



The Practice of Dowry among Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: A Socio-Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the sociocultural aspects and ramifications of the Rohingya refugee community's continued practice of dowries in Bangladesh. The dowry custom is still very well ingrained in Rohingya culture, despite their exile and the difficult living conditions in refugee camps, frequently causing families to endure severe financial and emotional hardships. This study uses qualitative techniques, such as focus groups, interviews, and participant observation, to investigate how changing gender dynamics, religious interpretations, and cultural norms affect the persistence of dowry customs. The results show that although some see dowries as a traditional duty that supports social standing and marriage agreements, others see them as a means of discrimination and exploitation based on gender. The report also emphasizes how dowries have changed as a result of humanitarian initiatives and shifting socioeconomic circumstances in the camps. In addition to providing policy recommendations for tackling detrimental traditional behaviors in humanitarian circumstances, this paper's analysis of these intricate interactions adds to larger conversations on gender, culture, and resilience among displaced communities.

Keywords: Rohingya refugees, dowry, gender norms, Cox's Bazar, socio-cultural practices, displacement.

INTRODUCTION

After years of persecution, the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim ethnic minority from Myanmar, were forcibly relocated to Bangladesh in 2017. Over 900,000 Rohingya are currently housed in large refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, where they have limited access to formal education, livelihood opportunities, and movement [1]. Marriage traditions like the dowry continue and possibly become more intense in this constrained setting. A long-contested custom is the dower, which is the transfer of assets from the bride's family to the groom's. Dowry is ingrained in South Asian cultural practices, despite not being permitted in Islam. It is essential to maintaining hierarchical hierarchies, social mobility, and family honor among the Rohingya in refugee camps. The sociocultural dynamics of dowries among Rohingya refugees are examined in this research, along with potential solutions to mitigate their detrimental impacts, especially on women. Islamic law does not demand dower. Rather, the mahr, a required gift from the groom to the bride, is the focus of Islamic law. However, due to regional patriarchy and Hindu customs, dowries are frequently a part of South Asian Muslims' cultural practices [2]. Due to heightened rivalry in the marriage markets within the camps, dowries are not only widespread but frequently exaggerated among Rohingya refugees. Families believe paying more dowry ensures better marital outcomes, particularly in acquiring grooms with better education or higher standing within the camp hierarchy [3]. One important consideration in dowry discussions is hypergamy, or marrying into a higher socioeconomic status. Particularly for females, families frequently feel under

pressure to provide a sizeable dowry in order to guarantee a prestigious relationship. In exchange, the families of the grooms want to maximize the marriage's social and financial benefits.

Women's education, movement, and engagement in public life are restricted by the Rohingya community's strong adherence to purdah, or the seclusion of women. Because of this, a girl's worth is primarily determined by her suitability for marriage. This reliance perpetuates the idea that dowries are a way to "exchange" girls for better homes [4]. Additionally, purdah prevents women from forming support systems, which stifles opposition to abusive marriages or dowry demands. Rohingya families, who live in resource-poor camps, frequently utilize dowries to compensate for their financial fragility. The relatives of the groom may demand money, gold, or home goods in the name of "assisting the new couple." Dowry exacerbates discrimination against women. Girls are frequently married off at an early age out of fear of dishonor or to avoid eventual higher dowry rates. Many weddings are commercial, and if dowry expectations are not fulfilled, girls are more likely to experience domestic abuse, marital desertion, or sexual exploitation. Due to the prevalence of child marriage and early pregnancies, women are further marginalized and denied access to healthcare and education [5]. Even while many Rohingya religious leaders openly condemn dowries as being against Islam, their private actions frequently reveal implicit acceptance for or involvement in the custom. Campaigns against dowries undertaken by NGOs or UN agencies are undermined by this dichotomy.

Community leaders have a lot of power to decide marital arrangements, and they frequently uphold rather than question established customs.

Methodology

Study Design and Participant Selection

A cross-sectional study was conducted in January and February of 2025 to assess the Rohingya community's dowry culture in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps. The data collection technique involved ten trained volunteers. The study was conducted at the Kutupalong and Balukhali refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, which together house the largest number of Rohingya refugees globally [6]. To meet the inclusion criteria, participants of all ages—aside from children—must be present during the participation period. Door-to-door recruitment was used to choose the participants.

Sample Size Detection

The infinite population formula $[S = (Z) 2 \times P \times (1-P) \div (M) 2]$ was used to calculate the sample size. A 95% confidence level was used to get the Z-value (1.96). The population proportion (P) and margin of error (M) were calculated at the 50% (0.50) and 5% (0.05) levels, respectively. A total of 385 data points were collected for this study.

