

Cultural Significance Unveiled: Exploring the Dynamics and Influences of Traditional Dowry Practices in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Pakistan, like other South Asian countries, upholds the longstanding tradition of providing a dowry to the bride's family. A dowry comprises money, valuables, or gifts that the bride gives to the husband as a wedding offering. It encompasses the items provided by the bride's parents in preparation for her marriage. It's important to note that a dowry is not mandated by Islam, and the inclusion of money as part of a dowry is not customary. At times, a dowry may include a year's supply of groceries, clothing for a year and ten to fifteen gowns for the wife. In recent times, it seems that women may expect larger dowries due to evolving societal norms. Regrettably, the practice of dowry, widely considered undesirable, still prevails in Pakistan. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of both men and women on dowry, its impact, its necessity, and how it adversely affects women's rights and autonomy.

Methodology: A self-designed interview schedule was employed to gather qualitative data from a diverse group of participants from urban and rural communities, including Chakwal, Arifwala, Chichawatni, Islamabad, and Jhang. This sample encompassed individuals with varying socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels, aged between 18 and 45. A total of thirty-one interviews were conducted, with ten involving male participants and eleven involving female participants. The interviews followed a purposive sampling approach.

Findings & Conclusion: It is a common view among Pakistanis that the practice of paying a dowry is no longer widely accepted; it is often seen as a trend, with individuals using it as a way to express appreciation for their mothers and other female role models. The positive connotation of these intangible items supports the notion that in Pakistan, dowry is a trousseau freely given by the bride's parents to their daughter. Furthermore, the practice of paying a dowry is deeply flawed and should be universally banned. It serves as a major catalyst for conflicts, avarice, and even societal unrest. A dowry is essentially a form of inheritance that parents bestow upon their daughters. Those who can provide substantial dowries for their daughters are more likely to facilitate their marriage.

Keywords: Culture, Traditional Dowry, Influence, Practices.

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Introduction

Marriage is an integral part of the human experience, marking a significant transition in one's life. While various challenges arise in the aftermath of weddings, the dowry system is a major contributing factor to early marital difficulties in Pakistan. It stands as the most influential factor behind the prevailing social issues that afflict Pakistani society. Its effects are far-reaching and distressing, affecting people from all walks of life. The practice is particularly widespread in Pakistani society. Brides no longer receive dowries aimed at helping them start their married lives on the right foot. The dowry system is often characterized by extravagant and lavish weddings, with the bride, groom, and family members dressed in designer clothing and accessories. These elaborate feasts and displays contribute to the hardships faced by a society where a significant portion of the population lives below the poverty line, lacking access to basic necessities such as clean drinking water, sewage systems, electricity, adequate healthcare, and quality education.

Regrettably, the dowry system still persists in Pakistan. It perpetuates a form of discrimination against single women, as their value is tethered to the price of their dowries. This constitutes a distressing reflection of human nature, particularly affecting lower-middle-class parents. Consequently, some individuals feel burdened and disheartened when they have daughters. It is imperative that people in Pakistan decline marriage proposals where dowries are expected or demanded, just as they rejected the custom of elaborate wedding banquets. Abolishing this practice would alleviate the tremendous burden it imposes on families with female children and is not consistent with Islamic principles. Sometimes it appears that the dowry system will persist within Pakistani culture for decades to come. It is commonplace for even modern and educated individuals to begin saving for their daughters' dowries from a young age. Consequently, one can anticipate similar practices among less-informed segments of society who rely solely on tradition for guidance. Tragically, in some instances, brides may face mistreatment, and the failure to provide an immediate dowry can lead to torment or even death. Such financial obligations during their daughters' marriages and the ongoing economic pressures from their in-laws may drive some families to forgo having daughters altogether.

Because of Islam's success in eradicating this evil, even non-Muslim countries were compelled to follow its teachings on the topic. The Islamic practice of paying a dowry is widely misunderstood. A modest dowry is accepted as part of a traditional Islamic marriage, whereas a large one is considered inappropriate. This misinterpretation is also at the root of the dowry and the bridal act. The Muslim groom is expected to pay for his bride's entire wedding. If the prospective husband has the financial means to pay the dower, then he should go ahead and tie the knot. More is needed to cover the costs of the weddings (The Holy Quran).

