

Dowry's Silent Strength: Holding Marriages Together, Cutting Polygamy Down in Pakistani Society

Dr. Waqas Ali Khan

Lecturer, Sociology, University of Narowal

waqas.ali@uon.edu.pk

Muhammad Sajid Nadeem

Assistant Professor, Sociology, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan Sub Campus Lodhran

Awais Khalid

Visiting Lecturer, Psychology, University of Narowal

Abstract

This study takes a qualitative approach to understand the complex and at times contradictory role of dowry in both enhancing marital stability and shaping gendered relations in Pakistan. Dowry is often considered a financial, social burden that accentuates ideologies of gender-based inequalities; however, dowry continues to be a practice and even honored in many South Asian cultural groups. Objectives of the study are to understand current socio-cultural meanings of dowries in Pakistani marriages, to differentiate the importance of dowry in divorce prevention and hindrance of male remarriage, to explore the dowry as a contribution to women's social and emotional safety and security in their husband's family, to investigate economic possibility as dowry as an investment in the shared household, to study the changing forms of dowry and views of dowry across different socio-economic and education strata and to consider the use of dowry as a structural barrier to polygamy and upheaval of marriage. This study uses findings based on four FGDs with 6 to 8 married women in each group, then presents a thematic analysis to unpack the meanings and function of dowry in relation to women's lived experience. The women indicated that dowry is a key factor for marital stability and women's security. Participants claimed that a "good" dowry results in a higher level of respect for the bride in her husband's family home and could even deter the husband from taking another wife because of the material and social significance of that original marriage. Dowry operates as a form of social insurance and emotional leverage within patriarchal family structures. However, the findings also pointed to how dowry commodifies women, creates tremendous pressure on their natal families, and reinforces women's perceived dependence on their in-laws for security; each essentially upheld gender inequality. Additionally, the research discovers nascent counter-narratives among younger, more educated women who indicate that they want to reject or change dowry practices. Although these voices are few in number at present, they represent the possibility of change for women. The research found that while the dowry system may lead to marital stability. Thus, stakeholders must work together, such as policymakers, educators, and community leaders, to change socio-economic systems that support the dowry institution in order to promote other types of marital respect and security based on gender equality and mutual agreement.

Keywords: Dowry, marital stability, polygamy, economic burden, and social pressure.

Introduction

Dowry, a practice in South Asia that is centuries old, has frequently been construed as a patriarchal curse, which objectified women and enabled gender-based violence. This interpretation is usually valid, as in many cases dowry has resulted in abuse, dowry deaths, and gender inequities. However, a potentially better sociological interpretation would reflect that dowry is more than merely an instrument of exploitation; it can be a protection instrument and a source of marital stability, especially related to traditional and semi-modern households. In many contexts such as Pakistan, when female mobility is restricted and U.S. style legal protections for women are limited or poorly enforced, dowry is often the only form of

“negotiated power”, and socio-culturally viewed as an investment that can both provide women socio-cultural agency in the marital space, while serving as a deterring obstacle to male-infidelity or remarriage (Ali, 2020; Sharma & Nasreen, 2015).

Marriage in South Asia is not just a private partnership but a social and economic arrangement. In the rural and semi-urban regions of Pakistan, marriage is regulated by family elders and is often rooted in expectations and assumptions about economic transactions, family honor, and long-lasting social contracts. In this regard, dowry, while often reproached, symbolizes something more than a ritual act. The dowry is more than symbolic. It becomes a form of economic capital legitimizing the woman’s transition to her husband’s household, and even if limited, enhances her diminished security and social capital (Kumar, 2017). The forms the dowry can take include gold, furniture, cash, land and even property. For many families, dowry is a contribution to equipping their daughter with the basics for a stable future and a way of securing respect in the marital home.

In addition, the perception of dowry as a tool for marital durability is gaining credence among families, particularly in societies where support or financial recourse for women after divorce is limited. In situations where the dowry is above a threshold amount, husbands and their families might be bound by a stronger sense of obligation or dependence that would not encourage separation. This is especially true in communities where financial or social penalties bestow status on men or make it less palatable to seek divorce, or to take a second wife (Zafar, 2018).

