

# Dowry and its Impact on Women's Marital Life: A Study in Sylhet City, Bangladesh

<sup>1</sup>AL AMIN RABBY<sup>†</sup>, <sup>1</sup>UMAMA RAHMAN\*, <sup>2</sup>MD. ABUL HOSSEN<sup>‡</sup> &  
<sup>1</sup>MARRIYA SULTANA\*

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Sociology, Shahajalal University of Science and Technology,  
Sylhet 3114, Bangladesh*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Social Work, Jagannath University, Dhaka 1100, Bangladesh*  
E-mail: alaminrabby@yahoo.com

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**ABSTRACT:** Dowry is a multifaceted, deeprooted gender issue with social, economic and health consequences. This social evil has brought fatal effects to the lives of ordinary women of our society. It has a lot of dimensions like social, economical, psychological, legal, ethical and religious. The study identified factors which promote dowry supportive practices in Bangladesh and also examined the contexts of factors e.g. religion, socio-economic status, education and other attitude and behaviour towards dowry; and recommend specific intervention program especially to explore possible ways to reduce and eliminate dowry. Although family tradition, poverty, unemployment, mass illiteracy and lack of consciousness could be discerned as significant factors, further study is essential to confirm whether education, employment, women empowerment, awareness program and overall poverty alleviation could help to eradicate this evil social practice.

## INTRODUCTION

The term dowry means the property such as clothing, money, Jewelry etc that a wife brings to her husband during marriage or after marriage. Dowry theoretically belongs to the bride; however it usually passes to the husband and his family upon marriage and therefore it is often an important factor in marriage. Nazzari ('91), and Birge (2002) has defined dowry as the property a women bring during her marriage. Ameen (2005) defines dowry as the property which the husband received from his wife and her family upon marriage. Anderson (2003) (*cf.* Suran *et al.*, 2004) argue that dowry has also been referred to as gift or transfer by a bride's family to the groom or

his family at the time of marriage a direct transfer to the groom, in numerous historical instances.

Along with the dowry demand there is another thing which comes at the wedding "*abder*" that both sides would agree that no demand would be made but there are some expectations of the groom which have to fulfilled. Ahmed and Nahar ('86) argue that this word is being used instead of the more open and direct word demand because the *abder* conveniently mask the exhortation or exploitation rather it creates an impression of expensive and generous gift giving.

Jhabvala ('81) cited in Huda (2006), reveals that like many customs and social institutions in Indian subcontinent, dowry is said to originate from Hindu customs. Traditional Hindu law recognizes several types of marriage, hence; the most approved being the Brahma from, where the bride's father gives her away without any consideration. In the Brahma from,

<sup>†</sup>Assistant Professor

<sup>‡</sup> Professor

\*Student

the bride's father offered his daughter adorned property, but was under on compulsion, and these gifts were given to the daughter personally. Such voluntary gifts were to provide economic security from the daughter in her new home and were considered as gifts with wife (*stridhaan*). Ahmed and Nahar ('87) refer to Brahma marriage as dowry or Joutuk marriage and argue that, though this form was once confined to Brahmins, it later became accepted by other castes.

Ansari ('81) cited in Huda (2006), some authors have tried to justify this system of dowry by reference to the practices of the prophet Mohammed that is Sunna. Despite agreement that dowry payments are not among the basics of a Muslim marriage, there are contentions that it forms part of the Sunna of the Prophet, who gave certain items to his daughter Fatima at the marriage to Ali, the Prophet's cousin (Ansari, '81: 80-81).

The second instance quoted by those who see dowry as Islamic is the marriage of Zinab, another daughter of Prophet, who has given a costly necklace by her rich mother (Ansari, '87: 81). These are not regarded as normative Sunna however, since Jahez was not mentioned for several other marriages during the Prophet Mohammed's time, nor did the companions after the prophet's time emphasize this practice. Huda (2006) said, the Koran, the traditions of the Prophet (Sunna) and other early scholars (for example, the Hedaya), do not back the practice of demanding dowry. The traditions of the prophet call for a man to avoid marriage until he can afford marriage and dower. If he cannot afford to get married he should practice abstinence until Allah provides him with sufficient means. Esposito ('82) comments dowry although not rooted in Islamic law, is firmly established by custom.

