

## The Practice of Dowry in Bangladesh: A Study on Existing Situation and Reasons for Sudden Bloom up

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*Abstract: Dowry was available\*in different parts of the world. With the advent of modernization, the custom is disappearing in different parts of the world except some of the part of Indian subcontinent. It has becoming a severe problem in this part. Dowry is an old and holy phenomenon among the Hindus in South Asia. It was not an Islamic custom and it was not available among the Muslim in the subcontinent even only 60 years ago. Suddenly, it becomes a very common issue and causing enough violence and brutality in conjugal life among both Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh. This study is going to discuss the existing situation of dowry violence and trying to see the problem from a new perspective using the model of "Social Relation Approach" developed by Kabeer and others. The article highlights how the changes in the social system is placing women in a more vulnerable situation. The essay tries to find out the relationship of institutions and how they produce, reinforce and reproduce a custom and thus inturns trigger dowry practice and dowry violence in the society. It also provides some suggestions to stop dowry practice and dowry violence.*

### 1.0 Introduction

The dowry system is a widely spread custom that can be analysed in terms of its relevance for macro institutions - the state, market and also at the micro household and community levels. But most importantly, it needs to address the power relations between men and women. However, the scope of this study is to focus on the existing situation of dowry practice in Bangladesh and find out causes responsible for such sudden expansion of dowry practise in the country.

It dates back at least to the ancient Greco-Roman world. With the barbarian invasions, the Greco-Roman institution of dowry was eclipsed for a time as the Germanic observation of bride price became prevalent throughout much of Europe. It was however widely reinstated in the late Middle Ages. In Medieval Europe dowries were common practice among

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most social and economic groups. The dowry system was also practiced in China as a way for the family to secure some of its wealth for its daughters as women could not inherit property in the orthodox Confucian society of China (Anderson 2003, pp. 271- 272).

In South Asia dowry has stronger roots than in the other parts of the world. With the advent of modernization dowry is disappearing in different parts of the world but it is becoming a severe problem in the subcontinent. Dowry is an old and Holy phenomenon among the Hindus in South Asia (Banerjee 1996, p. 2 and Saleh 2004, p.2). The Hindu tradition of dowry was originally limited to the holy caste Brahmin and it was also regarded as a status symbol. The status symbol was later spread among other Hindu castes in India. The root cause of the problem behind dowry is Hindu religious orthodoxy and its degenerate caste system (Banerjee 1996, p. 2). It was in the early 1950s when dowry started to be considered as a 'social evil' (Sitarama 1999, p. 1). These days, the custom has rendered enough violence and brutality among the conjugal lives of both Hindu and Muslim communities.

Dowry is not an Islamic custom. It wasn't available among the Muslim in the subcontinent only 60 years ago. Among the Muslims, the bridegroom has to pay Dower (bridal money) to the bride during the marriage. Ramakrishana Mukherjee, in his pioneer study of Bengal villages in the early 1940s, reported that the giving of bride prices (Dower) among the Muslim population was declining, and that dowry system, was making its first appearance among the better-off Muslim families (Mukherjee, R 1971: 272-5 cited from Hartmann, B and Boyce, J, K, 1990, p. 83). But now it is being widely practised among the Muslim population of the subcontinent as well and it plays a key role in most wedding arrangements especially in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Moreover, It alone became the biggest cause of family dispute and violence against wives in Bangladesh. A UNDP study in Bangladesh reports,

"The incidence of physical and verbal abuse of wives due to non-fulfilment of dowry obligations by their fathers is so high that it is almost considered a norm. It occurs in at least 50% of recent marriages." (The Hunger Project undated, p. 20).

The problem is taken seriously by the government of Bangladesh. The practice of dowry was banned by law in 1985. Ensuring good governance

and mainstreaming gender in policy and law is now considered to be the most vital issue of the government. However, various measures taken by the government and others no significant change has taken place to reduce the magnitude of dowry related violence against women. Still the evidence shows that it has blooming up dramatically in the recent years. Some (Suran et al 2004, p. 3) termed this phenomenon as dowry inflation.

### 1.1 Objectives of the Study

Dowry issues are a consequence of the interactions of a set of multifarious factors. There are some common socio-economic, cultural and demographic issues that led to the expansion of the problem in the society. This study will help the government and others to find a better solution of dowry system. The objective is to

- a) Identify what the causes are and what let the problem to bloom up, and
- b) What can be helpful for reducing the dowry violence and stop the practice.