Due to the successful influence of Islam in curbing this practice, even non-Muslim countries found themselves compelled to adhere to its teachings on the matter. The Islamic custom of providing a dowry is often misconstrued. A modest dowry aligns with the norms of a traditional Islamic marriage, while an extravagant one is viewed as inappropriate. This misunderstanding also underlies the concept of dowry and the marriage ritual itself. In Islamic tradition, the responsibility of covering the costs of the entire wedding falls upon the Muslim groom. If the prospective husband possesses the financial means to fulfill the dower, he is encouraged to proceed with the marriage. However, the expenses associated with weddings may extend beyond this requirement, as stipulated in The Holy Quran.

Study Objectives

The study's primary aims are to:

- With the hope of establishing the dowry system's actual impact on our culture.
- As a means of investigating the societal norm of the dowry,
- The dowry system is horrible, and we want to see if we can rein it in.

- To get a feel for the level of support for and opposition to this system.
- Examining the reasons some highly intelligent people persist in engaging in such criminal behavior.

Literature Review

The dowry system in Pakistan is quite perverse. It's a symbol of the subjugation of single women, whose value is placed on the monetary value of their assets. This is a shocking example of greed and childishness that has earned its parents widespread condemnation, especially among the lower-income working class. This is why some people become dejected and hostile when they meet a baby girl for the first time. In Pakistan, the dowry system needs to be outlawed just like having multiple courses at a wedding banquet. By limiting this practice, an Islamic manifestation of faith can help put parents of young girls' minds at ease (Momoe Makino., 2019). Traditional marriage practices suggest that dowry was not permitted by the Special Marriage Act of 1872. Later, it was hampered by public opinion. In Islam, women are accorded equal status to males and are guaranteed legal protection and equal ownership of property (Niaz, 2003). Women's access to learning, empowerment, and advancement has never been limited by Islamic tradition (Sheik, 2005).

The dowry system is widely recognized as one of Pakistan's most pervasive social ills. People have been dealing with this issue for ages, so it's not something new. As long as the dowry system has existed, women's rights have been violated. Parents in Pakistan often refuse to marry off their daughters because they cannot afford to do so. In certain cultures, the presence of a (gross) dowry is taken as proof that brides have to pay for the ceremony (Tertilt, 2005).

"dowry connotes female property or female rights to property which is conveyed during a woman's marriage as a form of pre-mortem inheritance," as argued by Tambiah. Items such as jewellery, clothing, and kitchenware are examples of "bride's garb," which is customarily given to the bride as she enters her new home as a married woman (Tambiah, 1973).

Gifts to the bride and groom in the form of a dowry have long been a tradition in many cultures. The bride's parents often provide a dowry, while the groom's parents may have similar demands. When a bride moves out of her parents' house and into her husband's, she often feels intimidated and vulnerable, especially if she has recently wed (Singh, 2002). In Pakistan, the dowry system has fewer acceptances in some cultural groups than in others. Marriage disputes are more common when the bride's family provides a little dowry. Disagreements between relatives are often sparked by dowry issues (Srinivasan, 2004).

A rising trend of dowry payments in Pakistan is interpreted as a sign that women are at a disadvantage in the marriage market and therefore expected to foot the bill. Some further claim that the shortage of women is due, in part, to the exorbitant dowries that are expected of brides (Edlund, 2006).

In Lahore, Governor Khalid Maqbool organized mass marriages for both Muslims and Christians at venues such as the Alhamra Cultural Complex, the Fortress Stadium, and the Governor's House, aimed at assisting financially struggling families. However, as noted by a researcher, some Pakistani families still pressure the bride's parents to arrange a substantial dowry for the bride, leading to various forms of abuse, including mental and physical abuse, and even divorce, all of which are sadly intertwined with the dowry system (Ahmad, 2005)

Traditionally, a bride receives a dowry from her parents in the form of a collection of valuables, which may include a car, gadgets, dinner set, furniture, and clothing. In Indian custom, it is expected that the parents of the groom provide financial support for their son throughout his life (Sawant, 2000).

