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Dowry as a Social Construct: An Analysis of its Effects on Women's Marital Experiences

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Abstract

The practice of dowry, which is a social issue in Pakistan, affects women, especially married women, in our society. This study aims to understand the practices and impacts of dowry in the district of Mansehra. Finding out how dowries affect women socially is another goal of the study. To achieve the study objective, we adopt a quantitative research method and a cross-sectional research design to collect and analyze the data. We collected data from 384 female respondents in the Mansehra district using a simple random sampling technique. We collected data through a structured questionnaire and analyzed it through SPSS. The researcher used the Chi-Square test and Kendall's Tau-b test to know the association and direction of association between study variables. At the bivariate level, the results indicate that all of the items on the dowry scale were significantly ($p=0.000$) and positively linked to the social effects of dowry. In addition, at the multivariate level, the results indicate that there was a significant ($p=0.000$) and positive ($\tau_b = .868$) spurious association between dowry and its social impacts while controlling for the level of education. Also, when the background variable marital status is taken into account, there are significant ($p=0.000$) and positive ($\tau_b = .868$) spurious links between dowry and the social effects of dowry.

Keywords: Dowry, Impacts, Social Impacts, Women Lives, Inequalities

Introduction

Like other South Asian nations, Pakistan preserves the long-standing custom of paying a dowry to the immediate family of the wife. A dowry is a gift, cash, or property the bride presents to her spouse as a wedding present. It covers the



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goods the bride's parents have given her for her marriage's preparations. Islam does not prescribe a dowry, hence the addition of money as part of a dower is not traditional. Sometimes a dowry may consist of food for a year, clothes for a year and ten to fifteen dresses for the wife (Ali, 2023). Marriage serves a crucial function in human existence. While it brings both satisfaction and challenges to one's life. However, before marrying entering into this engagement, several conditions must be fulfilled, including the dowry customary in our Asian culture (Bhamani & Merchant, 2022). In addition, marriage is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, signifying a crucial shift in an individual's life. The dowry system significantly contributes to early marriage issues in Pakistan, among many obstacles that emerge post-wedding (Das, 2024). It is the most significant determinant of the current social challenges plaguing Pakistani society (Ali, 2023). Dowry is, in fact, a customary practice associated with marriage. Dowry is defined as the monetary assets, possessions, or property that a woman brings to her husband's household upon marriage, provided by her parents (Ahmad & Hussain, 2014). The repercussions are extensive and troubling, impacting individuals from many backgrounds. The practice is notably prevalent in Pakistani culture. Brides no longer get dowries intended to facilitate a favorable commencement of their wedded life (Ali, 2023). The system of dowry is frequently characterized by opulent weddings, including the bride, groom, and family members attired in designer garments and accessories. The extravagant banquets and exhibitions exacerbate the challenges encountered by a society in which a considerable segment of the population resides beneath the poverty threshold, devoid of fundamental necessities such as potable water, sanitation systems, electricity, sufficient medical care, and excellent education (Auhad et al., 2024).

Unfortunately, the dowry system continues to endure in Pakistan. It sustains a sort of discrimination against unmarried women, since their worth is linked to the worth of their dowries. This is a troubling manifestation of human nature, especially impacting lower-middle-class families (Malik et al., 2024). These items may include garments, kitchenware, furnishings, and several other objects. The Dowry and Bridal Gifts Act of 1976 stipulates that "any assets bestowed prior to, during, or following the wedding, in any way, to the wife from her parents is linked to the marriage, excluding property that the bride may inherit under applicable inheritance and succession laws." (Pakistan N. A., 1976). In contrast, a wedding present is any object that the husband or his family directly or indirectly give the wife as a gift during the marriage ceremony; Bridal gifts do not include Mehar (Mohsin, 2022).

Dowry initially contained items that were often used in everyday life, but as time went on, the list of these items grew and continues to do so, and people began to utilize it as a distinguished symbol in the community. On the one hand, it bears the financial strain of a lavish dowry, but on the other, wealthy parents may utilize it to acquire a distinguished position and establish connections in society (Stanley J. Tambiah, 1989). Studies and surveys indicate that women who provide a substantial dowry have more happiness, and the conduct of their partners and loved ones tends to be equitable and affectionate (Agha, 2016). The dowry system in Pakistan is notably detrimental. It represents the servitude of unmarried women, whose worth is determined by the financial value of their possessions. This is a striking illustration of avarice and immaturity that has



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garnered much censure from its parents, particularly among the less wealthy working class (Momoe Makino, 2019). In Pakistan, some cultures exhibit a lower regard for the system of dowries than others. When the bride's parents provided a little dowry, it was presumed that the majority of marital problems had already transpired. Dowry often engenders significant familial discord. One of Pakistan's most significant challenges is the death of women resulting from dowries, often referred to as Dower Death (Gulzar & Nauman, 2022).