### 1.2 Research Questions

1. What is the existing situation of dowry practice in Bangladesh?
2. What are the contributing factors involved in dowry system in Bangladesh?
3. What can be done to combat dowry violence?

## 2.0 Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework

Almost every study (Bhat and Halli 1999, p. 129, Srinivasan and Lee 2004, p. 1109, Banerjee 1996, p. 2, Sharma, et al 2002, p. 252-253, Anderson 2003, p. 292-95) show that dowry is an old custom among the Hindus of Indian subcontinent. Some (Bhat and Halli 1999, p. 129, Rudd, 2001, p. 516) argue it was as a substitute of pre-mortem inheritance for female child among Hindus. Now it has turned into a major cause of indebtedness for many families and a major root of violence and brutality against many women. What began as gift of land to a woman as her inheritance today has degenerated into gifts of gold, clothes, consumer durables and large sums of cash, which sometimes entailed the impoverishment and heavy indebtedness of poor families (My Nation 2005, p. 1).

There are various factors responsible for the dowry practice in

Bangladesh. In case of Bangladesh, dowry is comparatively a new phenomenon. Surprisingly, within a very short period it has become very widespread in the country especially in the rural areas. The study conducted by Mannan (2004, p. 47) in two different districts of Bangladesh shows that 95% of women had to pay dowry at the time of marriage. The underlying causes of dowry are different as identified by different researchers in Bangladesh.

Lindenbaum's work (1981, pp. 394-399) identifies that the change of marriage transactions began in the early 1950s and 1960s and it makes its first appearance in the urban wealthy families which was a manifestation of capitalism and a desirable groom with a monthly salary.

Hayward's (2000, pp. 101-104) study confines on the spreading nature of dowry practice in the subcontinent, and its consequence., He provided a good auto ethnography to give a pen picture of vulnerability of women and their families in the society. He reveals that refusal to pay dowry leaves many girls unmarried.

Khan (2001, p. 124) highlighted the problem only from economic perspective. She blames unemployment problem as responsible for dowry and it is also viewed as compensation from the part of the parents whose daughter is ugly or has a dark skin.

Mannan (2003, pp. 42-43) viewed that the recent emergence of dowry among Bangladeshi Muslims is more due to simple greed and commercialisation of marriage than the impact of a traditional culture, the urge of hyper gamy and the undermining of the women's productive role. He did not mention what led to the development of the sudden commercialization of marriage and greed.

Suran et al. (2004, p. 4) used the Benquest theory of dowry and try to find out its implication in rural Bangladesh. The study finds out that contrary to the prediction of the Benquest theory, married females who paid dowry at marriage have a higher likelihood of reporting domestic violence compared to those who did not. He opines that dowry is due to a switch from a surplus of potential bridegroom to a surplus of potential brides since in the early 1970s, as a status symbol in the society.

Nazneen (2004, pp. 12-13) discussed some factors responsible for dowry practice in Bangladesh. She stated that women's dependence on marriage, increasing number of unmarried women compared to the unmarried men,

shift in economic scenario, hyper gamy and capitalism are the major causes of dowry in the country.

Saleh (2004, pp. 4-10) disagrees with the common belief that dowry was first shown in the Hindu culture. She agrees with Islam (2004) saying that the system was first established in our society in ancient time when non-Aryans gave their daughters to Aryans for large amounts of dowry. Later it becomes a widely used custom among Hindu marriage and the Muslim community in Bangladesh adapted it when it was a part of India. On the other hand what let to society to adapt the custom that doesn't have any root to its culture is not identified.

Many scholars have addressed the origin and development of dowry practice in Bangladesh from different perspectives. Some attribute it to the religious custom, some blame market and marriage squeeze, some blame culture and patriarchy, and some others blame capitalism and materialism. Some of the issues were already available in the society even before the problem is there and some of them are new. But the question is if the old factors were causing the problem why it becomes suddenly so inflationary. Or even if the new issues were causing the trouble the question arises how it has suddenly changed our behaviour. We need to look at the problem from a new perspective and try to find out a more effective way to address the problem.