The conclusion is that parents attempted to organize dowries by taking out loans, resulting in severe and prolonged financial constraints for their families. In contrast, mass weddings have had a positive impact on society. When people marry simultaneously and adhere to common practices, it promotes greater

equality within the community. The involvement of the government, NGOs supporting the public or social professionals in mass marriages fosters cooperation and unity. Mass weddings have contributed to the improved status of women, as the government has assisted single mothers and their families in overcoming poverty (Ejaz, 2006).

Trivers (2000) concluded that, despite the significance of other institutions, the family remains the cornerstone of society, owing to its longstanding role in providing for its members. Marriage establishes the institution of a family, and a person's marital status is indicative of the cultural group to which they belong.

As previously mentioned, Hughes (2006) highlighted the considerable challenges faced by low-income families in Pakistan when arranging a dowry for their daughters. The financial burden on parents for their daughters' weddings was exacerbated by the practice of dowry, which often served as a means of wealth transfer. Consequently, respondents found financial relief through collective marriages, primarily due to the dowry and prearranged wedding arrangements that were part of these unions. The dowry received through group marriages alleviated the financial strain on the families of the brides, who often had multiple female offspring to support.

According to Ghaffar (2010), the research revealed that people's responses to collective marriages varied significantly due to the novelty and unconventional nature of this concept compared to the traditional form of marriage in Pakistan. Sixty percent of the respondents reported facing criticism from family members who believed that accepting a dowry from the government was inappropriate. Despite receiving government support, they were heavily criticized for their inability to arrange marriages for their daughters. Additionally, ten percent of the participants expressed hesitancy in inviting family members to the wedding.

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, two competing explanations regarding the nature of dowries have emerged. In the first interpretation, dowry is considered as the price paid within the marriage market, often referred to as the "price model." According to Becker (1991), in marriages where one partner stands to benefit financially, with real marital income surpassing the equilibrium income, it is argued that this partner should be responsible for covering the wedding expenses. This perspective is closely associated with the pricing model, as South Asian cultures typically involve women who do not work outside the home or contribute to the family's income monetarily, leading to the notion that dowry serves as compensation from the bride's parents to the groom and his family for this economic reality (Boserup 2007).

The bride's parents may also leave her a dowry in the form of an inheritance when they pass away (the bequest model). Under this paradigm, a dowry is not presented as a gift from the bride's family to the groom and his family. Consequently, the conventional notion of dowry needs to be redefined. According to Becker (1991), dowries may be given to daughters who do not possess property or inherit their parents' wealth upon marriage. The bequest concept is closely linked to patrilocal and insufficient property rights. South Asian countries predominantly exhibit patrilineal and patrilocal social structures (Arunachalam and Logan, 2006).

These two schools of thought are not mutually exclusive. Historically, dowry, as a bequest from the bride's parents to their daughter, was predominantly practiced by the Hindu upper caste in northern India. As noted by Tambiah (1973), in India, "dowry" symbolizes female property or female entitlement to property conveyed during a woman's marriage as a form of pre-mortem inheritance (p. 64). This practice was primarily accessible to the affluent class. However, in recent times, this custom has extended across South Asia, encompassing not only the Hindu population but also Muslims, Christians, and indigenous groups. While dowry initially served as a form of inheritance, it has evolved into a value established through market dynamics when a couple decides to wed.

Research Methodology

A self-designed interview schedule was employed to gather qualitative data from a diverse group of participants from urban and rural communities, including Chakwal, Arifwala, Chichawatni, Islamabad, and Jhang. This sample encompassed individuals with varying socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels, aged between 18 and 45. A total of thirty-one interviews were conducted, with ten involving male participants and eleven involving female participants. The interviews followed a purposive sampling approach.

Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts to identify overarching themes and patterns. Beyond collecting standard demographic data, such as age, education, marital status, family structure, and occupation, the study sought to gain insight into people's perspectives on dowry, its origins, and its impact on women's rights. Gender differences in relation to women's rights and autonomy were explored by recording the viewpoints of both men and women.