Siddiqi (2002) takes Oldenburg's socio-economic analysis (Oldenburg, 2002) of the development of the dowry system as starting point for a discussion of the current dowry practice in Bangladesh. She notes that the post independence period in Bangladesh has been a period of increased social differentiation and new possibilities for capital accumulation. She proposes that dowry has become a tool for social mobility within this socio-economic environment. Siddiqi notes that it is only in the post-independence period, especially the 1980s and 1990s

that dowry death emerged as a serious problem. Ahmed and Nahar ('86) argues that, after the independence of Bangladesh the newly borne rich had to spend their wealth somewhere and marriage become the occasion for spending money in order to show off wealth. Parents of daughters enter in a competition through illegal means to marry off their daughters to desirable grooms so that their daughter could lead a life of leisure and comfort. In these case many parents willingly gifts things to the groom in order materialize the marriage. Ameen (2005) argue that the recent emerge of dowry in Bangladeshi society is more due to the simple greed and commercialization of marriage and the impact of traditional culture. Subhan ('97) reveals that after the independence of Bangladesh besides unemployment rate increased to a greater extent from mid seventies job markets in the Middle East, South East Asia, Europe and America which lured the young men of Bangladesh. These young men could not find money to cover air passage and other incidental cases to go to these countries. The only way of finding money to cover these was to get married to the girls of rich families to get dowries. The parents of the groom adopted this tactic's of extorting money from the bride side in total disregard of the capacity of the bride's family to such amount. Oldenburg (2002) cited in Siddiqi (2002) argues that today's practice of dowry in South Asia has to be seen as a product of the policies of the colonial rule. The British created male individual ownership in land, male become the dominant legal subjects. Both the masculinisation of the economy and the recruitment to the British army made sons are desirable than daughters. Work in British army or in the bureaucracy was a source of cash and land rewards. Families of grooms with access to such jobs started to demand dowry. Parents of potential bride knew that a good dowry was the way to secure the best groom and hence contributed to the practice.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Dowry is the payment made from the bride's family to the bride, the groom, the wedded couple or the groom's family. This can be range from movable property such as money, ornaments, clothing, household goods, and cattle in some cases land is also provided as a part of the payment. Soon after the

independence of Bangladesh due to the rapid social transformation a new social class emerged and took dowry as a way to show their wealth by providing and spending a huge amounts of money on their son's or daughter's marriage. At the same way people who demand dowry consider marriage as merely another way of making money, sometimes it happens overtly and it happens covertly sometimes. These make the marriages a commercial transaction, giving more value to property and money than the bride herself and now it has become the custom of the society.

The social evil, dowry, has brought great effect to the lives of ordinary women of our society. A number of marriage negotiations break down if there is no consensus between bride and grooms family on dowry. Early marriage is direct consequence of dowry demand, because younger bride has lower amount of dowry demand. The failure to meet the dowry demand and for the inadequate dowry, lots of women are facing physical and psychological violence and harassment. A number of women were killed, brutally tortured and even lots of them are sent back to their in-laws. Siddiqi (2002) in his research revealed a pen picture about the impact of dowry on women's life and the form of torture happened due to dowry and dowry related cause. According to the statistics of Ain O Salis Kendro (AKS), in the year 2007, 159 cases were filed for dowry death. In the year 2008, 1985 cases were filed for dowry related violence and 172 cases for dowry death. In the first half of 2009, 119 cases of dowry related violence including 78 deaths was reported. According to ASK (Ain O Shalish Kendro) and Odhkir, two renowned NGO's of Bangladesh, statistic report in year 2009, shows 176 women died due to dowry related violence, 7 women allegedly committed suicide as they could not bear the brunt of torture. In Sylhet division during the January-December of the year 2008 at Sylhet district, 72 violence cases for dowry demand and 8 murder cases for dowry demand, were filed at the Women and Children Tribunal. At Sunamjong district 27 dowry related violence case was filed (Mannan and Zohir, 2009: 150-151). The dowry demand is an open crime now. The brutality, atrocity associated with dowry toward the wives is normal and common. Demand and harassment for dowry in cash or kind of housewives by their husband's and in-laws are common in both rural and urban areas, in lower and

upper classes, illiterate, educated and even in higher educated people. In spite of the legal penalties for giving and taking dowry, the practice is continuing and dowry related violence and deaths are increasing. Thus the dowry demand is a serious social problem now.