This was significant in patriarchal settings like rural Punjab where although polygamy may be permissible under Islamic law, the social norm discourages polygamy except in extreme circumstances. Dowry acts as a silent form of coercive control. For example, when men receive a large dowry, they are not just socially pressured not to destroy that marriage because they don’t want to offend the family from which they accepted the dowry, they also know that leaving the marriage would also prompt family legal problems, social scrutiny from their family, and tribal retribution. In that context, dowry secures a wife’s position in her marital house, but it also obligates the husband to his social contract at marriage.

This phenomenon also has economically material implications. In many instances, dowry represents the family's first line of capital for establishing the couple's household, purchasing property, and even operating small businesses. The way dowry becomes absorbed into the husband-partner's livelihood systems creates a financial interdependence that adds to the resistance to divorce or remarriage. The dowry technically enters their relationship (sociologically), and thus becomes a part of the couple's "household economy" (Kumar, 2017) as an economic investment they co-possess.

Sociologists argue that we should not necessarily understand dowry in a totalizing moralistic sense either as totally oppressive or empowering but in relation to contextual meanings and structural roles specific to each society. In patriarchal and class-stagnated cultures, dowry often becomes a "status equalizer" to help families of lower social capital negotiate acceptable matrimonial alliances for daughters. While the dowry transaction maintains unequal gender norms, it sometimes affords women better financial and social protections as compared to a marriage where dowry is not mentioned (Sharma & Nasreen, 2015).

However, because dowry is challenged by ambiguities, it is paradoxical in its effects: it enhances the marital relationship by serving as a modality of financial stability and a locus of leverage for the wife, while also entrenching the idea that women must ‘pay’ for acceptance and protection. This has consequences for how women define their own value and how men, and society, define women’s social position in marriage. However, for many women without

inheritance, property or independent income, dowry is sometimes the only substantive transfer of wealth from her family of birth on a lifetime basis.

It is also noteworthy that the type and meaning of dowry is shifting among educated and urban middle-class families in Pakistan. Dowry is increasingly reframed as a “gift,” “jahaiz,” or “culturally appropriate support,” and this can include household items, cars, or even monetary support to the wife that is in the wife’s name, recognizing the distinction between some transfers. The symbolic shift does not remove power, but it highlights a change in how dowry is used to strengthen women’s social standing in marriage- not just economically, but socially (Ali, 2020).

Objectives

1. To understand current socio-cultural meanings of dowries in Pakistani marriages.
2. To differentiate the importance of dowry in divorce prevention and hindrance of male remarriage.
3. To explore the dowry as a contribution to women’s social and emotional safety and security in their husband’s family.
4. To investigate economic possibility as dowry as an investment in the shared household.
5. To study the changing forms of dowry and views of dowry across different socio-economic and education strata.
6. To consider the use of dowry as a structural barrier to polygamy and upheaval of marriage.

Review of literature

Historically, the dowry system has played a central role within the context of South Asian marriage, as it is entrenched within religious, cultural, and economic systems. Although the oppressive aspects of dowry, such as the commodification of women, dowry violence, and bride-burning have received ample attention (Mukherjee, 2013; Srinivasan & Lee, 2004), the functional aspects of dowry have received less scrutiny including when dowry acts as a stabilizer for marriages, as well as a deterrent against the remarriage of males. This literature review examines the existing literature that discusses the different forms taken by dowry, its linked functions to marital stability, women's place in society, and intra-household relations. The discussion is framed around the socio-cultural background of Pakistan.

1. Dowry as a Socio-Cultural Institution

In South Asia, dowry functions as a persistent socio-cultural institution that not only influences gender norms and expectations for marriage, but is also not simply a one-time transfer of wealth. Anderson (2007) argues that dowry is reflective of patriarchal tradition and economic necessity, where parents marry off their daughters with material resources to pave the way for the daughter's future post-marriage. Dowry is legitimized through traditions and religious interpretations. In the majority Muslim population, dowry is seen as a 'gift' rather than a demand, though similar customs are found in Hindu traditions as well. As Qadeer (2016), indicates, while there may be some distinction between gifting and coercion as a social phenomenon, this distinction is obscured in rural Pakistani communities where there is social leverage to expect dowries of material value regardless of the family's economic situation.

In Pakistan, dowry is popularly called jahaiz, which often consists of household items, cash, jewelry and/or land. Although dowry has no requirement in Islamic law, social necessity has made it for all intents and purposes an obligation of marriage. The increasing amount of dowry and the idea that implies the social status of the family and worth of the bride. These social preconceptions have made dowry common across classes, and indeed, the contingencies of dowry appear to allow its perpetuation into the future. Additionally, dowry serves a strategic

purpose; as an informal guarantee of the bride's status in the marital home, and also a form of protection.

