their daughter is treated well in her new home. Over time, this custom has evolved into a societal expectation, where expensive jewelry, furniture, cars, and valuables are given at a daughter's wedding, not out of love, but to satisfy societal pressure.

Even today, dowry remains deeply embedded in cultural traditions, making it difficult to eliminate. Families don't just give dowry for personal satisfaction but to uphold their status in the eyes of relatives, neighbors, and society. The groom's family, too, often measures the worth of their new daughter-in-law by the wealth she brings into the household, rather than her education or qualities.

In many cases, marriages are fixed only after dowry negotiations, and if the bride's family cannot meet the demands, the wedding is called off even at the last moment leaving the bride and her family heartbroken and humiliated. Despite legal bans and changing times, dowry continues to thrive, proving that this harmful tradition is still far from being erased from society.

Understanding “Dowry”

Scholars suggest that the practice of dowry originated from the concepts of Kanyadan and Streedhan. While some argue that dowry is a form of Streedhan, the two have distinct meanings. In earlier times, daughters had no legal rights to family property, so Streedhan was meant to provide them with financial security.¹ Dowry custom is prevalent across the world, and it is known by different names in various geographical and cultural locations –in Hindi (Dahej), Tamil(Varadhachanai), Urdu and Arabic (Jahez), Bengali (Joutuk), Mandarin (Jiazhuang), Turkish(Ceyiz), French (Dot), and Nepali (Daijo) (Harrelland Dickey 1985)–and in African countries, it is known as Idana.²

Dowry, a long-standing custom, involves the groom and his family demanding money, assets, or luxury items from the bride's family. Despite being illegal in India, this practice continues

¹ Suparna soni, *Institution of Dowry in India: A Theoretical Inquiry* 7-1(2020)

² Dr. Rajeev Kumar, *Dowry System: Unequalizing Gender Equality*, 170-182 (2021)

in many regions under the guise of tradition. In modern times, dowry has been cleverly disguised as "gifts" a way for society to justify and conceal this unlawful exchange. While giving and receiving dowry is prohibited, labeling it as a gift allows families to perpetuate this harmful practice without legal consequences. This societal cover-up not only keeps dowry alive but also contributes to the ongoing issue of dowry-related violence and deaths, making it imperative to address and eradicate it.

Dowry Death

The definition of “dowry” is not restricted to agreement or demand for payment of dowry before and at the marriage but also includes demands made after marriage.³ In India, arranged marriage is very common where over 90% of women after marriage live with their husbands' families.⁴ Dowry Deaths thus represent one of the most serious crimes evolving from deep patriarchy and greed. Where greed overshadows humanity. A newlywed woman, despite bringing dowry to her marital home, is often subjected to relentless demands for more. The fear of burdening her family keeps her silent, while she endures harassment, abuse, and even physical assault at the hands of her in-laws. When she refuses or is unable to meet their increasing demands, the cruelty escalates, sometimes leading to her tragic death a crime masked as an accident or suicide but, in reality, a brutal murder in the name of dowry. This social evil continues to claim innocent lives, making it crucial to expose, address, and eliminate it from society.

Causes of Dowry

Originally, dowry was the tradition of transfer of wealth to ensure the daughter's well-being in her marital home. However, over time, it changed into an obligatory custom, a status symbol, and a measure of a family's worth. Today, marriages are judged not by love or compatibility but by the wealth exchanged, turning this once-intended safety net into a heavy burden on brides and their families.

1. Gender Inequality

In patriarchal societies, men are seen as providers, while women are confined to

³ The State Of Andhra Pradesh vs. Raj Gopal Asawa And Anr , 2007

⁴ Soutik Biswas, *How prosperity fuels dowry demand in India*, BBC News, 29th May 2023

household roles, leading to their economic dependence. Dowry is often perceived as "compensation" for a bride's lack of financial contribution. This mindset fuels the preference for male children, as sons are considered assets and future caretakers, while daughters are viewed as burdens. Which results in gender inequality, female infanticide, and the continued suppression of women's independence.