Dowry has a fatal effect to the lives of ordinary women of our society. Despite the Dowry Prohibition Act, there are numerous evidences that the practice of dowry is continuing and the consequences that are harmful and lethal for women. In our country, every day lots of women are facing physical and psychological torture and abuse for the dowry demand. It was revealed that Sylhet has the lower proportion of reporting dowry, and thus dowry related violence and murder cases are low in Sylhet. Although we are not sure what is the reason behind this lower rate of dowry problem in Sylhet city since there is no research available in hand.

As Sylhet receives huge amount of remittance from abroad, so it has comparatively the better socio-economic condition (Afsar, Yunus and Islam, 2002: 48). Because of improved economic condition, the dowry problem is not serious in Sylhet. But the reality is different if we go deeper. Dowry system exists in Sylhet. Lots of women in Sylhet are physically tortured and verbally and mentally abused for the dowry demand while many are murdered (Ameen, 2005: 42; and Mannan and Zohir, 2009: 150-154).

Because of conservatism, family pride, traditional customs and different socio-economic system prevails in the Sylhet region, most of the dowry related cases are not openly discussed hence never become public. In this regard it is very much significant to know the impact of dowry on women's life, the motivation and perception behind giving and receiving dowry, and the determining factor that works for the perpetuation and of dowry in Sylhet. That's why in this study we will discuss the nature of dowry system and its impacts on women's marital life. For a deeper understating we will like to explore the causes behind for giving and taking dowry and explore the determining factor of dowry in Sylhet.

*Objective of the Study* :The general objective of the study is to know about the existing nature of dowry system and its impact on women's marital life in Sylhet city. In order to explore the question, present

research invites some specific objectives which are; firstly, to know about the causes of giving and receiving dowry. Secondly, to explore the determinants factors that affects the amount of dowry and finally to find out the participants recommendations to eradicate the dowry system.

### METHODOLOGY

In this research explorative design was followed. Methodological triangulation (sample survey and case study) was used. Both qualitative and quantitative data was used. At first the information was collected by structured questionnaire, from the respondent through survey method. Close-ended, open-ended, and dichotomous questions had been set in the structured questionnaire and here information was collected through face to face interviews. A guide questionnaire was used for case study to get in depth understanding about the impact of dowry on women's marital life.

All the married women and the parents (whose son and daughter are married) of those households in the area of 'Baruthkhana', Ward no. 15 under Sylhet City Corporation was selected purposively as the population for the study. To fulfill the general objective of the study 'the impact of dowry on women's marital life', we have selected the married women as the key-informants for this study. To know the existing nature of dowry system and the reasons behind giving and taking dowry we have selected the parents as the respondents. To carry on the process we have had gathered information from married women and the parents and had purposively taken 5 married women as key-informants, 40 parents as the respondents for this study. In this study 'household' was considered as a unit of analysis.

*Limitation of the study:* To conduct the following study we felt some limitations. These limitations are as follows:

- (1) Since the study area 'Baruthkhana' has been selected purposively, the result may not be representative for the whole city.
- (2) Because of the purposive selection, it is not possible to make generalization.
- (3) It is simply difficult to conduct such academic research covering the whole city due to its cost involvement and time requirement.

- (4) It is obvious that the task is difficult and so we tried to minimize problems faced in the field, and in doing so it is possible that some sort of error remains.

### RESULTS

Following are the tables which show the findings of the study.