## 2.1 Framework of Analysis

The paper would like to introduce the social relation approach to analyse the dowry problem in the country. The study will try to identify the factors from the perspective of Gender Inequality and Social Relations Approach Concept 3: Institutional Analysis. It will help us to find out the underlying causes for dowry practice in the country. The approach is developed by Naila Kabeer in association with policy makers, academics, and activists primarily from the South (March, Smyth, and Mukhapadhy 1999, p.102). The major assumptions made by Kabeer is that the roots of gender inequality are not confined to the household and family but are reproduced across different institutions, including the international community, the state, and the market. Kabeer (1994 cited in March, Smyth, and Mukhapadhy 1999, pp.104) describes institution as a framework of rules for achieving certain social or economic goals. It produces, reinforces, and reproduces social relation and thus generates

and perpetuates social difference and social inequality. There are four key institutional locations identified by Kabeer.

Table 1 : Example of Social Relations Concept 3: Institutional Analysis

Key Institutional Locations	Organization or structural form
State	Legal, military, administrative organizations
Market	Firms, financial corporations, farming enterprises, multinationals, and so on
Community	Village tribunals, voluntary associations, informal networks, patron-client relationships, NGOs
Family/ Kinship	Household, extended families, lineage grouping etc.

Kabeer (1994 cited in March, Smyth, and Mukhapadhyay 1999, pp.104-106) argues that the institutions are not ideologically neutral and they are the cause of producing, reinforcing and reproducing social differences and inequalities. The approach tries to establish that we must move beyond the official ideology of bureaucratic neutrality, and scrutinise the actual rules and practice of institutions to uncover their core values and assumptions. She also challenges the myth of the independence or separateness of institutions. It argues that they are inter-related, and that change in the policy or practise in one institution will cause changes in the others.

## 2.2 Five Aspects of Social Relations Shared by Institutions

Kabeer identifies that all institutions have five interrelated features such as rule, resources, people, activities, and power. She argues that these dimensions are useful in analysing gender inequalities.

### *Rules: how things get done*

The framework identifies two types of rules i.e. official or unofficial (norms, values, laws, traditions, customs etc) that permit everyday decisions to be made with the minimum of effort.

### *Activities: what is done*

There is a routinized pattern of practice for carrying out tasks. It causes certain tasks to get attached to certain social groups and it is considered that they are only capable of doing that particular task which is attached

with reward. These vary according to who does what. This creates a hierarchy of rewards, and reinforces inequalities between women and men. The gender division of labour attributes that women are good at certain activities which are at the same time, less recognised. It, in turn, develops the unequal relationships.

*Resources: what is used, what is produced*

Resources in the society are governed by institutional rules. Resources include human resources (for example, labour, education, and skills), material ones (food, assets, land or money), or intangible ones (information, political, clout, goodwill or contacts). For instance, it is men's responsibility to feed the family and they are given privileged access to resources such as land and other property.

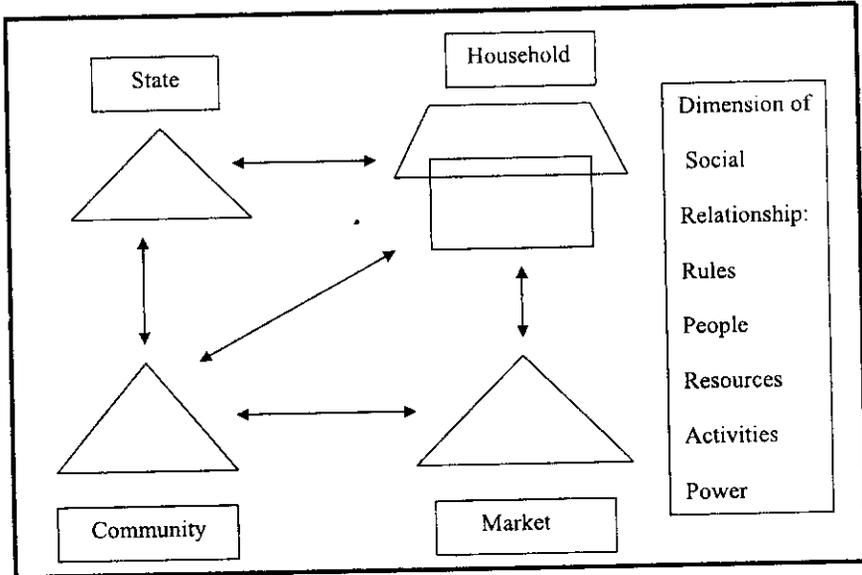
*People: who is in, who is out and who does what?*

Institutions deals with people, who they allow in and are selective about; who is assigned with various resources, tasks and responsibilities? Who is positioned where in the hierarchy? This selection reflects class, gender, and other social inequalities. For example, marring cross class, race and ethnic dividing lines etc.