2. Economic Factors

In many cultures, women lack property rights and inheritance claims, further increasing the financial burden on their families. Parents, already struggling to meet societal expectations, face economic pressure when arranging their daughters' marriages. This pressure is amplified by rising dowry demands, leaving many families in debt, sacrificing their savings, and even leading to loans just to meet these unjust expectations.

3. Social Status and Prestige

Dowry is not just an exchange of wealth it is a display of social standing. Families believe that a lavish dowry enhances their reputation, strengthens their social networks, and solidifies their status. The pressure to maintain this false prestige forces even financially unstable families to exhaust their resources, believing that their daughter's future and their respect in society depend on the size of the dowry they give.

4. Legal Loopholes

Despite legal prohibitions, dowry practices persist under the name of "gifts" and "customary traditions." Weak law enforcement and a lack of awareness allow this social evil to continue. Many cases of dowry harassment go unreported due to fear, societal pressure, or lack of trust in the justice system, ensuring that the cycle of oppression continues unchecked.

5. Educational Gaps and Financial Dependence

A lack of education and employment opportunities for women perpetuates the dowry system. Women who are not financially independent rely on their families and husbands for survival, reinforcing the idea that dowry is necessary to secure a stable marriage.

Even when women are educated, wage disparities and workplace inequality make them financially vulnerable, further fueling this practice.

6. Psychological Factors

The fear of societal judgment and the competitive mindset of families have turned dowry into a tool for securing the "best match" for a bride. Many parents believe that offering a higher dowry guarantees their daughter's happiness and security. Unfortunately, even substantial dowries do not shield brides from abuse, as greed only fuels further exploitation. The dowry system is deeply rooted in psychological conditioning, where customs are blindly followed, despite their devastating consequences.

7. Breaking the burden of customs

The dowry system is not just a burdened custom but it is a social pressure that fuels financial distress, which leads to gender inequality. Breaking this chain of burden requires education, empowerment, and a collective rejection of harmful societal norms. A woman's worth is not measured by wealth but by her dreams, capabilities, and independence. We should design a society where daughters are cherished, not sold in the name of marriage.

Effects of Dowry

1. Social Pressure and Emotional Imbalance

Society binds every individual within its customs, and the fear of isolation compels people to follow age-old traditions, even when they are unjust. The dowry system, deeply ingrained in rural communities, continues to thrive under this pressure. Even after fulfilling the initial demands, the never-ending expectations can push families to the brink, sometimes leading to the tragic death of the bride. Families are judged not by their values or love but by the wealth they can offer, creating an atmosphere of social and emotional turmoil.

2. Degrading the Status of Women

The birth of a girl, which should be a moment of celebration, is often met with sorrow or even worse death. Many daughters are deprived of education and freedom, conditioned to believe their sole purpose is household work. This suppression results in economic dependence, making them vulnerable not only in their parental home but also in their marital life. The dowry system reduces women to mere financial burdens rather than individuals with dreams and aspirations, raising serious concerns about gender equality.

3. Domestic Violence

Behind closed doors, many women suffer in silence, trapped in the vicious cycle of domestic violence. When dowry demands remain unfulfilled, brides are subjected to emotional harassment, verbal abuse, and even physical torture at the hands of their husbands and in-laws. What begins with taunts and mistreatment soon escalates into unbearable cruelty, leaving the woman mentally shattered and emotionally broken. The invisible wounds of such abuse push her into depression, robbing her of peace, dignity, and stability.

4. The financial instability of the Bride's Family

A father spends his lifetime accumulating wealth not for his daughter's future but to meet the ever-growing demands of dowry. The extravagant wedding expenses, followed by relentless post-marriage financial pressures, push many families into crippling debt. Some parents, in their desperation to ensure their daughter's well-being, sacrifice their future, exhausting their savings meant for old age. This financial instability not only affects the present but also burdens generations to come.

