

A survivor of a dowry burning recuperates in an Indian hospital. The truth behind such cases is often concealed. Many victims of dowry-related “accidents” fear repercussions from their husbands and in-laws, some of whom go so far as to bribe police officials to cover up their crimes.

Image: LC Visuals

dowry crimes and bride-price abuse

“Young Housewife Burnt Alive for Dowry” (27 May)
“Woman Ends Life Due to Dowry Harassment” (7 June)
“Body Found Floating” (7 June)¹

These newspaper headlines, appearing within the span of 11 days in the *Times of India* in 2001, are from just three of thousands of articles published each year that catalogue the rising number of women who have lost their lives because of dowry crimes in India.

The persistence of dowry crimes

As many analysts and women’s activists are quick to point out, femicide by husbands is not unique to India, nor is it more prevalent there than in many other parts of the world. The rate of intimate-partner violence in the United States, for example, is at least commensurate with that of India when compared on the basis of population.² The women’s movement in India, however, has gone to great lengths to publicise this particular form of violence against women, shedding light on the combined forces — including the lack of basic human rights and the tolerance of violence against them — that put some women and girls in mortal danger at the hands of their partners.

Although India outlawed the modern dowry system in 1961, the practice has escalated among the expanding middle class, crossing religious, socioeconomic and ethnic boundaries. The National Crimes Record

Bureau of the Government of India recorded 6,917 dowry-related deaths in 1998, a 15 percent increase over the number reported in 1997.³ Because incidents are grossly underreported, these statistics probably represent only a small sampling of the violence occurring across India every day. In 1999, the founder of the International Society against Dowry and Bride Burning in India estimated that 25,000 brides are killed or maimed each year as a result of dowry disputes.⁴ In 2000, a United Nations report estimated that on average five Indian women a day were killed in “accidental” kitchen fires by husbands whose demands for dowry payments had not been met.⁵ “Mina” is one of these statistics:

Beaten and harassed by her husband for almost four years for not bringing in enough dowry, Mina eventually left him and filed a harassment case with the local police. Her husband convinced her to return to him, however, and shortly thereafter she suffered a fatal

“accident”. According to her husband and his family, Mina “fell on a chimney.” As she lay dying from the burns that covered more than 94 percent her body, Mina was asked by police — as is customary — to make a declaration regarding the accident. She did so, absolving her husband and his family of any responsibility for her death.⁶

From empowerment to exploitation

A chief historic motivation for bestowing dowry, as practised in ancient Greece, Rome, India and medieval Europe, was to provide a degree of financial autonomy to a bride, who otherwise had little or no right to property after marriage.⁷ According to various traditions, dowry might flow from the groom and/or his family to the bride — thus ensuring her economic wellbeing in the event of her husband’s death or the dissolution of the marriage — or from the bride’s parents to the bride and her new husband, as a form of a bequest, or premortem inheritance, for their daughter.⁸

Now practised primarily in Asian cultures, dowry payment in its current manifestation typically involves the transfer of wealth from the parents of the bride to the groom and his family.⁹ Although women and girls are no longer the direct beneficiaries, some researchers maintain that the practice still confers benefits to the bride by enhancing her status in the marital home.¹⁰ Evidence from India, however, indicates that the positive effects of dowry for wives have more than diminished. Once considered a beneficent and even spiritual act observed only by the wealthiest and holiest castes (with the lower castes practising the more

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pragmatic tradition of bride price, involving compensation by the groom’s family to the bride’s family for the loss of human capital), the dowry system today often functions more as a commercial transaction and has been resolutely embraced by the middle and lower classes.¹¹

India’s modern dowry: groom price

Several theories have been advanced to explain why the middle and lower classes in India replaced the custom of bride price with the dowry system. Some suggest that it was an attempt by lower castes to emulate

higher castes. Dowry payment became a status symbol, one that bestowed greater respectability on the bride and her family and increased the likelihood of the bride “marrying up”.¹² It continues today because of caste-related systems of wealth dispersion.¹³ Another hypothesis contends that the interrelated influences of colonialism and the rise of a male-dominated market economy led to the devaluation of women, who lost their productive worth.¹⁴

Others cite demographic shifts in South Asia as a possible reason for the change. Reductions in overall mortality that began about 60 years ago have resulted in there being more young people than old in the region. Because women are likely to marry at a younger age than men, there is a surplus of marriageable women. Increasingly inflated dowry payments are sometimes six times the bride’s family’s annual income. These dowries now function as a groom price — a means for young women to compete for respectable husbands.¹⁵ According to this hypothesis, recent declines in fertility and increases in sex-selective abortions should reverse the trend of escalating dowries over time and may even result in a return to bride price as the shortage of eligible women and girls results in men competing for wives.

