

# **THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF DOWRY PAYMENT ON WOMEN AND THE GENERAL SOCIETY**

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Dowry or bride-wealth payment is a widespread practice in many African societies. Bride-wealth in traditional African societies had some positive aspects but mostly negative consequences, as it was the foundation of patriarchy. In traditional African societies, bride-wealth was related to goods and services that a bridegroom and his kinsmen transferred to the family of the bride (Kanogo,2005:105). Traditionally, this involved the delivery of livestock by a suitor to the father or family of his prospective bride.

The negative consequence of Bride-wealth is clearly seen in the debate on terminology. The term dowry generally refers to the property brought by a lady to the marriage. The term bride price has the connotation of buying or financial transaction. Although, it is always claimed that what we have is bride-wealth, in the present day society is more of financial transaction. Bride wealth has been highly commercialized leading to many negative consequences like women treated as property, idea of daughters as investment come we stay marriages and forced marriages.

1. Women treated as Property: Commercialization of bride-wealth, started with the introduction of the cash economy. Bride-wealth is paid in cash, as opposed to livestock and to individuals. Cash is a symbol of sale, so women are seen as articles of sale. This leads women to be seen as property and chattels. Parents put a price to their daughters, in many communities the standard payment apart from cash is a grade cow, water tanks plus other unofficial payments. The payment becomes even higher if the bride is educated. When women are treated as property, they have no dignity. Decisions are made without the input of the women. The treatment as property is clearly seen in the way the meeting is held with hugging and bargaining.
2. Daughters as Investment: The parents see their daughters as ways of getting rich. Most of the people for example the Nandi, value their cows more than their wives and daughters. They only value the daughters because they will get cows from the suitors. John Mbutia argues that Africans view their daughters as an investment, whose dividends could be gleaned periodically. A daughter is like a bank and it is only right that her father should be able to draw from her from time to time (LNC Meeting 1927). The crave for bride-wealth money by parents especially in Central Province leads women to form groups, through which they pay their bride-wealth if the men cannot pay. This group even include single ladies who have children, and their main

argument is that if they have to receive bride-wealth for their children, they have to ensure their own bride wealth is paid.

3. Come We Stay Marriages: Commercialization of bride-wealth leads to eloping or what is referred to as 'Come we stay marriages'. Most of the young people cannot afford the hefty bride-wealth, so they do not even inform their parents nor do they even have their marriages blessed in churches. Most of the marriages also begin on a shaky financial foundation, because the couple might be forced to take a loan to pay bride-wealth to parents and so even as they begin their married lives, they are servicing the loan. In many instances the girls have to help the men by contributing to funds for the bride-wealth and hence the practice has lost its original meaning. In some instances the men borrow the money but expect the ladies to pay when they are already married.
4. Forced Marriages: Many parents were more interested in bride-wealth, than in the welfare of their daughters. They are happy to marry their children off to rich men, even if the children are under age or have not completed school. This is very common among pastoralist communities for example the Masaai. However, forced marriage is also practiced by other communities. For example, in instances where a parent has boys whom they need to go to schools, they would marry off their daughters

to enable them get money to pay bride-wealth. This means that parents will not give the girls education but marry them off. Orphans are always forced into marriage by their uncles and relatives so that money can be found to educate boys. In most African communities, marriage cannot be nullified even if the lady is undergoing problems. This is because, if marriage has to be nullified the bride-wealth has to be paid back. Women therefore stay in abusive marriages because the parents cannot pay back the bride-wealth. The idea of bride wealth is based on traditional practices like among the Luo, taking bride-wealth in advance from your friend with the promise that you will give them your daughter. There was also the practice of bride pawning among the Kambas, Nandi and Kisii. This meant that when the community was experiencing starvation, they could give their daughter to the neighboring community in exchange for grain, with the view that if things get better, the girl would be redeemed. However, this never happened and in some communities like the Kisii, the head of the family, where the girl was pawned could even have sexual relationship with her.

5. Enslavement of Women: In Africa bride-wealth was always paid in exchange for a woman's productive and reproductive labor. The woman is therefore basically seen as source of labor in the family and also a machine for giving birth. This implies that if the lady does not give birth, the man can demand his bride-wealth to be re-paid or

mistreat the lady. By paying bride-wealth men have legal rights over the ownership of children. As Okot P B Tek says an African woman is therefore a slave or a beast of burden. The woman is expected to work hard and pay back the bride-wealth.

6. Conflict within the Family: Most marriages are founded on a lot of bitterness and suspicion which leads to conflict in the marriage. This is mainly due to the demands of parents before the marriage. The unreasonable demands lead to loss of respect and in some instances the couple pay the money requested and then break any relationship with the bride's family. Men who do not pay bride-wealth do not have legal rights over their children and their wives. A case in point is recently when a man was denied the right to bury the wife and the children were taken away from him. The man had struggled with the wife who was suffering from breast cancer. He had been drained both financially and emotionally and when the wife died, the family now wanted to discuss bride-wealth.
7. Inferior Position of Women & Dehumanization Since men pay bride-wealth, there is a notion that the girl has been bought. This gives women an inferior position, they can not be equal with the buyer. This is dehumanizing because whatever little the men pays is not equal to the value of a human being. The whole of the mans family als have a

notion that they are participants in the purchase. The man's sister have a notion, that the bride-wealth paid for them was the one used to purchase the brothers wife, hence they have a stake in controlling her. Infact in Luo culture, the wife always also refer to her husband's sister as a husband. Due to this situation, the woman has no voice in the family and on the wider community. She is not even consulted on issues which affect her directly. She has low self esteem and even the language used on her is demeaning. Due to bride-wealth widows have no economic independence. Although in the present world they are Christians, and death is supposed to end the marriage, in most societies, death does not end the marriage. In fact among the Luo, the term for the widow when translated literally means wife of the grave. Most of the young widows want to re-marry and live a dignified life but they can not do so. This is because bride-wealth was paid and if they are to remarry, then the bride-wealth must be returned from the first marriage, which is impossible. In this case the widow has to look for a partner in her late husband's community. In most instances most of these marriages are very de-humanizing, and the widow is actually exploited.

8. Gender Based Violence Since men pray bride-wealth, they view women as objects and part of their property. Women are abused both physically and psychologically. The language used by most men is that they are disciplining their wives According to recent research wife

beating or battering is still rampant, and most people take this as normal. Even professional women are beaten by their spouses and they have to create excuses e.g. by claiming that they fell down the stairs. Bride-wealth is also seen as paying for the productive and reproductive labor of women. This implies that when the woman gets married, she has to put on several hours of work, hence as OkotP'Btek says in his poem, an African woman becomes a beast of burden. Secondly, through bride-wealth a man is seen as having paid for the reproductive labor, hence her sexuality is bought. In many instances a woman is viewed as a sex object. First, a woman's major role is to give birth to and take care of babies, especially boys. In case a woman does not give birth to boys, she is beaten and insulted. Secondly, the man controls her sexuality and has to get the sexual rights whatever, time or situation. A woman does not have control over her sexuality. In fact people claim that there is nothing like rape in marriage.

In conclusion the payment of bride-wealth in Africa, leading to inferiority of women is not in line with the Biblical teaching on equality between men and women. Secondly, it is against the Christian view of marriage as partnership between two people and a bond of love. In the Bible marriage is always equated to the relationship between Christ and the Church. Christ comes to challenge negative aspects of culture, which enslave people, hence Christians in the modern world should re-think, the practice of bride-wealth.