5. Loss of Self-Esteem and Mental Trauma

When a woman's worth is reduced to the dowry she brings, she loses more than just material wealth she loses her self-respect. The constant pressure to "justify" her existence by fulfilling financial demands diminishes her confidence and self-worth. She begins to doubt her value, trapped in an endless cycle of guilt and helplessness. Society's greed crushes not only her spirit but also her dreams, suffocating her under the invisible chains of oppression.

Legal Frameworks

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

The act was introduced to put a legal stop to the dowry system, making both giving and receiving dowry a punishable offense. Under this law, dowry includes money, property, or valuable goods exchanged between families during marriage whether directly or indirectly. The Act has been strengthened through amendments to widen the definition of dowry and impose stricter penalties for violations. Despite its existence, enforcement remains a challenge, as dowry often continues under the name of "gifts" and "customary practices."

Dowry Death (Section 80) of BNS

When a woman dies due to bodily harm, burns, or unnatural circumstances within seven years of marriage, and it is proven that she was harassed for dowry, the law treats it as dowry death. Under this provision, the husband and in-laws are held accountable and face strict punishment. This legal measure aims to protect brides from the fatal consequences of dowry-related cruelty, ensuring that justice is served and such heinous acts are not left unpunished.

For example, Priya got married to Rajesh in 2020. Within a year of their marriage, Rajesh and his family started demanding additional dowry from Priya's parents, including a car and more cash. Priya's parents were unable to meet these demands. As a result, Priya was subjected to continuous harassment and physical abuse by Rajesh and his family. In 2023, Priya was found dead under suspicious circumstances with burn injuries. Given that her death occurred within seven years of her marriage and she was subjected to cruelty related to dowry demands, Rajesh and his family members can be charged with dowry death under Section 80 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023.

Prohibition from domestic violence

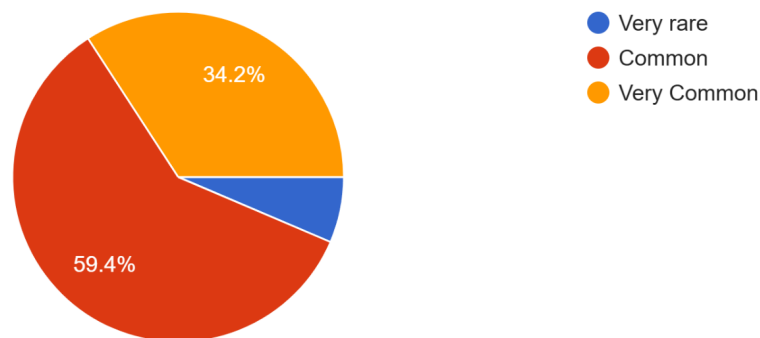
The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act not only addresses physical and emotional abuse but also recognizes dowry-related harassment as a serious form of domestic violence. This law provides legal protection to women facing cruelty and relentless demands for dowry, ensuring they have the right to seek justice and safety. By acknowledging dowry harassment as a punishable offense, this act stands as a powerful safeguard, empowering women to break free from oppression and reclaim their dignity.

Current Scenario and Findings

For a better understanding of the current scenario and public mindset regarding dowry I surveyed via Google Forms, the key findings are stated below:

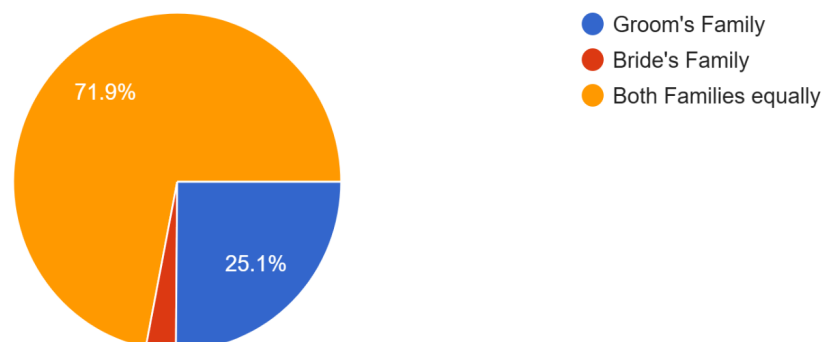
How common is the dowry system today?