Dowry as a form of violence

Although paying dowry may be a culturally specific practice, many of the circumstances that conspire to promote dowry-related violence against women in India are similar to those affecting women around the world: a lack of basic human rights, including education and property; an absence of support services for victims; and impunity for perpetrators. Indian tradition dictates that once a wedding is celebrated and a newly married bride has moved into her husband’s home, she cannot request a divorce, nor may she return to her parent’s home. In some marriages, the captive bride becomes a bargaining tool with which the groom and his family continue to extort dowry.¹⁶

Wife abuse actually may be higher when a husband and/or his family believe dowry payments are inadequate, as evidenced by one Indian study in which husbands were found to be more likely to beat wives with wealthy parents when the men thought their in-laws should be paying higher dowry. In the same study, it was documented that larger dowries reduced the risk of violence.¹⁷ Thus, women whose families either refused or could not meet ongoing dowry demands appeared to

The body of a woman wrapped in cotton, on its way to be dumped into the Ganges. After four days of intensive care in hospital, this woman died of burns that were believed to have been sustained during a dowry dispute. No one was prosecuted for her murder, and no one claimed her body.

Image: LC Visuals [film still]

“Asha”, from central India, was set on fire but managed to escape her tormentors and douse the flames. Shivering from fever and seriously burned, Asha huddled under a blanket in the corner of her hut, slipping into a semi-coma. When she regained consciousness three days later, the flesh of her charred arms had fused together.

Image: LC Visuals

be at greatest risk. Another study concluded that having in-laws who were dissatisfied with the amount of dowry put wives at four times greater risk of being beaten.¹⁸

Similar findings on the impact of dowry in neighbouring Bangladesh suggested that marriages without dowry arrangements had a reduced incidence of violence: "Paying no dowry is just as protective, if not more so, in terms of preventing abuse, as the largest dowry payments."¹⁹ Whereas bride burning is common in India, acid attacks in Bangladesh are a cheap and easy way to disfigure women whose families fail to meet dowry demands.²⁰ In the most extreme circumstances, the groom and/or his family may decide that the promise of additional dowry in subsequent marriages is of greater value than a wife's life.

Dowry crime's cousin: bride-price abuse

The tradition of bride price, also referred to as "bride wealth", has been the global norm throughout history. In an ethnographic study of over 1,000 societies around the world, approximately two-thirds of the communities were found to have customs where wealth from the groom's kin was transferred to relatives of the bride.²¹ While variations of bride price continue in a number of Asian countries, the negative impact of these practices on women and girls is arguably most pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa — or at least the relationship between bride price and violence against women is receiving increased attention there.

In African history, the payment of bride price — usually in the form of livestock, foodstuffs, cash or other resources — has served different functions among various tribes and ethnicities. At its most essential it is a social contract between families, one that not only bonds clans but, in many settings, also ensures that future children belong to the groom's lineage.²² According to custom, all or a portion of the bride price is expected to be returned to the groom's family should a wife die prior to childbirth or should the marriage dissolve. If a husband has not paid bride price and his wife dies, tribal elders may permit the bride's family to take custody of any children produced during the marriage.

Bride price is a competitive practice that often favours the highest bidders, and a large payment is a mark of status for the bride and her family. Some theorists have argued that the custom generally implies

greater social demand — and thus greater value — for women than does the practice of dowry, especially in its current manifestation as groom price.²³ Bride price, however, does not necessarily elevate the status or welfare of an African woman or girl. In fact, it can be as profoundly harmful as dowry is in other parts of the world.

Bride price as a form of violence

In the male-dominated and often polygynous societies in which bride price is perpetuated, African women are increasingly speaking out against the practice. Women's rights campaigners say that bride price objectifies women in the eyes of their natal families and their husbands. In 1999, for example, South African women testified at hearings on violence against women that bride price, especially when delivered in cash, constituted "buying a wife".²⁴ In instances where bride price is especially inflated relative to the local economy, husbands are much more likely to perceive the payment of bride price as a financial transaction, and hence more likely to consider it a right of ownership.