Problem Statement

The societal tradition known as dowry affects marital relations by generating notable power over women's lives in multiple cultural settings. District Mansehra within Pakistan shows dowry continues as an established cultural tradition which brings about destructive social and economic as well as psychological effects for women. The study investigates how dowry influences women's marital experience along with their personal autonomy and total well-being in District Mansehra.

Research Objectives

1. To explore dowry practices in the Mansehra district
2. The aim is to comprehend the impact of dowry on the lives of women
3. To determine the social impacts of dowry on women

Literature Review

The notion of dowry is ancient, and its origin remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it is said to have sprung from the roots of Hinduism. This habit is practiced in almost every culture and location globally, regardless of faith, but is particularly profound in Hinduism (Ch et al., 2023; Makino, 2019). Dowry has been significant from the Vedic era, when gifts from the bride's family and parents upon marriage were regarded as her property, termed 'stridhan' (Khan, 2021). During the Vedic era, marriage is linked to Kanya dāna. Kanya dāna, often referred to as 'Hunda,' derives from the term 'Handa,' meaning pot, since dowries were historically presented in a pot (Reshma, 2012). It was brought in England by the Normans around the 12th century. The practice of dowry in England historically allowed aristocratic families to marry off their daughters to establish financial alliances, seeing them as mere commodities (Chatterjee, 2018).

Dowry System in Pakistan

In Pakistan, dowry is a significant aspect of marriage. Research indicates that 95% of households engage in the exchange of dowries. Dowry is provided based on the families' status, including indulgences in affluent households (The diplomatic affairs, 2020). As a result of this tradition established by the upper class, families from the middle and lower classes endeavor to provide dowries that exceed their financial means and income. Individuals seek for females with affluent parents to get more dowry things. Essentially, in-laws insist upon it, and at times they discuss the amount of the dowry provided. The dowry system is derived from Hindu practices, since it often results in the denial of inheritance rights to daughters after the provision of dowry. Predominantly, female in-laws demand dowries and are often the instigators of verbal and physical violence against their daughters-in-law (Ch et al., 2023). The dowry



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system is generally acknowledged as one of Pakistan's most prevalent societal maladies. This subject has been addressed by individuals for a considerable duration, hence it is not a novel concern (Dasog, 2021). The existence of the dowry system has consistently resulted in the violation of women's rights. In Pakistan, parents often decline to arrange marriages for their daughters due to financial constraints. In some societies, the existence of a substantial dowry is seen as evidence that brides must compensate for the wedding (Ali, 2023). Dowry has evolved into a societal malady owing to its practice, while it was originally intended to assist the married couple in starting their life together. Parents provide dowries commensurate with their income to provide assistance rather than impose a burden onto themselves to satisfy societal expectations. These rituals give rise to difficulties. According to a Gallup Pakistan study, 53% of respondents supported dowry, 38% opposed it, and 9% were uncertain (Khattak & Bezhan, 2021).

Impacts of Dowry

Dowry has several adverse effects since it is a financial burden on families required to offer dowries for each daughter. Girls resort to suicide to alleviate the perceived burden on their parents, as they see their inability to provide for their dowries (McCarthy, 2017). Individuals procure loans from financial institutions and family members to provide dowries for their daughters, then dedicating their whole lives to repaying these debts till their demise. A significant number of females stay unmarried owing to their parents' poor socioeconomic level or insufficient finances (Onyango, 2016). Post-marriage, females will experience mistreatment from their in-laws and spouses (Muzaffar et al., 2018). They must also endure verbal abuse and ridicule when their dowries are insufficient. This also contributes to the violence. The education and freedom of women are the most crucial factors in preventing this problem (Mahata et al., 2023). Mental health concerns are prevalent in relation to dowry, although they are often disregarded, resulting in exacerbated troubles. The verbal abuse mostly originated from female in-laws, significantly disrupting the girl's life (Ali et al., 2013). As a result of this abuse, females either take their own lives or contemplate doing so. Research indicates that 65%-74% of females have suicide ideation as a result of the violence they encounter (Ali et al., 2013). There are fatalities resulting from the failure to provide a dowry; individuals murder their spouses over this issue. Pakistan has the greatest incidence of dowry-related mortality globally, with about 2,000 fatalities per 100,000 women annually (Ali et al., 2023). This dowry system has primarily impacted Pakistan, India, Bangladesh (Khattak & Bezhan, 2021).

