

Background

Dowry system in India was prevalent since the Vedic period. Dowry is derived from the ancient Hindu customs of "kanyadan" and "stridhan". In "kanyadan", the father of the bride offers the father of the groom money or property, etc. whereas for "stridhan", the bride herself gets jewelry and clothes at the time of her marriage, usually from her relatives or friends. In "varadakshina", the father of the bride presents the groom cash or kind. The dowry custom continues to rule society. In majority of Indian families the boy has inheritance rights while the girl is given a hefty sum at the time of her marriage in lieu of the Government regulated equal rights for girls in parental property. The present paper examines the culture of dowry, its consequences on the conjugal life of young married women in rural India and the violence experienced due to non-payment of dowry. The study was supported by Parks Small Grant, U.K.

Objective of the Study

The overall objective of the study is to examine the culture of dowry in the community and the violence faced by young married women due to dowry.

Sampling Design

The study was designed to a sample size of 654 married women in the age group 13-24 years. The study was conducted in rural West Bengal, the eastern state of India. The state had been divided into several blocks on the basis of their development indicators for example proportion of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population and distance from the district headquarter, that is, from Calcutta. In the next step villages were stratified on the basis of female literacy and were selected on the basis of systematic random sampling. Twelve villages were selected for the present study.

Methodology

The study included both the quantitative as well as qualitative techniques. The quantitative tool includes the questionnaire survey and the qualitative technique included Focus Group Discussions and In-depth Interviews.

Findings from the Study

About three-fourth of the women under the study reported that dowry had been demanded either at the time of their marriage or were demanded after the marriage ceremony was over. Only one-fourth women reported that no dowry had been demanded in either case. Three-fourth

of the women for whom dowry was demanded, reported that dowry was met by any means. Almost half of the respondent reported that dowry was met by borrowing money from relatives, and only 15 percent opined that their parents had money for dowry. Almost four-fifth women reported that stress was involved in meeting the dowry demands and few cases were there who reported dowry demanded before marriage and also after the marriage. Almost 15 percent reported to have current dowry-related problems at the time of the survey including verbal violence mainly from their mother-in-laws, father-in-laws and also husband. Little percentage also showed to have experienced physical violence due to non-payment of dowry items. Women were also asked whether they had received any support from their husband when they faced violence. About half of the respondents reported that their husbands were not involved in the violence but did not support in any way when they were experiencing violence from their in-laws. More than 30 percent women reported that their husbands were also involved in the violence and hence they did not support and only 19 percent reported that their husbands supported while they were experiencing violence from their in-laws.