TABLE 1  
*Kind of dowry transactions during marriage*

Kinds of transactions	Frequency	Percentage
Furniture, material goods	9	22.5
Furniture, material goods, TV, fridge	6	15.0
Furniture, material goods, TV, fridge, electronic appliances	16	40.0
Furniture, material goods, cash money	3	7.5
Furniture, material goods, motorcycle	3	7.5
Furniture, material goods, TV, fridge, car	1	2.5
Cash money	2	5.0
Total	40	100

The study reveals that, on their daughter's marriage, 22.5% respondents have given furniture, material goods(clothing, utensils, bed covers and curtain, jewelry etc ); 15% have given furniture, material goods, TV, fridge; 40% respondents have give furniture, material goods, TV, fridge, electronic appliances; 7.5% have given furniture, material goods and a motorcycle; 7.5% have given furniture, material goods, cash money; 2.5% said they had to give furniture, material goods, TV, fridge, and a car; 5% respondent said they gave cash money which was about 200000/- taka and 300000/- taka each as dowry.

TABLE 2  
*Monetary spending for dowry during marriage*

Money spent (in taka)	Frequency	Percentage
below 50000	4	10.0
50000-149999	4	10.0
150000-249999	7	17.5
250000-349999	11	27.5
350000-449999	9	22.5
450000-549999	3	7.5
550000-649999	1	2.5
above 650000	1	2.5
Total	40	100.0

For buying that entire things like furniture, material goods, TV, fridge, 27.5% respondents spent tk. 250000-349999, 10% spent below tk 50000, and 2.5% spent more than tk 600000, on their daughter’s marriage. The amount of money spending on dowry varies in between 150000-349999 tk, and mean comes to about 245000 tk.

The respondent views about the bringing of all those things (dowry) from the daughter-in-laws parent’s family is, 10% respondent said “it is a social norm”, 32.5% said “for maintaining status /prestige it is necessary”; 27.5% of them said that getting all this things is “their son’s right”; 15% said all that thing is “necessary for a new couple”. Only 15% respondent thinks that “it is not necessary for the bride to bring all that things (dowry)”.

TABLE 3  
*Reasons for giving dowry in daughter’s marriage*

Reasons for giving dowry	Frequency	Percentage
Positively influence daughter’s marital life	7	17.5
It gives her a higher status, position	5	12.5
Give her a secure, happy marital life	5	12.5
Maintain our status, prestige, position	13	32.5
Increase our status, position, prestige	6	15.0
none	4	10.0
Total	40	100.0

Table 3 shows that 17.5% said whatever they give to their daughter’s marriage “that has positively influenced daughter’s marital life”; 12.5% said that dowry has “give their daughter a higher status, position”; 12.5% said that it has “give the daughter a happy secure marital life”. On the other hand 32.5% respondent said, “whatever they have given for their daughter’s marriage that has maintained their status”, 15% said “it has helped them to increase their status in the society.

TABLE 4  
*Kind of dowry demand by sons for their marriage*

Demands	Frequency	Percentage
Cash money	9	22.5
Car	1	2.5
Motorcycle	1	2.5
Nothing	29	72.5
Total	40	100.0

In the case of taking special items as dowry presented in table 4, 22.5% respondents said, on marriage, “their son had taken cash money”; 2.5% said “their son demanded a car”, and 2.5% of the of the respondents said “their sons have taken motorcycle from the bride’s parents”.

Table 5 shows demands and expectations of groom’s family from the would be bride’s family. In the case of would be daughter-in-laws, the amount of dowry depends up on the nature of beauty and features of the girl. 50% respondents said that they took dowry because their daughter-in-law is not beautiful. In respect to son’s qualification, and higher job occupation, the parents of the doctor groom said that they demanded dowry because their son is overqualified than the bride. 41.2% parents who gave dowry on their daughter’s marriage for maintaining the prestige or status, had also take dowry from their daughter-in-law’s family for the same reason.66.6% parents give dowry for increasing their status, prestige, and they had taken dowry for maintaining their status; and 33% parents stated that they had taken dowry to make the competition with their other relatives who got their daughter and son married (Table 6).

