

## **Dowry and Bride Price**

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*Bride price* and *dowry* are terms that refer to payments made at the time of marriage in many cultures, primarily in Asia and Africa. Bride price is typically paid by the groom or the groom's family to the bride's family. Dowry is typically paid by the bride's family to the bride or to the wedded couple. Thus bride price and dowry are not necessarily the converse of each other. However, in the twentieth century, dowry payments in South Asia have increasingly been demanded by and paid to the groom's family (and not just to the bride or the wedded couple). This suggests a usage of the term dowry to mean a *groom price*, the reverse of a bride price.

Bride price and dowry need not be mutually exclusive, and marriage transfers in both directions can occur simultaneously. A complex set of norms may then govern the nature and the magnitude of payments in either direction.

### **Prevalence**

Historically, the payment of bride price has been a more common occurrence than that of dowry. Only 3 percent of the cultures listed in Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967) demonstrate the practice of dowry payments, whereas 66 percent follow a norm of bride price. Dowries were common in the Near East, Europe, East Asia, South Asia, and some parts of the Americas. Although the custom of dowry payment has disappeared in most regions in the West, it remains widespread in South Asia. Bride prices were known to have prevailed extensively in Africa and also in areas of mainland, South, and East Asia, and North and South America.

Both dowry and bride price regimes were present in South Asia in the early part of the twentieth century; in the second half of the century, dowry amounts were inflated, including a switch from bride price to dowry in many areas where the former practice was dominant.

### **Characteristics of Marriage Payments**

The payment of bride price can take several forms. *Bride price* or *bride wealth* is typically a transfer in the form of livestock, goods, or money from the groom (or his family) to the bride's kinsmen. *Bride service* refers to a transfer in the form of labor or other services rendered by the groom to the bride's family. Both these forms of payment can be substantial in magnitude. In contrast, a *token bride price* is usually a small symbolic payment made by the groom's family to the bride's. Finally, *woman exchange* refers to the transfer of a sister or other female relative of the groom to the bride's family in exchange for the bride.

A *dowry* or *groom price* is a payment made from the bride's family to the bride, the groom, the wedded couple, or the groom's family. It may consist of movable property such as money, ornaments, clothing, household goods, or cattle. In some cases land is also provided as a part of the payment.

The norms associated with marriage payments can be complex and vary largely across societies. These norms govern issues such as when the marriage payment is to be made and to whom, to what use the marriage payment may be put, and who inherits the payment in case of death or dissolution of the marriage. In some regions of South India, for example, a bride price is paid by the groom's parents to the bride's but must then be

spent on the bride's dowry. The payment may subsequently be claimed by the bride's family, but only upon the death of the bride. In some African societies, on the other hand, the bride price received for a woman may be used to obtain a wife for her brother. But such a transaction is often regarded as a debt owed to the sister, and to repay it the brother must offer his daughter in marriage to her son.

### **Factors behind Marriage Payments**

Many hypotheses have been put forward to explain the occurrence of bride price and dowry. One theory links marriage payments to the rights of inheritance held by women and explains dowry as a premortem bequest made to daughters. Another hypothesis links marriage payments to the economic value of women. Brides command a positive worth—a bride price—in areas where women make valuable contributions to agricultural work or other economic activity. In regions where women do not make an economic contribution, they constitute an economic liability and hence bring a dowry. A third hypothesis argues that marriage payments are “prices” that clear the marriage market—that is, these prices equate the demand for and supply of brides and grooms. Therefore, when grooms are relatively scarce brides pay dowries, and when brides are scarce grooms offer a bride price.

Other theories link the existence of different types of marriage payments to the laws governing marital and social ties (kinship structures). For example, bride price has been observed very often in societies with general polygyny (polygyny practiced by the general populace and not just the rich), whereas dowry almost always occurs in monogamous societies. Marriage payments have also been linked to norms of

hypergamy—whereby brides are expected to marry into a higher caste or social group—and hypogamy—whereby brides are expected to marry into a lower caste or social group.

These and other explanations of marriage payments proposed by social scientists are not mutually exclusive, and more than one factor could contribute to the determination of marriage payments in any society. Moreover, because the combination of factors leading to dowry or bride price may be very different, the disappearance of one type of payment over time does not necessitate the appearance of the other.

### **Dowry Inflation and the Marriage Squeeze in India**

India witnessed a real inflation in dowries in the latter half of the twentieth century. Incidents of violence against brides who were unable to pay the dowries demanded of them (bride burning and dowry deaths) also became increasingly commonplace during this time, despite the passage of the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), which made the payment of dowries illegal.

The phenomenon of the Indian dowry inflation appears especially perplexing given that the widespread practices of female infanticide and female feticide contributed to a highly masculine sex ratio in India throughout the twentieth century. It seems puzzling, therefore, that scarce women in India should have to pay increasingly higher prices for grooms. However, the nature of marriage payments is determined not by the overall sex ratio of the population but by the ratio of “marriageable” men and women. It is possible that this ratio is skewed in favor of women—leading to a positive price of grooms (i.e., dowry)—even when the overall sex ratio is skewed in favor of men.

The *marriage squeeze hypothesis* uses the idea of differential marriageable age of men and women to argue that population growth (which occurred in India in the 1930s) explains dowry inflation. The argument runs as follows: High rates of population growth lead to younger cohorts outnumbering older cohorts in the population. When older men marry younger women, this leads to an excess supply of marriageable women—or a marriage squeeze against women—causing the price of grooms to be bid up.

The norm of *caste hypergamy*, practiced in some regions of India, has also been invoked to explain the Indian dowry inflation. According to this norm, women must marry into a higher social class and hence pay a higher price for the more “desirable” groom. Alternative explanations of the dowry inflation point to *Sanskritization* (emulation, by lower castes, of the higher-caste practice of paying dowry), the changing economic value of women, and changing social structures in India during this time.

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**Cross References:** Caste; Caste, Anthropology of; Family; Marriage