

## **The Impact of Dowry Transactions on Women-Headed Households: Gendered Vulnerabilities in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka**

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The long-standing practice of dowry is one of many under-discussed problems that adversely affects young women and their families across the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities. Underpinned by the perception that marriage is the ultimate goal in a woman's life, parents save for their daughter's dowry from birth to purchase property and other valuables such as gold jewelry. With dowry inflation, the girl child is generally considered an economic liability to the family. Arguably, newspaper matrimonial advertisements are indicative of how women are treated as marketable commodities in the marriage market.

Admittedly, the dowry system has exacerbated the socio-economic problems that already exist in the northeast area of post-conflict Sri Lanka. In example, Women-Headed Households (WHHs) that have no sustainable livelihoods struggle to save for the exorbitant dowries of their daughters in exchange for marriage. In utter desperation, a large number of such women who intend to fulfil the customary requirement of giving a marriage gift for their daughters, have fallen victim to micro-finance loans. In an increasingly caste-conscious and materialistic society, displaced Northern women experience double discrimination in matrimonial affairs – being landless and low-caste. Coupled with the unwillingness to break the taboo against remarriage and the inability to afford another dowry, some widows prefer to engage in relationships outside marriage. Like in most post-conflict societies, structural inequalities based on caste, class, gender and economic exclusion serve to disempower women who deal with the legacy of war in Sri Lanka.

Although official statistics are not available, the lack of a dowry and inability to provide an adequate dowry have resulted in harassment and violence against women in diverse contexts at different scales. A considerable number of local soap operas depict how matriarchal-extended families extort more dowry money from newly-married brides, in lieu of welcoming them into the family. Conversely, intense parental pressure has led prospective grooms to abruptly end their relationships with partners of their choice who are incapable of offering a hefty dowry. As dowry transactions have been traditionally regarded as the ideal vehicle to attain personal growth, men seek numerous benefits that range from furthering business ventures to pursuing higher studies in

the name of a dowry. According to Thesavalamai (territorial laws and customs which govern the Tamils in Jaffna), the groom has significant control over assets despite ownership of land and property having been transferred to the bride prior to marriage. Unarguably, such archaic laws not only perpetuate toxic male supremacy but also trigger the breakdown of spousal relationships.

With a view to combat dowry-related abuse, India adopted the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. On paper, such legislation is a victory for gender equality in the Indian context. However, the simple enactment of laws is woefully inadequate in making women less vulnerable to verbal, physical and emotional abuse. Identifying the dowry payment as a wider social issue and not merely a women's issue is of paramount importance to reduce gender-based discrimination in Sri Lanka and across the globe. Raising awareness at the grass-roots level on the social injustice behind the traditional marital practice of dowry is a long-term solution to empower women.

Unlike two-parent households, WHHs lack an adult male's earnings as well as a perceived sense of safety and security with a male figure. Such diverse and nuanced experiences exemplify the profound and multi-faceted vulnerabilities of the young women who head these households. At the height of war, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) banned both casteism and the dowry system with a view to appeal to marginalized Tamil groups. Contrastingly, in the post-LTTE era, caste consciousness and dowry practices have gradually seeped into the Tamil psyche, resulting in active discrimination against lower classes. Investigating the challenges faced by Northern women in life post-conflict to raise their socio-economic status is vital to bring about meaningful reconciliation. Unless such issues are paid attention to, women's empowerment is likely to remain another buzzword in the Sri Lankan context.