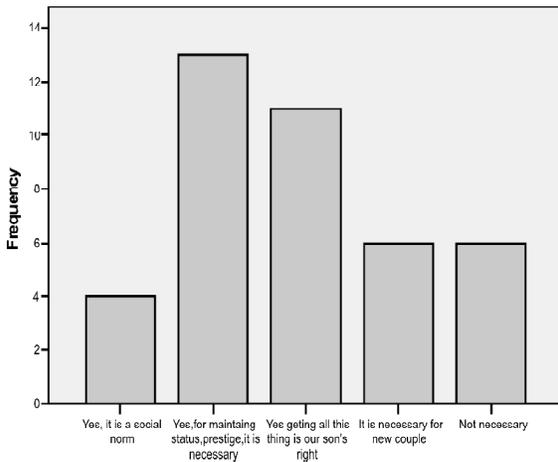


Figure 1: Is it necessary to bring all those things



TABLE 7  
Reasons for giving dowry to groom's family

Reasons:	Reasons why you wanted dowry from in-laws' family								
	It's a way of making money	The bride has some faults	The groom is over-qualified than the bribe	It's our right to get things	To maintain status and prestige in society	For competition with other relatives	They have lack of those things	Did not want to take dowry	Total
gave all the things in marriage of the daughter for									
Display	—	—	—	—	2 (100)	—	—	—	2 (100)
For increasing status/prestige	—	—	—	—	2 (100)	1(100)	—	—	3 (100)
To secure a prestige for groom	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1(100)	1(100)
To maintain status/prestige	—	—	2 (11.8)	2 (11.8)	7 (41.2)	1 (5.9)	0	5 (29.4)	17(100)
For competition with other relatives	—	—	—	1 (33.3)	1 (33.3)	—	—	1 (33.3)	3(100)
Hiding daughters faults	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1(100)	1(100)
To make strong position of daughter in in-laws home	—	—	—	—	1 (50)	—	—	1 (50)	2 (100)
For daughter's happy family life	2 (33.3)	1 (16.7)	—	2 (33.3)	—	—	1 (16.7)	—	6 (100)
For showing daughter's wealth in in-laws home	3 (60)	—	—	1 (20)	—	—	1 (20)	—	4 (100)
Total	5 (12.5)	1 (2.5)	2 (5.0)	6 (15)	13 (32.5)	2 (5.0)	2 (5.0)	9 (22.5)	40 (100)

Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage.

## DISCUSSION

In this present study I have tried to explore the nature of dowry system, the causes of giving and taking dowry and the determinant factors that affect the amount of dowry. I also tried to know the impact of dowry on the woman's marital life in Sylhet City. The findings of the study are as following.

### *Nature of Dowry System in Sylhet City*

From the field study it is found that most of the groom's family indirectly want the dowry from the bride's family. The respondents (70%) said that, on their daughter's marriage their son-in-law's family had demanded dowry indirectly in the form of gift. In the case of their own 'son's marriage' the respondents (45%) said that, they had also followed the same process. Very few (15%) groom's family directly demanded dowry from the bride's family. In the process of indirectly demanding dowry system, the

groom's family very strictly wants it. In this system the groom's family had asked the bride's family in a round about way that, "we have no demand, but you can give everything as you wish, because we know you will not deceive your daughter and son-in-law". Some groom's family told the bride's family that "we have no demand, but whatever you will give that should be good in quality, which can suit with our status, and maintain our status and prestige". Some groom's family had also mentioned the shop's name to the bride's family, "from where the furniture and other things should be purchased". Some groom's family didn't demand anything, but they also didn't say 'no' to the bride's family for dowry. Some groom's family told the bride's family that our house is well furnished, so "it will be better to give other things instead of furniture". In Sylhet by this way the dowry system is continuing under the name of 'gift giving culture' from the bride's family to the

bridegroom and his family. Thus the nature of dowry system is perpetuating in Sylhet in an indirect or covert way.

#### *Reasons for Giving Dowry*

While exploring the reasons for giving dowry from the respondents, I learnt various security and social motivations as the reasons for giving dowry.