Major responses suggest that despite strict laws and changing times, the practice continues in many forms, such as “gifts.” This result highlights a gap between the legal framework and societal adherence, proving that mere laws are not sufficient to change and transform society's mindset.



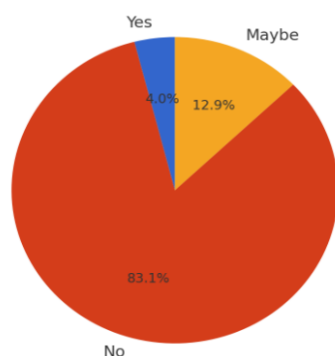
Who is responsible for dowry deaths?

When asked who is responsible for sustaining the dowry system, the majority agreed that both the bride's and groom's families share equal blame. This aligns with legal perspectives, which state that both giving and accepting dowry are punishable offenses. Encouragingly, this indicates a growing awareness of the law and an increasing willingness to challenge societal norms.

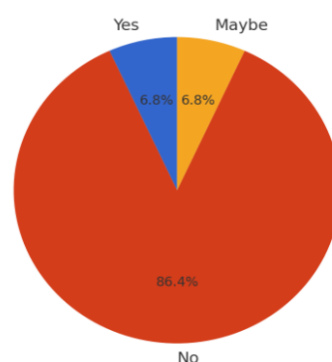


Preference on receiving and giving dowry?

Would you prefer to give dowry?

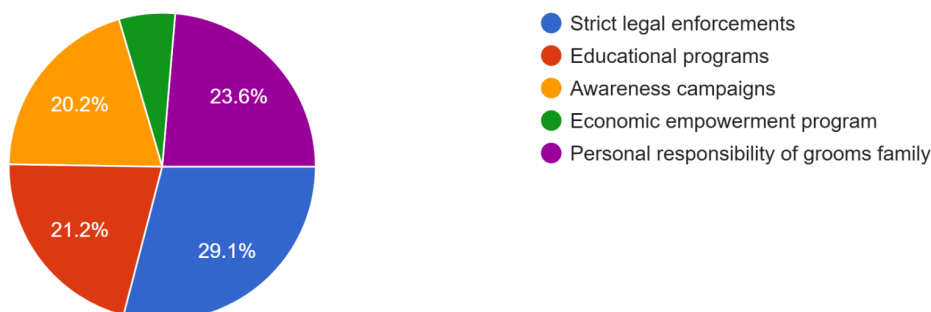


Would you prefer to take dowry?



While most respondents firmly oppose dowry, a small percentage remain uncertain, reflecting the ongoing conflict between modern ideologies and deeply rooted traditions. This suggests that a complete societal shift will take time while progress is being made, requiring continuous awareness, education, and legal reinforcement.

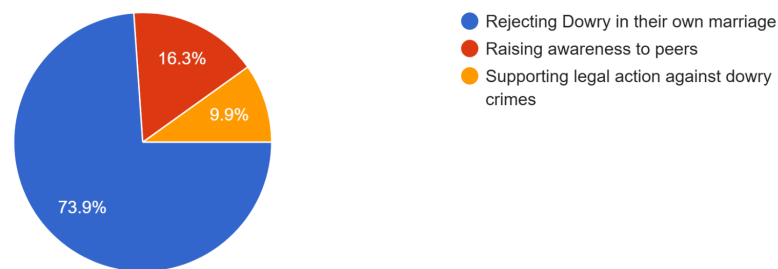
What measures would shift societal views and practices regarding dowry?