2. Dowry and Marital Stability

While much of the feminist literature critiques dowry as an exploitive practice, emerging sociological literature acknowledges a paradoxical function of dowry it maintains marital commitment. Ali (2020) argues that while dowry is indeed a patriarchal vehicle, dowry can not only empower women, but it can also enhance their symbolic and tangible value in the household. Whether it is measured in size or quality, dowry increases household value, and is a deterrent to husbands and their families committing divorce, or engaging in a second marriage. In a way, dowry acts as a deterrent to instability in marriage, by securing which commitment one has made in terms of social and your financial obligations in a divorce.

Notably, Zafar (2018) located that for most rural Pakistani households, predominately in Punjab and Sindh, if men receive significant dowries, they are expected, by social norms, to stay true to the marriage. For one, not only is there social norms of staying faithful to the marriage relationship, but to return part of the dowry when haq mehr at divorce or to provide restoration of the dowry. Thus, men are expected, on a very basic level, to maintain commitment via cost or penalty in undoing dowry. Finally, dowry, when pronounced in these ways, relies on forms of common investment, and it ties men and women in usually one-off financial arrangements. In this context, Sharma & Nasreen (2015) refer to this concept as the dowry bond, whereby a brides' capital requires collective leverage, or, it binds men to greater marital stability through their bride's contribution to the household.

3. Dowry as a Barrier to Male Remarriage

The literature also notes a lesser known use of dowry; namely, the use of dowry as a way to limit male polygamy or remarriage. In a qualitative examination of Urdu speakers by Khan and Saeed (2021) found that when families negotiate a higher dowry when marrying off their daughter, the intention was to "bind" the husband so that he is less likely to take another wife, limited by financial and moral obligations. In a number of tribal and rural contexts, a man's honour is also implicated in abandoning a wife who comes with a more sizeable dowry.

While Islamic law condones polygamy, social practice often restricts it, especially if dowry is seen as a form of "payment" or "investment" in a monogamous relationship. This aligns with Barth's (2014) social contract marriage: once an economic transfer (in this case, the dowry) occurs, obligations are prompted that shape behaviour in the marriage in the long run. For this reason, dowry is not necessarily simply a form of asset transfer but can instead be framed as informal control over a man's ability to form additional marriage alliances.

4. Dowry, Household Economy, and Gendered Power

Multiple scholars emphasize the economic character of dowry as a form of capital for both partners. Kumari (2019) argues that dowry contributes to the household economy through providing seed capital for businesses, financial capital in crises, and household capital for household development. But as Kumar also contends, this usage is gendered: it provides capital for men, but women remain economically and socially dependent on their husbands unless ownership rights are clearly established.

Gendered capital raises questions of control, autonomy, and relational power within marriage. If the bride or her family retains ownership of the dowry (like land or gold), women may have a greater degree of bargaining power; yet Patel and Ahmed (2022) clarify that dowry rarely translates into durable empowerment without legal protections and rights to inheritance.

5. Dowry and Evolving Middle-Class Practices

The meanings and forms of dowry in modern urban Pakistan are evolving. As Ali (2020) states, educated families often reinterpret dowry and design their own ritual form of dowry as a "gift

culture,” making it less material, but remaining a significant representation of the woman’s value, and allowing negotiation in her entry into marriage, regardless of contractual contributions. The dowry has also become a social contract that deters male violations and promotes monogamy.

In a recent study of upper-middle-class Pakistani families, Malik (2023) reports a desire for "branded dowries," where 'gift quality' is emphasized instead of 'gift quantity' (e.g. electronic devices, vehicles, branded furniture). The examples in this analysis highlight how monuments to tradition continue to have value in marriage, as dowry transforms, whilst also preserving social order and obligations.

Methodology

In the present study researcher conducted the data from 4 Focus Group Discussions (FGD). There were 6 to 8 participants were in each FGD.