Kabeer stated (1994 cited in March, Smyth, and Mukhapadhyay 1999, pp.104-109) that the unequal distribution of resources and responsibilities, together with the official and unofficial rules which promote and legitimise this distribution, ensures that some institutional actors have authority and control over others. These individuals then promote practices which entrench their privileged position, and they are most likely to resist change.

The essay will try to find out the relationship of institution that produce, reinforce and reproduce and thus in turn triggers dowry practice and violence in the society.

Figure 1: Social Relations Concept 3: Key institutions and their relations



(March, Smyth, and Mukhopadhyay 1999, pp.108)

The diagram shows the interrelatedness of the institution diagram and how they create social inequalities.

Eisenstein (2004, pp. 188-199) sees patriarchy as a structure of domination and exploitation. She argues that modern world makes the living harder for women than ever before. Global capitalism exposes women to new levels of exploitation and also instigates new yearning for democracy that cannot easily be dismissed as simply bourgeois. We need to conduct an extensive research to identify the causes behind the violent behaviour of the male counterparts. Dowry related violence can also be seen as the result of a patriarchal power structure and also as a result of global capitalism. A more balanced power structure and an equal access to power and freedom can ensure a free society.

### 3.0 Research Approach

This research relies on secondary qualitative case studies and quantitative data in the main. It will be based on a critical review of secondary data. The research also takes into account the existing laws relating to gender, policy booklets, government or semi government publications, and research done by local and international experts, different NGOs, proceedings, working papers and other documents.

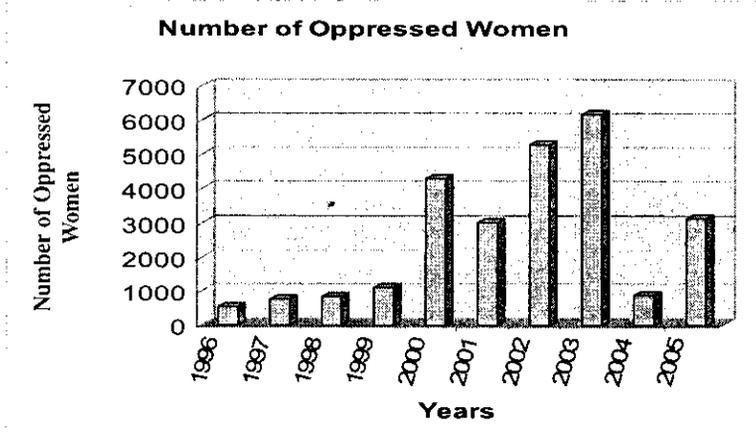
#### 4.0 Existing Situation in Bangladesh

Many researchers and practitioners (Suran et al. 2004, p. 7, Lindenbaum, 1981 pp. 394-395, Mannan 2003, pp. 43-44) argue that dowry does not have any roots within Muslim and Christen cultural history within Bangladesh. They argue that it is a recent cultural penetration that has created social problems in the country. Mukherjee reported that the dowry system first emerged among the better-off Muslim families in the early 1940s (Mukherjee 1971: 272-5 cited from Hartmann and Boyce 1990:83). Lindenbaum (1981 p. 395) identifies that the practice began among the wealthy urban families of Bangladesh in the 1950s, the major change in this region took place in the 1960s and was just beginning among some poorer families in the early 1970s. Mannan (2003, p. 44) agrees with Siddiqi (2002) that dowry seems to have started only after independence and that has increased dramatically since the 1980s. Despite the disagreement about its origins and causes, many critics are in agreement that dowry practice undermines social justice and human rights and that it is appropriate that it has been legally banned in Bangladesh, because it has been recognized as the major cause of violence against women in Bangladesh (Mannan 2003, BNWLA 2004, p. 44, pp. 12-23, Women for Women 2001, pp. 27-29). The rate of dowry oppression is increasing day by day. The statistics of violence against women received from police head-quarters show the increased rate of violence relating to dowry.