According to Miria Matembe, a Ugandan parliamentarian, "The girl's parents look at her as a source of income and demand too much from the groom's side. Once the groom has paid so much, he starts looking at his wife as property. ... Bride price perpetuates the low status of women and keeps them in bondage."²⁵

"We are going to shout about bride price across Africa, and we are going to say 'No' to the sale of women!" The words of Atuki Turner, the director of a nongovernmental organization in Uganda that works with victims of domestic violence, reflect the direct relationship that she and her staff see between marital violence and bride price.²⁶ Some women the agency serves are forced to have sex with their husbands — who claim to "own"

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them — and beaten if they refuse. In the context of polygynous practices across sub-Saharan Africa, this disempowerment puts women at significant risk of HIV/AIDS, as well as other illnesses. In many traditional communities, wives are not allowed to place sexual demands on their husbands — including requesting that they use condoms — nor do they have a right to decide on birth control.²⁷

In some settings, bride price also puts girls at risk of child marriages. Impoverished parents may seek to “sell” daughters as young as age 10 to considerably older men — who are more likely to be the highest bidders — to reap a high bride price (as is often the case in war-torn settings such as South Sudan, where poverty is endemic and sources of material wealth are few).²⁸ Child marriages also may be arranged to obtain the higher bride price paid for girls who have not been sexually active prior to marriage, a trend that has escalated due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Girls who marry young usually stop going to school because of their responsibilities in their new family, and consequent early sexual activity and child-bearing exposes them to myriad reproductive-health complications.²⁹

Attempts by young girls to resist early marriage are often futile in traditional societies where females have few rights and where, according to custom, the wellbeing of the community is prioritised over that of an individual woman or girl. Once married, women and girls who try to leave abusive marriages may risk additional violence at the hands of their natal family, whose worries about paying back the bride price can take precedence over any concerns about the health and welfare of a daughter or sister. Reduced to the status of chattel, incalculable numbers of women across sub-Saharan Africa have no recourse from the violence that defines their everyday existence.³⁰

Eradicating dowry and bride price

Just as the women’s movement in India specifically targeted the issue of dowry abuse in the 1970s and 1980s, African women are now coming forward to denounce the custom of bride price.³¹ At the first international conference on bride price in Africa in 2004, participants drafted a declaration calling for the abolition of the practice and sent it to all African presidents, the United Nations Secretary-General, the African Union and the Arab League of Nations.³² In Uganda, a domestic-relations bill is pending in which bride price is redefined as an optional marriage gift that cannot be refunded.³³

Legislating against bride price in Africa will not be a conclusive solution, just as prohibiting dowry has had a limited effect in India. An important lesson learned from India is the need for adequate resources for law enforcement and support services. The government shelters in India are reputedly “so horrible that a bride will prefer to die at the hands of her in-laws than to move to one.”³⁴ In Delhi, where the population exceeds

14 million, the police response unit that deals with dowry crimes has one van to respond to all calls. By the time the team arrives at the scene of a reported bride-burning, it is often the case that the police already have recorded the death as a cooking-stove accident, having been “assisted towards this conclusion with a wad of rupees.”³⁵ Even with widespread

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corruption and limited resources, however, there are successful convictions — so much so that the main prison in Delhi has a cell block designated exclusively for mothers-in-law who have killed or harassed their daughters-in-law.³⁶

According to one activist in Uganda, many women defend the practice of bride price because without it they consider themselves worthless, despite the work they perform in the household. “They are told it is only bride price that gives them value. Since many women believe this, it is no wonder that even today they don’t support the abolition of ... bride price.”³⁷

Women’s activists in Africa agree that lasting reform will require long-term strategies of community sensitisation and women’s empowerment — something well-known to Indian women’s groups that have struggled for the past 30 years to combat dowry crimes.³⁸ Often told by families to “back off” because one daughter’s rescue might limit another daughter’s prospects for marriage, victims’ advocates in India have had to confront entrenched cultural and economic systems in which women are both victims and perpetrators of such crimes.³⁹ Activists have realised that addressing dowry crimes independently of other social and economic factors that undermine women’s equality is short-sighted. Improving the condition of Indian women requires broad-based legal and cultural reforms in women’s and girls’ property and inheritance entitlements.⁴⁰ The same inevitably will be true in Africa, where any efforts to modify the tradition of bride price must include the promotion of women’s basic social and economic rights, particularly among the victims themselves. ■

A young Palestinian bride-to-be follows her mother past Israeli tanks on the way to her wedding. Her mother carries a suitcase crammed with cash — without which the marriage will not take place.

Image: Jaafar Ashtiyeh/AFP [newsprint photo]

While a documentary crew was at a hospital in India filming a report on dowry burnings, this woman was abandoned on the steps of the facility, burned from head to foot. In excruciating pain, she implored a member of the film team, “Please look after my baby girl.” They were her last words.