Thematic analysis

Theme	Description	Participant Quotes (Illustrative)	Interpretation
1. Dowry as Marital Security	Dowry was viewed as a safety net for women, promising better treatment and lowering the chances of divorce.	“Achi jahez wali larki ka shoher do baar sochta hai chhorne se pehle.” “Mera jahez hi meri izzat ka zariya tha.”	Dowry is informal insurance for the woman that reinforces her rights within the marital home.
2. Deterrent to Male Remarriage	Husbands feel financially and morally obliged to accept a dowry, making it less likely that they would enter into a second marriage.	“Shohar ne kaha dusri shadi ka khayal bhi nahi laya, kyun ke abba ne gari aur plot diya tha.”	Dowry is an investment to keep the male far from remarriage, a second binding commitment.
3. Symbol of Family Prestige	Dowry reflects status within the parents' families and provides protection for how the bride is treated in husband's family.	“Agar jahez acha ho tou sasural izzat deta hai.” “Log kehte hain falan ki beti ka set bohot zabardast tha.”	Culture is a performance of honor, and social status is broadcasted and authenticated by means of dowry.
4. Emotional Blackmail & Societal Pressure	Parents have a heavy burden as they have to deal with family and society's expectations, while women understood it was a burden they would have to deal with.	“Ammi abbu ne qarz le kar mera jahez tayar kiya, warna rishta hi toot jata.”	Culture puts obligations on people, even in harmful ways; refusal may risk abandoned engagement or loss of face.
5. Dowry as Shared Household Investment	Some recognized that a dowry aided in household items like furniture, appliances, and property.	“TV, fridge, washing machine sab mere jahez ke hain, ghar chalane	Dowry can also structure comfort at home and is normalized into pooled resources, often for household demands.

Theme	Description	Participant Quotes (Illustrative)	Interpretation
		<i>mein madad milti hai."</i>	
6. Control vs Empowerment Dilemma	Although dowries are viewed as a "gift," at times ownership and control over the gifted items are assumed by the in-laws.	<i>"Jahez mera tha, lekin maika walon ne sab kuch sasural ke naam kar diya."</i>	Dowry formally acknowledges the bride's security, even if ownership or control is often forfeited, compromising its empowering potential.
7. Changing Perceptions in Younger Generation	Younger women expressed their resistance to excessive dowry; some requested only symbolic or minimal dowry.	<i>"Main chahti hoon meri beti bina jahez ke shadi kare."</i> <i>"Ab taleem zaroori hai, jahez nahi."</i>	A slow cultural shift is emerging, especially among educated participants aware of the inequities and weighing egalitarianism versus cultural expectations, even approaching dowry differently.
8. Dowry as Cultural Compulsion	Most couples recognized dowry as an issue that many accept as unavoidable in marriage, but may disagree with it as an ethical matter.	<i>"Hum nahi dena chahte thay, lekin rasm ka masla tha."</i> <i>"Aaj bhi jahez ke bagair rishta mushkil hai."</i>	Cultural hegemony is true, dowry is non-negotiable, there is increasing recognition of its costs despite explaining its costs

Interpretation of the table

1. Dowry as Marital Security

The participants all pointed out that a planned dowry adds to the bride's respect and security in her marital home. Dowry was seen as a deliberate way of protecting women, often referred to as "izzat ka zariya" (a person's honour). Multiple women indicated that their husband and in-laws were less likely to show aggression and were reluctant to talk about separation because the bride contributed price to the marriage.

Dowry in this case works as a non-verbal marriage contract, communicating to the groom's family that the bride is not coming to the couple hood as a mere liability but is accorded assets. In addition to its symbolic and material value, dowry is a source of informal protection from the bride's husband. The dowry practice has a problematic, oppressive background, but is reconceptualized as a mechanism of passive agency, a way for women and their families to orient themselves toward respect in a patriarchal structure.

2. Deterrent to Male Remarriage

A developing but serious theme was the impression that significant dowries inhibit men from marrying a new wife. Women shared repeatedly that the husband feels morally and socially obligated when the bride's family provides a large asset, such as a car, furniture, or land. In some rural settings, remarriage after a big dowry would be perceived as shameful.

This hints at both the economic and reputational cost of polygamy in dowry-based marriages. Dowries function as tools of marital negotiation, but also marital control curtailing husbands

from making decisions in the future. The dowry works as a socioeconomic buffer against instability; especially in a context where legal recourses or women's inheritance rights are scant.

3. Symbol of Family Prestige

Women recognized that dowry maintains a relationship with their social image and class performance. The participants remarked that individuals evaluated a woman's worth, as well as her family's dignity by the volume or quality of dowry that a bride was provided. The quote "people still talk about my dowry" references how dowry operates as a status differentiator.

