

Why dowries persist in South Asia

Despite a surfeit of men and growing female empowerment, grooms still have more clout

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The word for dowry in Bangladesh is an English one: “demand”. It is the price, in other words, that the groom’s family demands in order to admit the bride to their household. In theory, such transactions are illegal in both Bangladesh and India, and limited in value by law in Pakistan. The legislators who enacted these rules (in 1961 in the case of India) thought dowries would go the way of *sati*, the horrific practice in which Hindu widows were encouraged to throw themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre to show their devotion.

Economics militates against dowries, too. India has 37m more males than females, so it ought to be women, not men, who are paid to marry (if they wish to marry at all). Moreover, recent decades have seen a sharp rise in levels of female employment in Bangladesh and Pakistan, at least, undermining the notional justification for a dowry: to defray the cost of providing for the bride.

In China similar factors have worked to women’s advantage. Not so in South Asia. Perhaps nine-tenths of all marriages are arranged, and dowries are involved in well over half of these, academics estimate. The authorities barely bat an eyelid. Newly married couples in rural Tamil Nadu still tour their village to display the bride’s dowry—typically cooking vessels and a little gold. Far from hastening dowries’ demise, the explosive growth of the middle class has spurred their evolution. Many families may not be so gauche these days as to make explicit demands of a prospective bride’s parents. But the least an Indian bride is expected to bring to a lower-middle-class family is a new motorcycle. For a filthy rich one, it might be a Mercedes-Benz, say, or an American residence permit.

Why does dowry persist, even in Bangladesh, which development specialists praise for improvements in female health, education and employment? Over marriage, women remain at a disadvantage. Tasaffy Hossain, an activist in Bangladesh, says it is still nearly unimaginable for a woman never to marry. The longer a young woman goes unmarried, the greater the risk of “dishonour” for her family—if she has a romance with someone, say. Equally, the more educated a woman is, the more restricted the pool of desirable husbands, especially when religion and caste come into the equation.

Despite the rise in female employment, men still have many more choices and, on average, earn much more than women. Even for the bride's parents, it can make sense to invest in the son-in-law with cash to start a business or, say, pay for a degree.

Sarah White of the University of Bath argues that, in the case of rural Bangladesh, far from being at odds with the modern model of development, dowries are consistent with it. She is surely right to call Bangladesh's market economy "red in tooth and claw". While many have prospered, many others have been losers—for instance, from land appropriated with inadequate compensation. Access to jobs is not free and fair but governed by networks of patronage, explaining, in large part, the country's endemic political violence. In this context women working in the multiplying garment factories of Dhaka, the capital, may not be securing their independence so much as supplementing the income of their husband's family. Others may even be saving up for their own dowry.

Ms White calls dowries a "collective investment in advancement". That applies to the better-off, too. Well-off Indian families, a member of one explains, go into marriage negotiations as if the merger of two companies is at issue.

All this comes at a high price, of course. When Shirin, a young garment-worker in Dhaka, got married and moved into her new husband's home, her parents paid the groom's family "a good dowry—as much as they could afford", she says. Yet her in-laws demanded more, and her husband took to beating her senseless when her family couldn't supply it. Eventually neighbours rescued her, and she filed a case against her husband. That was five years ago; the authorities have yet to press charges.

"Dowry torture" of women like Shirin is common, claiming on average over 20 lives a day in India. Dowry's baneful effects are also assumed to contribute to sex-selective abortion, female infanticide and malnutrition among girls. Encouragingly, a growing number of wives are walking out on violent husbands. More and more educated women attempt to avoid arranged marriages altogether. But in a world where dowries persist, most women understandably conclude they are better off having one.