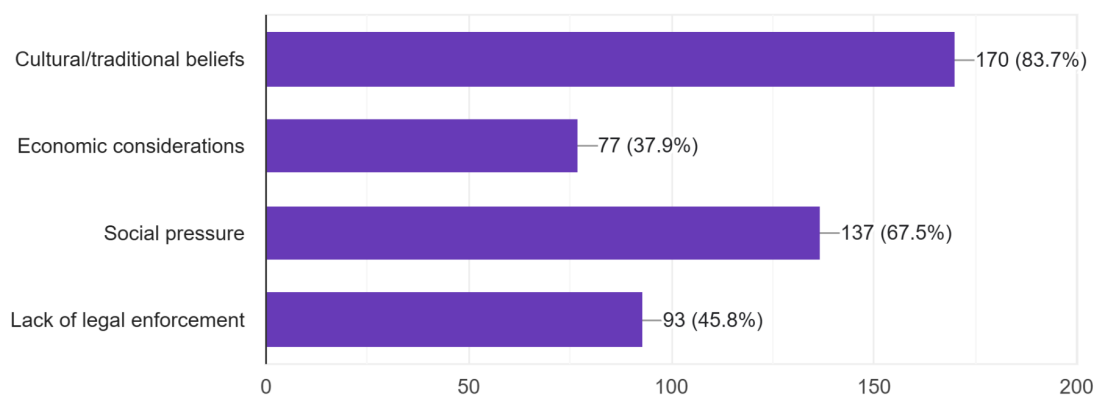
What role should men play in stopping dowry?

A strong public sentiment emerged that men have a crucial role in stopping dowry. Respondents believe that if men refuse dowry in their marriages and actively spread awareness among peers, it would be a significant step toward eradicating this harmful practice. This highlights the need

for male allyship in the fight against dowry, as real change begins with individual choices and actions.

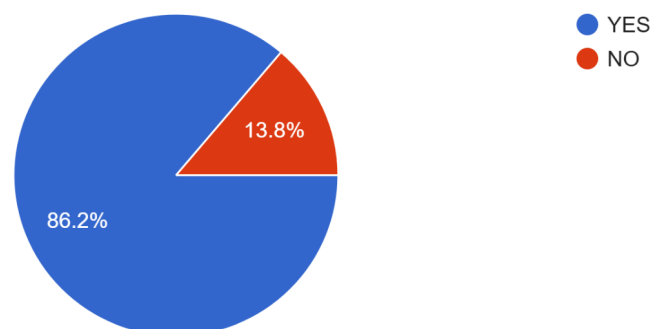


What are the reasons for dowry practices? (assumption 1 unit = 1000)



Would an individual report a dowry-related crime (dowry death or dowry practices)

This reflects a growing sense of social responsibility, where people are willing to step out and take action against dowry-related crimes. With awareness on the rise, the hope for a dowry-free society seems alive.



Conclusion

We live in a society shaped by customs, traditions, and the ever-watchful eyes of others. Too often, people focus on judging the actions of others rather than reflecting on their own beliefs. While societal perceptions may differ, they should never dictate our sense of right and wrong. Legal reforms take time, especially when challenging age-old practices, but true change begins with a shift in mindset. Providing a strong education, support, and the freedom to shape her future is the greatest dowry parents can give their daughter. Empowering her with knowledge, confidence, and independence ensures she stands on her own, makes her own choices, and builds a life of dignity far more valuable than any material wealth ever could be.

The birth of a daughter should be a moment of joy, not a cause for concern. Her well-being and happiness should be a family priority, not a burden. The key to eradicating the evil of dowry lies in awareness, education, and empowerment. Raising a daughter is not enough she must be given the strength, knowledge, and confidence to stand against injustice on her own.

“What will society say?” This question has shackled generations. But the real shame is not society’s opinion; it is the unbearable grief of losing a daughter to the cruelty of dowry. A future where daughters live, grow, and shine is the only future worth fighting for.