Images: LC Visuals [film still]



"Jamilla" was born in Filimgue in Nigeria, which is around 155 kilometres north of the capital, Niamey.

"I have nine siblings. My parents treated us very well. When I was 13, my father told me it was time to marry. The husband he had chosen was my 30-year-old cousin. I told my father I was too young, but he said I had no choice. I resisted and cried so much. My father knew I was unhappy, but he had promised his brother that I would marry the man, whose first wife had run away. He had paid my father 120,000 CFA [US \$220]. I tried to escape, but I was brought back home and forced to marry my cousin.

"When I went to live with my husband, his brothers and friends tied my arms and legs and dragged me to him, beating me. My husband just watched. He didn't touch me — but he didn't stop them, either. I cried so much — I still have scars from that time. We were living in the village where I was born, in a hut made of mud. The men took off my clothes and tied me to the bed. I screamed so loud that people came in. One of the people who came in was my father-in-law, who beat me and told me I must live with my husband. I told them all that even if they beat me I wouldn't sleep with him, and they said they would kill me if I didn't.

"My husband had some mental problems — I am not sure what they were. Maybe that is why he would just stand and watch. When they tied me naked to the bed, he didn't rape me. I think it was too humiliating for him to do it with everyone there. I would have preferred to live with an animal than this man. My legs were torn where they had tied me to the bed.

"I tried to forget what had happened and get on with work. One night, I told my husband I needed to go out to the toilet. I took a lamp with me and escaped. He didn't know that the day before I had sold my marriage clothes and hidden the money in my headscarf. I ran for two days with only water to drink along the way. When I arrived in Niamey, I was very sick and could not walk. I was taken to hospital. It took me two weeks to recover. My father came and was so angry — he said I had humiliated him. I told him it was better for me to humiliate my father than to stay with that man. My father said that if that was the case I must repay the dowry.

"There was a man who was a friend of mine before my marriage. I asked him to help me. He paid back the dowry, but as a result I had to marry him. I didn't love him.

"For the first year I lived happily with my new husband, who was a butcher. We lived in a small house made of mud in Niamey. But then he started taking drugs and drinking alcohol. He started to insult me and beat me. At first, I didn't do anything but then I started fighting back — but only when he was drunk and weaker than me. I was only 14 and he was around 30. He wouldn't even remember the beatings the next day.

"Sometimes I consented to have sex with him, but other times I said no. If I refused he would beat me and hold me around the neck and force me. He used to bite me — I still have scars. People tried to help, but my husband would beat them, too. I was so unhappy — I felt like I was always in a bad situation. I told my husband I wanted to divorce him. He said that if we divorced I would have to pay back the dowry.

"I didn't have my period for about two months, but then one day he punched me in the stomach and blood started pouring out of me. We have no children. I never used contraception — I am not sure why I never got pregnant. My husband used to sleep with prostitutes. He gave me a sexual disease, but there was nothing I could do to stop him.

"I lived patiently with my husband for four years. Two months ago, he went out and I ran away to my mother's house. I explained the situation to my family, but they have their own problems. I have refused to go back to my husband and am afraid that he may come and get me.

"My older sister is also suffering abuse from her husband. There are so many problems with forced marriage — it should be stopped. I want to be able to have a choice. The authorities should sensitise people. Why I should suffer like this, and twice over?"

Image: Georgina Cranston/IRIN



"Have you seen the burnt woman?" Nisha shouted from her doorway when we passed the slum on our way home. We hadn't, and asked the girl how bad it was. Nisha shrugged her shoulders. All she knew was that a young woman called Aleesha was lying badly injured in one of the illegal shacks near River Assi. She showed us to the hut and we decided to have a quick look before going home. Upon entering, we saw, in the dim light of a small electric bulb, a young woman lying on a bed, obviously in shock, most parts of her body grotesquely burned. Molten remnants of her synthetic sari stuck to loose patches of blackened skin, thick swollen blisters revealing raw flesh, infected wounds riddled with swarming flies.

Aleesha had been suffering in this hut alone and uncared for, but as soon as we arrived a group of men and several women appeared on the scene, each of them shouting their version of what they thought had happened and what should be done. Big-eyed children, some of them not older than three years, jostled one another in the doorway. Amidst this chaos, Aleesha lay staring at us, her blackened body in sickening contrast with the bright colours of her bedcover. We found out that she had laid helpless on this bed for six days, slowly slipping in and out of consciousness, refusing food and drink, softly crying because she was unable to breastfeed her youngest child. While the days wore on, her wounds got contaminated, attracting scores of flies. It was then, late in the afternoon of the sixth day, when young Nisha took us to the hut.