#### *Motivations for Giving Dowry*

Most of the respondents mentioned that they provided dowry for various security reasons (33%). Some of them mentioned that they provide dowry “to ensure daughter’s happy marital life” while others explained that “they had to do that hoping that their daughter will get well treatment in her in-laws home”. Some also had said that “they had to give dowry in order to secure a high profile groom”.

#### *Social Motivations*

This study also revealed that social motivation is the major reason (67%) for giving dowry. The respondents said giving something on daughter’s marriage is a social obligation. They give dowry on their daughter’s marriage “to maintain the status, prestige in society”. Some parents think if they give large amount of dowry on their daughter’s marriage that “will make daughter’s position strong in her in-laws home”. Some parents give large amount of dowry “to display their wealth, to increase their status, prestige”.

#### *Motivation for Receiving Dowry*

The study also revealed some interesting findings regarding the motivation behind receiving dowry.

*Economic motivations:* Some respondent think that taking dowry on son’s marriage is a way of making money, and to get the household things and appliances from bride’s family, that otherwise they could not afford. While others have a strong belief that taking something from the bride’s family is their son’s rights, because they had to spend a huge amount of money to take their son up to this point. Some participant mentioned that they took dowry because the bride was less qualified and this way they compensate the limitation, and limitation they indicated as the body

complexion, academic qualification and lineal heritage.

*Social motivations:* The study also revealed social motivation a major (53%) factor for taking dowry. To maintain the social status and position in the society the grooms’ parents have taken dowry from the bride’s family in the name of gifts. Further, for increasing their status and position in the society, and to compete with their relatives some of the respondent had stated taking dowry. Some parents have not demanded anything from the bride’s family, but have taken whatever was gifted to them only for social reasons, to avoid receiving comments, like some faults or problem in the groom’s family. Thus to avoid receiving unpleasant comments from the relatives and neighbours the groom’s family have taken dowry.

#### *Factors Determining Dowry Amount*

The present revealed some factors playing an important role in determining the amount of the dowry. These factors increase and decrease the amount of the dowry during negotiations. Amount of the dowry increases with the factors like monthly income of the bride’s family, amount of foreign remittance sent by the bride’s family member. There is a strong relationship between the dowry amount and the beauty of the girl to be married, especially the skin complexion, body shape, and also the social hierarchy. The amount is on the lower side when the skin complexion, beauty and body features are much appreciable and social hierarchy goes on higher level. There is also a relationship between the bride’s educational level and job position, and the amount of dowry. More the educated girl, lesser the amount of dowry.

#### *Impact of Dowry on Women’s Marital Life*

Dowry has both positive and negative impact on women’s marital life. When the amount of dowry is inadequate or not as much as demanded by the groom’s party, or the quality of materials are poor, then it can have an adverse and damaging effect on the marital life of the newly married women. She might face the verbal abuse, physical and mental torture, and in the worst case marital relationship can be broken up. If the parents of a bride fulfill the groom’s party’s direct and indirect demand properly

then the women's marital life become stable, secure and happy. On the other hand when a woman got married bringing with her large amount of material things as dowry, which was directly, indirectly demanded by the groom's party then she receives warm welcome, get hospitability, fair treatment by the in-laws family and the husband. Sometime she gets a higher, strong position and status than the other bride of the in-laws family.

### CONCLUSION

The nature, causes of dowry system and its impact is a bit different in Sylhet than other regions of Bangladesh. The nature of dowry is in an indirect or in a hidden form. Because, in Sylhet city grooms family didn't demand dowry directly. One cannot see or feel it unless he becomes much watchful about it. This system exists in disguise of 'gift' as a symbol of good wishes and as a way to preserve family tradition, dignity and tradition. But most of the time this is not the case. It is abusive, unjustified cultural practice that has detrimental effect on both the parties. Although the government promulgated a law and is committed to eradicate this kind of deep rooted social evil but unfortunately still this kind of cultural practice existing and continuing. Raising women's status through education and providing employment to women and making people aware about this unjustified and evil practice, would help in eliminating this practice gradually, if both the government, educated people and social activists work together.

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