Research Methodology

The researcher adopts a quantitative research approach and cross-sectional research design to collect and analyze the data. The locale of the study was the district of Mansehra. We collected data from female respondents using simple random sampling techniques. The sample size was 384, as per the unknown population formula. We construct a structured questionnaire with the help of existing literature to collect data. The reliability of the scale was determined through SPSS, and both the scales were reliable: dowry Cronbach's Alpha = .928 and social impacts of dowry Cronbach's Alpha = .967.



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We further analyzed the data using SPSS. We analyzed the data at the bivariate and multivariate levels using Chi-Square and Kendall's Tau-b to determine the direction of association and association between the study variables.

Ethical Considerations

During data collection the researcher upholds ethical research standards by giving attention to both participant rights and their welfare. Every participant in the study provided consent to the researcher before data collection activities began. This process indicated their willingness to join the research. Confidentiality along with anonymity protected every participant's personal data while they took part in the study. The researcher followed principles of honesty combined with integrity along with transparency to maintain both data accuracy and reporting without bias or manipulation. The study implemented all ethical guidelines to shield participants from damage and maintain researcher integrity thus strengthening the study's credibility and reliability.

Results and Discussion

The collected data were analyzed at bi-variate and multi-variate level. The independent, dependent and background variables were cross-tabulated to determine the association between them.

Bivariate Analysis

Association between Dowry and Social Impacts of Dowry on Women

This table indicates the association between dowry and its social impacts on women's lives. The results highlight that the bride's family paid dowry money because they considered it a tradition was significantly ($p=0.000$) and positively ($T^b= 0.675$) associated with the social impacts of dowry. Similarly, the groom's family demands for dowry were highly significantly and positively ($p=0.000$, $T^b= 0.694$) associated with social impacts of dowry. The association between the bride's family's wishes to provide dowry to the groom's family was found significant ($p= 0.000$) and positive ($T^b= 0.775$) with social impacts of dowry. Those who lack literacy often pay dowries and have significant and positive ($p=0.000$, $T^b= 0.837$) associations with the social impacts of dowry. Further, the association between the social impacts of dowry and due to their ignorance of the Dowry Law, they provide dowries was highly significant ($p=0.000$) and positive ($T^b= 0.928$).

Dowry is an evil practice in our society which affect our society and social system negatively. The custom of dowry acts to sustain gender discrimination because people believe women represent a financial liability to their families. Families fall into debt when they feel pressure to provide dowry which results in their financial downfall. The duty to deliver dowries triggers families to sell their properties and borrow money and use up their savings which results in sustained economic distress. A dowry is a gift, financial or property, that the bride bestows onto her husband as a bridal offering. It encompasses the items provided by the bride's family for her matrimonial preparations (Ali, 2023). The failure of families to provide dowry results in serious bride harassment and abuse leading to occasional fatalities. Dowry creates tension between families who are married to each other and their spouses. The business aspect of dowry creates problems for families because it downplays both emotional aspects of marriage together



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with social elements. The dowry system substantially exacerbates early marriage problems in Pakistan, alongside several challenges that arise after marriage (Das, 2024). Through the practice of dowry society maintains patriarchal structures because it provokes women to become purchasable assets while enforcing marriage as a deal between families. The practice weakens both gender equality initiatives and women's empowerment movement. Lacking the means to pay dowry causes families to undergo social discrimination and receive social rejection. Their marginalization grows stronger because dowry payment problems make it harder to find proper marriage opportunities for their daughters. Regrettably, the dowry practice persists in Pakistan. It perpetuates prejudice against unmarried women, since their value is associated with the value of their dowries. This is a concerning aspect of human nature, particularly affecting lower-middle-class households (Malik et al., 2024).

Table 1: Association between Dowry and Social Impacts of Dowry on Women

| Independent variable (Dowry) | Dependent variable | Statistics χ^2 (P-Value) Tau-b |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| The bride's family traditionally pays money as dowry. | Social Impacts of Dowry | $\chi^2=174.903$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .675$ |
| A dowry is demanded by the groom's family. | | $\chi^2=184.969$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .694$ |
| The bride's family wishes to provide it. | | $\chi^2=230.847$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .775$ |
| Those who lack literacy often pay dowries. | | $\chi^2=269.183$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .837$ |
| Due to their ignorance of the Dowry Law, they provide dowries. | | $\chi^2=330.818$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .928$ |

Multivariate Analysis

Association between Dowry and its Social Impacts while controlling Level of Education

This table contains the multivariate analysis of independent, dependent and background variable level of education. The results indicate that there was a significant and positive ($p=0.000$, $T^b= 1.000$) spurious association between dowry and its social impact for literate. Additionally, dowry and social impacts of dowry have significant ($p=0.000$) and positive ($T^b= 0.759$) spurious association for illiterate respondents. Further, the results of entire table indicate that, there was significant and positive spurious ($p=0.000$, $T^b= 0.868$) association between dowry and its social impact while controlling level of education.