With the exception of Aleesha's mother and younger sisters, we made everybody leave the hut, and asked Aleesha if she could tell us what had happened. Even though it was obvious that speaking was virtually impossible for her, she bravely attempted to tell us what had happened to her. It

was in the house of her in-laws, at the other side of the city, her *bhabhi* (sister-in-law) and *saas* (mother-in-law) had doused her with kerosene and set her afire. Exhausted, Aleesha leaned back and closed her eyes. There was no time to lose; we had to have her hospitalised as soon as possible.

It took several days and as many conversations to piece together the story that led to the dreadful event which almost killed Aleesha. Today, she is about 26 years old but she was married off 13 years ago to Raj Kumar, an ice-cream vendor. Being the owner of a cart, he was regarded a good match. Aleesha's parents had to plunge deep into debts to cough up an enormous dowry: 6000 rupees [\$135] in cash as well as several expensive gifts. On top of this, they had to pay for the wedding and feed scores of guests, most of whom were invited by Raj Kumar's parents.

After the festivities, as tradition dictates, Aleesha went to live with her parents-in-law, her husband, his brother and his wife. Being the youngest, and new to the extended family, she had to work very hard, her *saas* had stern demands. Aleesha was scolded by both her *saas* and her *bhabhi* and received no support from her husband whatsoever.

She felt increasingly lonely, a pain which was somewhat alleviated by motherhood: She gave birth to three sons, who give her a lot of happiness, and who are the reason for the one and only compliment ever given to her by her mother-in-law. As far as her marriage is concerned, she abhors being intimate with her husband. She hates having sex, she says it gives her no pleasure and her husband is aggressive in sex.

On the afternoon of July 5, Aleesha was preparing tea, squatting behind her stove, when suddenly *saas* and *bbabbi* came in and threw kerosene on her lower body. *Saas* put a match to it and in no time Aleesha, wearing a synthetic sari, was ablaze. From what she told us, we understood that she tried to extinguish the flames with her bare hands, whereupon both her arms caught fire. Next to her burning body, two of her sons screamed in terror. Aleesha managed to stagger to the street in front of the house, where *saas* and *bbabbi* were now pretending to rescue her. They threw a bucket of water on Aleesha, which only made matters worse, and rushed her on a barrow to the government hospital, where she was refused entry.

She was refused entry at other hospitals too and eventually left with her mother in the hut by the river. Hospitals refused to take her in before the police had made a report. Cases of burnt women were invariably linked to attempted killings and first had to be dealt with by the police, they said.

On the streets, selling his ice cream, her husband had known his wife would be set ablaze that very afternoon. He had known and didn't intervene and now after the burning Aleesha knew her husband had known of what awaited her that day. Nonetheless, she wanted him to stay with her in the hospital and look after her. She wanted to stay with him, for a life without husband would be worse. Life as a single mother would be impossible. Her mother also had made it very clear to Aleesha, when she was still in shock and long before we arrived on the scene, that Aleesha could not stay with her in her miserable hut. Where would she get the money from, to feed Aleesha and four extra children? It was impossible: Aleesha had to return to her in-laws. That was the only solution in their situation.

Later, while Aleesha was recuperating in the hospital, we had long talks with Aleesha's mother. It was clear that this woman, mother of seven and living in abject poverty, was incapable of ordering her thoughts, incapable of reflecting on her life. It felt as if this was the first time she was asked to tell about her life, her feelings, and her sadness. There was much sadness. She cried a lot and then, as if she remembered then and there, she revealed that one of her sons also set his wife ablaze. Her own son had done the exact same thing to his wife. The grief-stricken woman didn't condone the act, of course, but somehow she wanted us to understand that poverty was the main reason things like this could happen.

"They were poor, he was desperate and when he could not force his parents-in-law to give more dowry, he faked the kitchen accident and set his wife ablaze with kerosene. Yes, like many other men had done in this very city. She died, and he got remarried, managing yet a bigger dowry than the first one."

Excerpted from an account of Aleesha's story by a social worker from the Duniya Foundation (www.duniya.org)
whose work includes helping victims of dowry burnings.

Aleesha today. Recovered from the terrible burns she suffered at the hands of her husband and in-laws, she has returned to her marital home. Aleesha feels she had no choice in a society where a single woman with children would be lucky to survive outside the relative protection of a family. “Life as a single mother would be impossible,” she said.

Images: LC Visuals