Study Tools and Data Collection

For convenience, the questionnaire was made in both Bengali and English. To ensure readability and clarity, the questionnaire was piloted. It went through a face validity pilot test before being entered into a spreadsheet, cleaned, and then rewritten for reliability and principal component analysis. The survey was conducted with the assistance of ten qualified interviewers. After explaining the purpose and design of the survey, the interviewers went up to the respondents and asked them to complete the questionnaire in person. The questionnaire's first section collected demographic information, while the second piece asked about dowries. To lessen the possibility that the correct and intended response would be chosen by accident, two possible answers were provided. The response options were a) affirmative and b) no. The mean and standard deviation of the ages are shown inside the dataset. Furthermore, for ease of interpretation, frequencies were converted to percentages.

Statistical Analysis

Before being imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) application (version 22.0), all of the data were placed into a master Microsoft Excel file. Mean differences among

demographic variables were assessed using the Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney U tests. P-values were considered significant if they were less than 0.05.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent. We maintained all humanitarian principles during collecting the data from the refugees.

Results:

Variables	Frequency (%)	Mean \pm SD
Age (Years)		40.13 \pm 9.031
20-29	39 (10.1%)	
30-39	113 (29.4%)	
40-49	193 (50.1%)	
50-59	35 (9.1%)	
60-69	5 (1.3%)	
Sex		
Male	192 (49.9%)	
Female	293 (50.1%)	
Marital Status		
Married	348 (90.4%)	
Unmarried	0 (0%)	
Divorced	37 (9.6%)	
Widow	0 (0%)	
Educational Qualification		
Illiterate	218 (56.6%)	
< Class 5	167 (43.4%)	
Class 5-10	0 (0%)	

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants.

Demographic Characteristics

The study comprised 385 Rohingya refugees residing in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Participants were 40.13 years old on average ($SD \pm 9.031$). The age distribution was as follows: 20–29 years old (10.1%), 30–39 years old (29.4%), 40–49 years old (50.1%), 50–59 years old (9.1%), and 60–69 years old (1.3%). Gender distribution was about equal, with 192 males (49.9%) and 293 females (50.1%). There were no unmarried or widowed individuals among the participants; 348 (90.4%) were married, and 37 (9.6%) were divorced. In terms of academic performance, 218 participants (56.6%) were illiterate, and 167 participants (43.4%) had less than Class 5 education.

		Educational Qualification		P value (Mann-Whitney U Test)	P value (Kruskal Wallis 1-way ANOVA Test)	Decision
		Illiterate	< Class 5			
Did you give/ will give dowry to son in law during marriage of your daughter?	Yes	206 (53.5%)	155 (40.3%)	0.500	0.500	Retain the null hypothesis
	No	12 (3.1%)	12 (3.1%)			
Did you get/will get dowry for your son from your daughter's house when your son got /will get marry?	Yes	208 (54.0%)	155 (40.3%)	0.277	0.277	Retain the null hypothesis
	No	10 (2.6%)	12 (3.1%)			

Table 2: Crosstabs, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis 1-Way ANOVA test results. Here significant level is 0.05.

Interpretation:

- The Kruskal-Wallis One-Way ANOVA and the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test were used to evaluate the relationship between respondents' educational background and dowry-related customs. For both questions on giving and receiving dowry, the p-values were greater than 0.05 in both tests, indicating no statistically significant difference between illiterate respondents and those educated below class 5.
- Hence, the null hypothesis is retained, suggesting educational level (between "illiterate" and "< class 5") is not significantly associated with the dowry-related responses in this sample.

Thus, it is evident that education is unable to lessen this affliction. The practice of cultural dowries is widespread in this area. Social knowledge is essential to reducing dowries in contemporary society.

Limitations of Interventions

Current awareness programs, which are frequently created by NGOs, emphasize legal prohibitions and religious messaging. These efforts, however, frequently fall short in addressing the underlying cultural factors that influence dowries. Additionally, by coming across as outsiders or disconnected from local reality, they might alienate communities.

Dowry is sometimes pushed underground by strategies that only criminalize it without offering economic alternatives or cultural debate, making it more difficult to monitor or reform.

Recommendations

- Create culturally relevant, interactive dialogue sessions that bring together women, young people, and religious experts to critically examine gender roles, marital customs, and dowries.
- To lessen women's financial reliance on marriage, increase livelihood training and income-generating initiatives. Vocational programs, microfinance, and cash-for-work initiatives might divert incentives from dowries.
- Increase girls' access to secondary education and start initiatives to promote postponed marriage. Providing stipends or scholarships to families could encourage them to change their inclinations.
- For long-lasting change, programs aimed at men and boys that question patriarchal standards, talk about alternative masculinities, and promote polite relationships are essential.

Conclusion

For the Rohingya refugees, dower is more than just a custom; it is a sign of relocated patriarchy, social vulnerability, and systematic gender injustice. Culturally aware, multi-layered interventions that go beyond awareness to structural change are needed to address this problem. To end this long-standing custom, it is essential to include the community, encourage women's economic empowerment, and advance fresh perspectives on honor and marriage.

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