

Curbing dowry practices: an anti-poverty imperative



Key Points

- It has been recognised that dowry in South Asia hinders women's empowerment and can serve as a cause of violence against women. A recent study in Bangladesh highlights that dowries also have serious economic repercussions, with families identifying dowry payment as a leading cause of impoverishment.
- Public policy aimed at ameliorating the negative social effects of dowry should take the economic consequences of unaffordable dowry into account, and dowry-focused policies should feature as part of broader poverty reduction strategies.
- There is a need to go beyond official policy and find innovative ways of addressing the negative socio-economic effects of dowry, both at the local and national levels.

What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty. Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation. This is different from the transiently poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.

South Asian governments have taken steps to curb dowry since the early 1960s; India and Bangladesh outlawed the practice, and Pakistan has attempted to set upper limits on dowry prices. Yet, dowry has continued to be a widespread and harmful practice, and research from Bangladesh suggests that the practice is on the rise.



www.chronicpoverty.org

The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) is an international partnership of universities, research institutes and NGOs, with the central aim of creating knowledge that contributes to both the speed and quality of poverty reduction, and a focus on assisting those who are trapped in poverty, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Partners:

- Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Bangladesh
- Development Initiatives, UK
- Development Research and Training, Uganda
- Economic Policy Research Center, Uganda
- FIDESPRA, Benin
- HelpAge International, UK
- Indian Institute of Public Administration, India
- IED Afrique, Senegal
- Institute of Development Studies, UK
- Institute for Development Policy and Management, UK
- Overseas Development Institute, UK
- Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, South Africa
- University of Legon, Ghana
- University of Sussex, UK

Contact:

Julia Brunt
CPRC Programme Manager
j.brunt@odi.org.uk

© Chronic Poverty Research Centre 2010

Families report that dowries are unavoidable if their daughters are to be married, but that dowry amounts are usually quite large relative to families' means. This is particularly the case among the poor, for whom the impact of dowry tends to be regressive. Marrying 'up' into a wealthier family can involve a larger investment for poor families, but marrying 'down', which is a cheaper option, is not possible for the poorest.

Faced with dowries they are unable to afford, poor families borrow money from relatives or turn to development NGOs to secure high-interest loans, which are supposed to be used to support income-generating activities. Poor families then sell livestock or land to pay their debts, and some never recover from the asset divestment. In an attempt to mitigate the damage that dowry causes, some families also agree to pay the dowry in instalments. However, this leaves brides vulnerable to threats of divorce or violence when their families prove unable to pay.

The economic consequences of dowry are often devastating. A 2007 study in rural Bangladesh revealed that dowry and wedding expenses are among the

most important causes of impoverishment for families. Respondents ranked dowry alongside illness and medical costs, two well-known drivers of entries into poverty.

Anti-dowry public policy must therefore be seen as an anti-poverty imperative, in addition to a means of reducing oppression of women, and should be included in national poverty reduction strategies. This suggests that international development organisations will have to engage with the issue. To date, they have for the most part avoided doing so, perceiving the practice to be cultural and likely to disappear with economic development.

Going beyond official national policies, the complex economic and social environment in which unmarried women are stigmatised and the costs of unaffordable marriage suggest the need for innovative approaches to anti-dowry policy. This applies at local levels as well as at the national level.

The issue of dowry belongs on the anti-poverty agenda, and policy needs to go further in addressing the problem in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

This CPRC Policy Brief was written by Peter Davis and Kathryn Bach

This policy brief is based on 'Curbing dowry should be more essential in poverty reduction strategies' by Peter Davis.

Resources and References

- Davis, P. (2009). 'Curbing dowry should be more essential in poverty reduction strategies'. Feature submitted to DFID 'Discovery of the Week'.
 - Davis, P. (2007). 'Discussions among the poor: exploring poverty dynamics with focus groups in Bangladesh'. Working Paper Series, No. 73. Manchester, UK: Chronic Poverty Research Centre.
 - Davis, P. (2010). 'Social exclusion and adverse incorporation in rural Bangladesh: learning from a mixed-methods study of poverty dynamics'. Working Paper Series. (forthcoming): Chronic Poverty Research Centre.
- See also: www.sdri.org.uk for a selection of life histories from this work.