

research snapshot

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What is the relationship between domestic violence and dowry?

What is this research about?

Dowry is a practice where resources are passed from the family of the bride to the groom's family at the time of marriage. Women may be able to control certain forms of dowry (for example, jewelry). Domestic violence is defined in this study as marital or spousal violence, often the physical or psychological violence that the husband inflicts on his wife.

This research looks at intergenerational trade-offs between dowry and domestic violence. Larger dowries reduce marital violence by increasing the economic resources of the marital household. This enhances the social status of the groom and his family and serves as an asset over which the woman enjoys relatively more control. However, the dowry also leads to a continued upward spiral of dowry expectations which in turn is likely to increase daughter unwantedness, sex selective abortion, and female infanticide.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers did a study with 178 married women in an agrarian village in Salem district in Tamil Nadu, South India. Salem is notorious for having a high ratio of men to women. The researchers did the following to get a better understanding of the relationship between dowry and domestic violence:

What you need to know:

Dowry is one of the reasons that daughters are viewed as burdensome in countries like India. At the same time, access to and control over their dowries (and other forms of assets including land) can play a significant role in women's well being, for instance by reducing the level of domestic violence they experience.

- Gathered responses to structured questionnaire
- Interviewed and discussed with women
- Collected life-history information from key respondents.

Discussions with men and women across different castes, classes, and generations provided information on the demographic profile, women's positions and roles in the home, marriage practices and episodes of domestic violence.

A variety of factors were tested to look at their impacts on the social and economic stresses that trigger violence. These factors included changes in household economic resources, education level, amount of dowry given at marriage, number and gender of children, age at marriage and alcohol consumption. The

hypotheses were tested to determine the manner in which dowry and the other socio-economic attributes may influence violence at home.

What did the researchers find?

The study found that nearly 50% of married women experienced verbal or physical violence, with the alleged improper performance of household tasks and of the supervision of children or workers emerging as the main reasons for the violence. The researchers concluded that violence is a way for men to release stress, emotions, and frustration, and to punish and control women in order to maintain male authority in the home.

The study also found that domestic violence is lower in economically better-off households as well among women who bring larger dowries. In contrast to the effect of dowry, women's education tends to be associated with an increase in the level of violence. While dowry-obtained wealth confirms male image, it seems that an increase in women's income and education challenges a husband's authority, threatens prevailing gender norms, and results in increased violence. Most women are in favour of dowry as it is seen to raise their value, promote marital happiness and security, and is an important asset over which they can exercise some control. This research shows that a larger asset portfolio - whether through dowry or property inheritance - may not give greater protection to women if the women have little or no control over them.

How can you use this research?

Policy makers and researchers may use this research to develop policy for the South Asia region and for members of the South Asian diaspora that follow the practice of dowry.

Policies which ensure equal property rights for women and programs that help women build and retain control over assets may be needed in order to reduce their vulnerability to violence. Along with empowering women, changing existing gender norms with respect to male violence will be vital to preventing further violence.

About the researchers

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