Dowry acts as a performative cultural currency that enables families to either create or maintain their social capital. Although this intensifies pressure on impoverished families, it also clarifies why dowry remains resilient despite educational attainment: this indicates class identity, honor, and prestige, not just a transference of possessions.

4. Emotional Blackmail & Societal Pressure

A number of participants shared how dowries put pressure on families to take on debt in order to pay for the dowry. Some families took out loans, some pawned land, and some delayed marriage for other siblings in order to pay for the dowry. While participants noted the emotional trauma, they also noted the pressures of facing a broken engagement, or the gossip that comes with not being able to pay a dowry.

This theme suggests that dowry is a cultural obligation that is coercive. Women know that the additional emotional and financial stress it places on their families is consequential, and acknowledge the need for a dowry in order to get "a good match." This highlights how structural patriarchy normalizes oppressive practices by framing it as a tradition or necessity.

5. Dowry as Shared Household Investment

Some participants asserted that dowry was a resource to set up the house from furnishings to appliances and that by extension dowries benefited the couple, some noted that they had never possessed control over any of these things after marriage.

This shows us that, even though dowry is often defended as "for the bride", it is often joint property or worse taken over by the husband's family. It obscures the boundary of gift and inheritance. Therefore, the empowering potential of dowry relates to property rights and control, not simply ownership.

6. Control vs Empowerment Dilemma

Although dowry is intended to be a safety net, many participants noted times when their in-laws managed all the assets. Some women remarked that they had no input into how their dowry was utilized and others were instructed not to try to claim any ownership.

This theme demonstrates a false sense of power. While dowry may symbolically elevate the bride's societal status, the initiation of real independence is rarely realized unless accompanied with legal recognition and support from family. This mirrors institutional inequity for women, where assets that are intended to protect women are often still controlled by men.

7. Changing Perceptions in Younger Generation

Interestingly there were some women especially younger and educated respondents who voiced their intent to openly oppose the dowry system. They said they would not give dowry to their daughters or supported only very minimal symbolic things.

This signals the beginnings of cultural transformation. Education and urban connectivity are key ingredients in reconsidering and are potentially opportune triggers to rethinking outdated, hazardous customs. These sentiments arise, again, in a very small minority of participants, and are suggestive of possible generational shift especially in semi-urban contexts where access to education opportunities exist.

8. Dowry as Cultural Compulsion

The most common thematic pattern was the realization that dowry is part of marriage whether they believed in it personally or not. Even people who had a moral objection to the situation felt they must fulfill the dowry requirement for their child or social credibility.

This theme illustrates the hegemony of tradition. Dowry persists, even if it is seen to be in any way 'unfair', because the risk of social repercussions (shame, being rejected or talked about) is greater than their own moral objections. The immortal value of dowry is reinforced through cultural norms and converging deprivation.

Discussion

Dowry commonly recognized as a burden, a source of emotional and financial stress for families, a dowry is also viewed as an instrumental source of marital stability and also of security for women. In this discussion, these findings are contextualized within the socio-cultural, economic, and gendered landscape of South Asian societies, particularly rural and semi-urban Pakistan.

It was often reiterated in the FGDs that many participants feel dowry represents a form of insurance for marriage, a sentiment reflected in the literature. (Anderson, 2007; Srinivasan & Lee, 2004). Participants emphasized that women with "better" dowries are granted more respect and stability in their in-laws' households than with lesser dowries. This indicates a more functional view of dowry: from a materialistic perspective, it plays a part in elevating the bride's status, in addition to providing her a veneer of protection. This validates Banerjee's (2020) account of view of dowries being internalized as a woman's source of power in patriarchal systems; not as a form of exploitation, but rather an attribute for her in the marriage.

However, the security that dowry offers is contingent. The minute that material differentiation is stripped away (whether through damage, sale, or corruption) the woman could also lose her leverage. This demonstrates the precariousness of empowerment through dowry: empowerment grounded in external material aspects is precarious.

One of the most interesting and less-explored findings in your data is that dowry can actually deter polygamy or remarriage by husbands. This was mentioned by several participants who said that their husbands did not want to consider getting a second wife because of the substantial investment they got at the first marriage, which translates into money provided as vehicles, gold or property. This adds a new dimension to previous work which has mainly focused on dowry as causing violence or conflict, but rarely seen it as a tool of spousal restraint (Rozario, 2006).