The universal belief is that education acts as a significant social catalyst for fighting against harmful cultural traditions including dowry. Higher education creates individuals with analytical skills and enhances personal rights awareness



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and lets them challenge societal norms that lead backward. Dowry functions as a cultural practice that people accept because few educational opportunities exist in their communities. Many families show little understanding about the effects of dowry laws along with women possessing few means to stop the practice. The dowry imposes a financial burden because of its opulence; nevertheless, affluent parents may leverage it to attain social status and forge ties within society (Stanley J. Tambiah, 1989). The awareness about dowry's adverse effects tends to rise yet mutual acceptance of tradition and social pressure support its continued practice in areas where education reaches moderate levels. The frequency of dowry tends to decrease in communities where residents are highly educated even though it has not vanished completely. Open access to education enables women to gain equality in status and fight against backward methods which follow traditional cultural beliefs. Research demonstrate that women who provide a significant dowry have more satisfaction, and their treatment of their spouses and loved ones is often fair and loving (Agha, 2016). A Gallup Pakistan poll revealed that 53% of participants supported dowry, 38% opposed it, and 9% were ambivalent (Khattak & Bezhan, 2021).

Table 2: Association between Dowry and its Social Impacts while controlling Level of Education

| Level of Education | Statistics Statistics χ^2 (P-Value) Tau-b | Level of Significance for Entire Table |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Literate | $\chi^2 = 147.000$ (0.000) $\tau_b = 1.000$ | $\chi^2 = 289.598$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .868$ |
| Illiterate | $\chi^2 = 136.698$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .759$ | |

Association between Dowry and its Social Impacts while controlling Marital Status

The results indicate that there was a significant ($p=0.000$) and positive ($T^b=1.000$) spurious association between dowry and social impacts of dowry for single. Similarly, dowry and its social impacts have significant ($p=0.000$) and positive ($T^b= 0.750$) spurious association for married respondents. Furthermore, the overall results of this table shows that there was significant and positive ($p=0.000$, $T^b= 0.868$) spurious association between dowry and the social impacts of dowry while controlling level of education.

Social effects of dowry affect unmarried and married women in multiple ways because they both sustain misogynist systems and sustain prejudiced gender relations. Women experience different types of negative effects because of dowry practices yet their core status as property assets remains the same regardless of whether they are married or unmarried. Dowry has several detrimental impacts since it is an economic strain on households obligated to provide dowry payments for each daughter. Girls contemplate suicide to relieve the perceived burden on their parents, stemming from their failure to provide dowries (McCarthy, 2017). The concern about lacking sufficient dowry causes parents to



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arrange marriages early for their daughters with unsuitable partners. Child marriage continues to spread because of these circumstances and such conditions restrict educational and economic possibilities for unmarried women. A considerable percentage of women remain unmarried due to their parents' inadequate socioeconomic status or financial resources (Onyango, 2016). The failure of families to deliver the dowry prompts married women to encounter either harassment or physical assault and emotional abuse. Women are subjected to verbal abuse and derision when their dowries are inadequate. This also exacerbates the violence. The education and autonomy of women are the paramount variables in mitigating this issue (Mahata et al., 2023). The family may be expected to give more dowry to the new couple after their marriage with dowry harassment being a common occurrence. The establishment of legal economic and social interventions aimed at combating dowry will create a balance of justice for women across both single and marital life. Mental health issues associated with dowry are widespread, however often overlooked, leading to intensified difficulties. The verbal abuse mostly stemmed from female in-laws, profoundly affecting the girl's life (Ali et al., 2013).

Table 3: Association between Dowry and its Social Impacts while controlling Marital Status

| Marital Status | Statistics Statistics χ^2 (P-Value) Tau-b | Level of Significance for Entire Table |
|----------------|---|--|
| Single | $\chi^2 = 172.000$ (0.000) $\tau_b = 1.000$ | $\chi^2 = 289.598$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .868$ |
| Married | $\chi^2 = 118.569$ (0.000) $\tau_b = .750$ | |

Conclusion

The research investigates dowry's effects on women's married lives, with a primary emphasis on females since it mostly harms them. Dowry is a social evil that is practiced worldwide, particularly in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The escalating effects have exacerbated the burden on women's lives, as well as the bride's family. Various social and economic factors contribute to the persistence of dowry practices. Insufficient education or illiteracy contributes to the perpetuation of dowry practices and a lack of understanding of their effects on women's married lives. Dowries prevent women from getting married at a younger age. It also affects the family of the bride economically and socially. Dowry directly affects women, leading to various abuses and humiliations in their in-laws' homes when the demands are not fulfilled by the bride's family. Dowries also promote violence, especially domestic violence. This evil practice destroys a woman's overall quality of life.

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