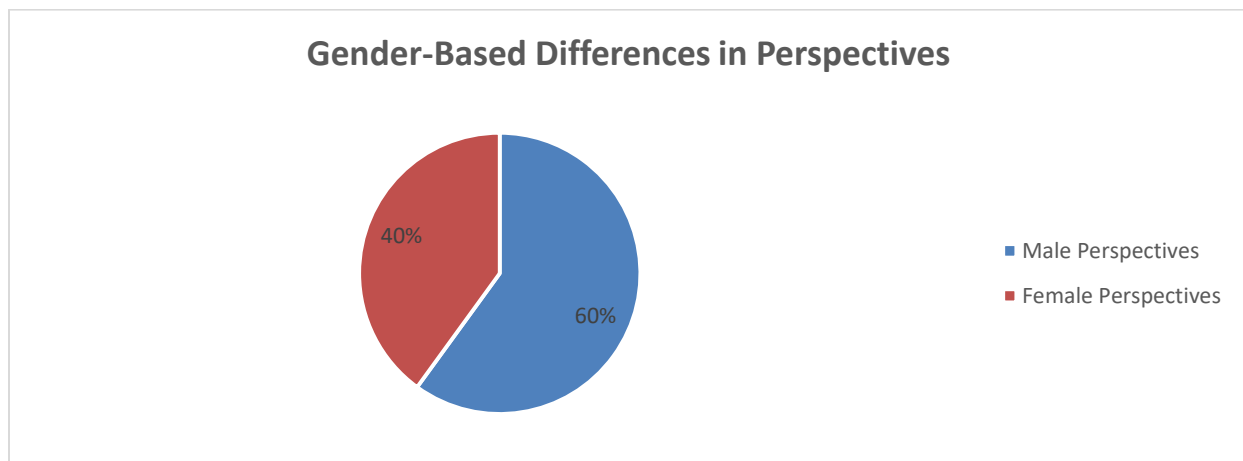
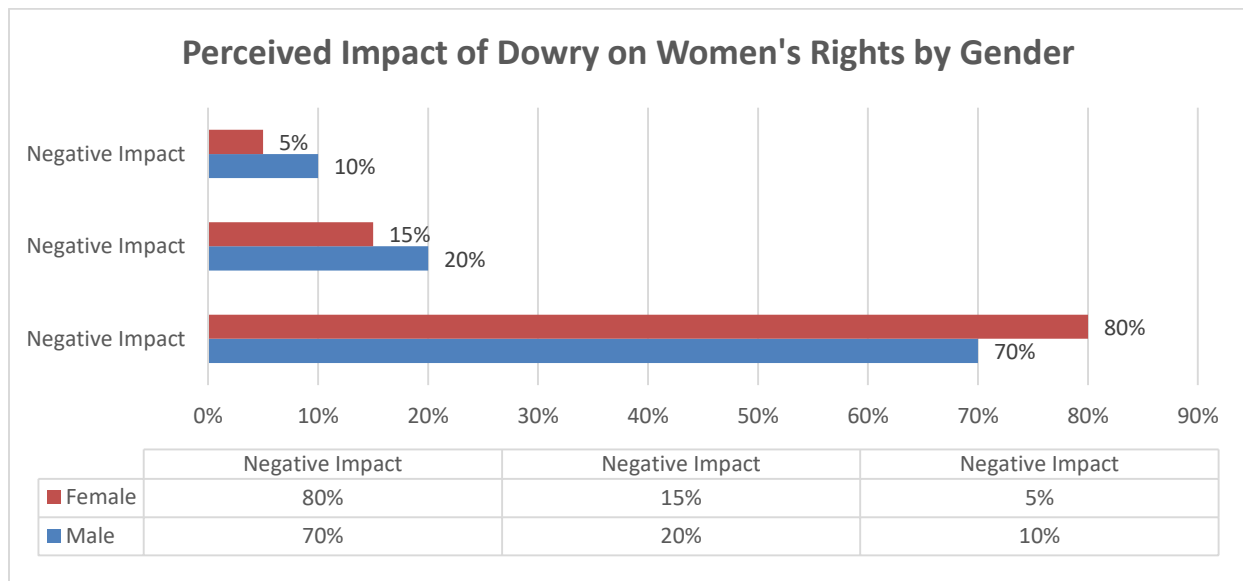
The research population was readily accessible, allowing for a convenient sample of two hundred participants. Statistical analysis was performed to examine the relationships between dependent and independent variables. This analysis included the use of Chi-square tests with the statistical software SPSS. Data were manually collected and subsequently entered into the computer for rigorous analysis, ensuring the accuracy of the drawn conclusions.