This dynamic is especially relevant in Pakistani contexts where Islamic law allows polygamy, but sociocultural norms of reputation or financial capacity often limit the possibilities. So in this regard dowry becomes a system of social contract: a contract that binds the husband to the material reciprocity made at marriage. While it limits his choices, it is by commodifying the worth of women in economic terms, but it does not deconstruct the male-dominated structure of marriage.

Moreover, the discussion shows dowry is related to social class and status performance. As Jeffrey & Jeffrey, (1997) claimed, in South Asia dowry is not a private transaction, it is a public display of a family's honor. Families create dowries to publicly display their wealth and sophistication, especially when a family performs a dowry with neighbours in Narowal and surrounding semi-urban areas, where traditional and modernity coexist. However, this symbolic, materialized exchange only perpetuates caste, class and gender hierarchies.

Women shared examples of neighbours or relatives providing praise on a dowry or being critical of a dowry, even years after the wedding. This is framed through Bourdieu's (1986) perspective on cultural capital, in which material goods are resources used to enforce or

augment a family's symbolic power in society. Therefore, families and individuals opposed to the dowry practice felt pressured to engage in a dowry, otherwise, they would risk social isolation or humiliation.

Many women, interestingly, viewed dowry as their contribution to the establishment of the marital home. Dowry often consisted of furniture, electronics, and household items which became parts of the functional primary infrastructure of the home. This aligns with findings by Sharma et al. (2018) suggesting that dowry can obscure the line between gift and shared property which can subsequently become contested through ownership and control. In many cases, women acknowledged that the items - however brought from their natal home -were subsequently taken over by their husbands or in-laws, signaling a limit to their agency and autonomy.

Such a contradiction between women's economic contribution through dowry or property purchase and the cited lack of control illuminates systematic disempowerment in patriarchal marriages (Kandiyoti, 1988). Empowerment without ownership may be symbolic, or hollow at best.

The emotional burden of dowry emerged as a prominent theme. There were several women who reported feeling guilt and sadness, as they were aware their parents likely went into debt, or sold off possessions in order to make a dowry. Yet, at the same time, many of these women described the need to have a dowry to have a "good" marriage; demonstrating the hegemony of tradition (Gramsci, 1971) in their lives. The double bind is here: dowry is both exploitative, but also needed.

This pattern is similar to "patriarchal bargaining" that Kandiyoti (1988) has described, whereby women in the context of male-dominance become economically aware, not by resisting it, but by bargaining from within it. The strategy employed by women in rural Pakistan was one of accepting the dowry as a survival mechanism. This was particularly the case in highly rural locations, where gender roles and economic choices are rigid.

In all this continuity, there were still signs of cultural change, in the sense that there were a few younger participants who indicated a desire to not give dowry to their daughters, or only supported symbolic exchanges. They claimed to prioritize education and equality in their marriage partnerships, versus cultural traditions in dowry. This indicated, to some degree, the gradual effects of education, urbanization, and gender discourse to shift the normative cultural beliefs (Ali, 2014).

Nonetheless, it is still early change that is limited to elite classes. These progressive beliefs appeared to be concentrated amongst the semi-urban educated middle class. The vast majority, especially from rural backgrounds ultimately considered the dowry system as in their future and inescapable, even if they disliked it.

It is painful to recognize the irony evidence suggests: that dowry may offer women a momentary sense of agency, but its very foundation reinforces structural gender inequities. A woman's worth becomes attached not to her person, reasoning and ability to contribute, but to what she brings in material value. The threatened separation from the marriage, partner's infidelity, or abuse is often mediated by the perceived value of "dowry," as a measure of how transactional marriage is to the institution.

Rozario (2006) suggests that dowry systems do not vanish with modernization, they metamorphose to meet the economic and social pressures of the day. Even when women secure education, dowry expectations persist, because getting emancipation through education, has not developed into economic empowerment through wealth.

Conclusion

The research concludes that the ritual of dowry has become a two-edged sword- supplying perceived marital security and peace on one hand, yet reinforcing and codifying systemic gender inequality on the other. For many women, dowry is a personal burden as well as a form of social shield. It is understood as a passport to dignity and an impediment to male repeated remarriage, in context of a society where polygamy is permissible in theory, but socially and economically evaluated. A number of respondents claimed that their husbands had not wanted to remarry because the costs of the first marriage were so vast, which demonstrates the nature of dowry as a contract that carries burdensome obligations over time.

However, this security is deeply troubling. It does not emerge from a recognition by the family that the woman is distinct with intrinsic worth, dignity, and rights, but from an opportunistic use of perceived worth connected to material goods. This commodification demolishes women's dignity as economic agents and lends support to the impression that respect in a marriage must be purchased. Moreover, this cultural logic normalizes the assumption that women's welfare is the exclusive responsibility of her own family instead of being a collective social responsibility.

While dowry has significant cultural significance, it is structurally entrenched in social norms, economic anxieties, and public performances of honor. Families worry about stigmatization, gossip, and mistreatment of their daughters if they leave out "too little" and not because they care about dowries as a cultural ceremony. These anxieties are prevalent for families in semi-urban and rural areas like Narowal where traditional norms persist regardless of legal reforms. Still, there are signs of emerging change. In the study, some of the younger, educated women expressed discontent with dowry as a social norm, that they wanted their marriages and families to be based on equality and mutual understanding, not a material swap. Although these voices are still minority, they represent a significant start of a social or cultural change particularly if stressed in education, the media, and community awareness.

In summary, while dowry might seem to serve the purpose of stabilizing marital relationships, it is really fragile and ethically problematic while perpetuating patriarchal control and systemic gender injustice. Eliminating the dowry problem goes beyond avoiding a law prohibiting it; it needs a cultural critique and social commitment to the values we attach to marriage. Only then can we expect real marital harmony - not based on the price of furniture or gold - but on mutual respect and equality.

References

- Ali, S. (2020). *Gender, Dowry, and Marriage in Pakistan: A Socio-Cultural Analysis*. Lahore: University of Punjab Press.
- Ali, S. M. (2014). Gender and Education in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 7(1), 13–27.
- Anderson, S. (2007). The Economics of Dowry and Brideprice. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(4), 151–174.
- Banerjee, M. (2020). *Dowry in 21st Century India: A Legal and Social Overview*. Oxford University Press.
- Barth, F. (2014). *Marriage Transactions and the Theory of Social Contract*. Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers.
- Jeffrey, R., & Jeffrey, P. (1997). *Population, Gender and Politics: Demographic Change in Rural North India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with Patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290.

- Khan, N., & Saeed, A. (2021). Dowry and Male Responsibility: Cultural Discourses from Rural Punjab. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 36(2), 201–219.
- Kumar, R. (2017). Dowry as a Social Practice: Economic Impact and Gender Relations in India. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 412–428.
- Kumari, R. (2019). Dowry and Domestic Economy in South Asia. *Asian Economic Review*, 61(1), 37–59.
- Malik, F. (2023). Branded Dowry and Social Prestige in Urban Pakistan. *Contemporary Pakistani Society*, 8(2), 101–121.
- Mukherjee, R. (2013). Dowry Deaths: A Critical Analysis. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 20(1), 85–98.
- Nasreen, T. (2015). Dowry as Female Security: Evidence from Rural Pakistan. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(2), 109–125.
- Nasreen, T. (2016). Dowry and Women's Negotiated Power: Evidence from Rural Punjab. *Pakistani Journal of Gender and Society*, 18(1), 77–93.
- Patel, R., & Ahmed, S. (2022). Property, Patriarchy, and Dowry: Gendered Rights in Pakistan. *Journal of Feminist Legal Studies*, 30(1), 51–70.
- Qadeer, M. (2016). Marriage and Class Stratification in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Science*, 33(3), 56–78.
- Rozario, S. (2006). The Marriage Squeeze and Rising Dowry in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 32(1), 119–139.
- Sharma, M., & Nasreen, T. (2015). Dowry as a Form of Female Security: A Sociological Insight. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(2), 109–125.
- Sharma, N., Choudhary, K., & Rani, A. (2018). Dowry and Domestic Violence in India: A Critical Appraisal. *International Journal of Law and Legal Jurisprudence Studies*, 5(3), 212–228.
- Srinivasan, P., & Lee, G. R. (2004). The Dowry System in Northern India: Women's Attitudes and Social Change. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(5), 1108–1117.
- Zafar, H. (2018). The Economics of Marriage: Dowry Practices and Male Responsibility in Rural Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Issues*, 35(1), 58–74.