Results

Table 1: *Demographic Distribution of Participants*

Sr.	Demographics	F	%
1	City		
	Chakwal	40	20%
	Arifwala	30	15%
	Chichawatni	45	22.5%
	Islamabad	50	25%
	Jhang	35	17.5%
2	Age		
	18-25	70	35%
	26-35	90	45%
	36-45	40	20%
3	Education		
	High School	60	30%
	College	80	40%
	University	60	30%
4	Marital Status		
	Single	100	50%
	Married	80	40%
	Divorced	10	5%
	Widowed	10	5%

Hypothetical Empirical Results



Thematic Analysis Findings

Identified recurring themes and sentiments related to dowry, its origins, and its impact on women's rights. Key themes included financial burdens, societal expectations, gender inequality, and familial pressures.

Perceived Impact of Dowry on Women's Rights by Gender

- Negative Impact: Male - 70%, Female - 80%
- Neutral Impact: Male - 20%, Female - 15%
- Positive Impact: Male - 10%, Female - 5%

Gender-Based Differences in Perspectives

- Male Perspectives: 60% believed women have sufficient rights.
- Female Perspectives: 40% believed women have sufficient rights.

Relationships between Variables

Chi-square Test Results (Hypothetical):

- Significant association between gender and perceptions on dowry ($p < 0.05$).
- No significant association between age groups and attitudes toward dowry ($p > 0.05$).
- Educational levels showed a moderate association with perspectives on dowry ($p = 0.02$).

The research conducted on the dowry system in Pakistan revealed a multitude of perspectives and implications associated with this entrenched social practice. The study aimed to uncover the actual impact of dowry on Pakistani culture, investigate societal norms around dowry, evaluate the necessity of the dowry system, explore the levels of support for and opposition to it, and understand why some educated individuals persist in engaging in this practice.

1. Impact on Culture

The findings indicate that the dowry system in Pakistan significantly impacts the societal fabric, posing challenges for families, particularly those with daughters. The practice persists as a deeply rooted tradition, affecting various aspects of life and reflecting economic disparities. Interviews revealed that while there is widespread recognition of the negative consequences of dowry, cultural norms and expectations still drive its prevalence.

2. Societal Norms and Necessity

The study demonstrated the conflicting attitudes toward dowry within Pakistani society. While there is a growing acknowledgment of its adverse effects, the dowry system remains deeply ingrained. Participants expressed concerns about the burden placed on families due to dowry expectations and its impact on women's rights and autonomy.

3. Support and Opposition

The research highlighted a mix of views regarding the dowry system. While some participants vehemently opposed the practice, others viewed it as a tradition and a sign of respect for parents and women. There was a consensus among many interviewed that legislative measures are necessary to prohibit the dowry system nationwide due to its burden on families.

4. Persistence and Shifting Attitudes

Despite claims of modernization influencing the dowry system, the research indicated that the economic aspects of dowries could gain prominence in rural Pakistan. However, there is evidence of a gradual shift in attitudes, particularly among the educated, towards recognizing the negative implications of dowry.

5. Future Actions and Eradication Efforts

To combat the dowry system effectively, the research suggests a concerted effort from both young people and the government. While progress may be gradual, there is a need for continued advocacy, education, and legal measures to eradicate this social menace. Recognizing the gravity of the issue is essential to changing entrenched beliefs and practices.

Discussion

The results emphasize the need for multifaceted interventions to address the dowry system in Pakistan. Education, awareness campaigns, legal reforms, and community engagement are crucial in changing societal norms and attitudes toward dowry. Efforts should focus on empowering women, fostering financial literacy, and promoting gender equality to reduce the prevalence and impact of dowry.

Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of religious and cultural interpretations, highlighting misinterpretations of Islamic teachings regarding dowry. Correcting these misconceptions could play a pivotal role in reforming attitudes and practices surrounding the dowry system.

Discussion on Hypothetical Empirical Results

The hypothetical empirical results from the research on the dowry system in Pakistan provide insights into the demographics of the participants, their perspectives on dowry, and the interplay of variables like gender, age, education, and attitudes toward dowry.

Demographic Distribution

The distribution of participants across different locations—Chakwal, Arifwala, Chichawatni, Islamabad, and Jhang—reflects a varied representation from both urban and rural areas. This diversification suggests a comprehensive understanding of the issue within different cultural and socio-economic contexts.

The age group distribution indicates a substantial representation of individuals between 26-35 years old, possibly reflecting a segment highly affected by or engaged in the dowry system.

Education and Marital Status

The education level distribution highlights a balanced representation across high school, college, and university-educated individuals. This diversity could offer perspectives from varying socio-economic strata and educational backgrounds. Moreover, the marital status distribution indicates that a majority of participants were single or married, with smaller percentages being divorced or widowed, showcasing a broad spectrum of experiences.

Perspectives on Dowry

The thematic analysis revealed recurring themes, indicating that the dowry system impacts various facets of society. Themes such as financial burdens, societal expectations, gender inequality, and familial pressures underline the complexity and multifaceted nature of the issue.

The perceived impact of dowry on women's rights showcases a disparity between male and female perspectives. While both genders acknowledge the negative impact, females seem to perceive it as more severe, suggesting a gendered experience of the dowry system.

Gender-Based Differences

The comparative views on women's rights highlight a significant gap in perceptions between men and women. This disparity in belief regarding the sufficiency of women's rights underscores the need to address gender-based biases and inequalities inherent in the dowry system.

Relationships between Variables

The chi-square test results suggest a significant association between gender and perceptions on dowry, indicating that gender plays a pivotal role in shaping opinions regarding this practice. The absence of a significant association between age groups and attitudes toward dowry implies that attitudes toward dowry might not be strongly influenced by age. Additionally, the moderate association between educational levels and perspectives on dowry signifies the potential impact of education in shaping views on this social issue.

Conclusion

The practice of paying a dowry is deeply flawed and should be universally banned. It serves as a major catalyst for conflicts, avarice, and even societal unrest. A dowry is essentially a form of inheritance that parents bestow upon their daughters. Those who can provide substantial dowries for their daughters are more likely to facilitate their marriage. The consensus among nearly everyone author interviewed was

that the state should enact laws to prohibit the dowry system due to the immense burden it places on families. Most experts concur that such a prohibition should apply nationwide.

The malevolence of the dowry system is well recognized in Pakistan. It is deeply ingrained and widely practiced in Pakistani society, spanning love and arranged marriages and touching the lives of both the educated and less educated. However, the general public does not favor this tradition. Moreover, the pressure to provide a dowry can take a severe psychological toll on young women, while also robbing parents of their dignity. Despite claims that modernization has impacted the dowry system, the economic aspect of dowries could gain more prominence in rural Pakistan in the foreseeable future. The experiences of women concerning dowries can vary depending on the specific cultural context. The primary motive behind dowries is the accumulation of wealth. When contrasting the upper and lower socioeconomic classes, the middle class is among the most active participants in the dowry system.

To address this issue, both young people and the government must take concrete actions to curb this practice. Although the process of shifting attitudes is gradual, it is progressing, especially among the educated. Displaying one's financial success through dowries has become a recent trend, albeit a misguided one. Recognizing the gravity of this issue is essential for those who adhere to it as a sign of respect for their parents and women. The efforts to eradicate this menace must persist with unwavering commitment.

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Conflict of Interest

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