Table: 2: Statistics of Dowry Violence against Women Received from Police Head-quarters

Year	Women Oppressed by the Practice of Dowry
1996	511
1997	747
1998	832
1999	1119
2000	4302
2001	3012
2002	5284
2003	6165
2004	885
2005	3130
2006	956 (Up to April)

Figure 2: Number of Oppressed Women in Bangladesh



The data collected from the police head-quarters show that the rate of dowry oppression against women has gradually increased up to 2003 and it also experienced a sudden decline in 2004 and again increased in the following year. Further research is needed to establish the reason for the sudden decline and the re-surgence thereafter. More data is needed, but unavailable at this stage to establish whether the trends in the future is to decline in response to the new laws and the new policy called "gender mainstreaming". The argument developed here is that laws and the policies are not implemented in a consistent manner and that this is the reason why there was initially a decrease when the law changed, but when implementation was tardy, the practice of abuse of women's rights continued.

Many studies (Siddique, 2000; Khan 2001, Mannan 2004, Jahid 2004, Rozario 2004, Naripokkho 1998) have been conducted to find out the factors responsible for the dowry practice. The study will try to apply the social relation approach: institutional analysis for finding a relationship among the institutions. The social relation approach divides the institution into four different categories. The following table categories of issues responsible for the dowry practices in the country based on social relation approach developed by Kabeer.

Table 3: Factors Responsible for Producing, Reinforcing and Reproducing Dowry

Key Institution Location	Factors responsible producing, reinforcing, and reproducing the dowry
State (legal, military, administrative organizations)	<p>Siddique (2000) reveals some limitations of judiciary</p> <p>Khan (2001, p. 124) focuses on the limitation of legal definition of dowry given in existing laws of the country</p> <p>Naripokkho (undated, pp. 34-38) blames the negative and disrespectful attitude of police towards women, gender biases among judicial officers, difficulties of access for women, lack of evidence, lack of security of witnesses, lengthy procedures, inadequate shelters and poor level of care and services in existing shelters, lack of counselling services and lack of proper investigations.</p> <p>Jahid (2004, p. 1) and Hayward (2000, p. 102) blame the high cost and corruption in the legal system.</p>
Market (firms, financial corporation, farming enterprise and multinational so on)	<p>Suran et al (2004, p. 4) holds responsible hyper gamy among the bride's family to raise their status by marrying the daughter into a higher status family</p> <p>Nazneen (2004, pp. 12-13) states that dowry is a status symbol in the society.</p> <p>Rozario (2004, p.33), Hayward (2000, p. 101), Khan (2001, pp. 123-24) and others identify economic reason for dowry. They accuse the increase of capitalist value, materialism, and the job market for dowry.</p>
Community (village tribunals, Voluntary associations, information, patron client relationship, NGOs)	<p>Rozario (2004, p. 33) and Nazneen (2004, p. 13) identify that marriage squeeze for dowry practice in the society.</p> <p><i>Schuler, Hashemi, and Badal (1998, p. 150) blames social dependency of women is a factor contribute to the dowry practice.</i></p>
Family/ kinship	<p>Rozario (2004, p.) also accuses the patriarchal attitude in the family responsible for dowry.</p> <p>Rozario (2004, p. 31) identifies the social vulnerability of women and marriage as a major factor responsible for dowry.</p>

The above table shows that the institutions are not ideologically neutral and they are the cause of producing, reinforcing and reproducing social inequalities. The interrelatedness of the institution reinforces and reproduces the dowry practice and causes increasing rate of violence. The

five aspects of social relations shared by institutions can also be helpful for analyzing the practice. Rules allow male to take everyday decision, Social norms, values, laws, traditions and customs are in favour of the patriarchal attitude that places women in a inferior position. The gender division of labour decided women to do the household work and assign with activities that are regarded as less important. The resource distribution in the society is also in favour of men. Property is inherited by the male member of the country family. Despite the existing legal property rights women are deprived of their shares from their parent's property. Thus the five basic aspects of the institutions are becoming a key issue for the reinforcing the dowry practice.

### **Five Aspects of Social Relations Shared by Institutions**

*Rules:* The framework identifies two types of rules i.e. official or unofficial (norms, values, laws, traditions, customs) that permit everyday decisions to be made with the minimum of effort. With the change in the social system the state has failed to provide enough support for women to cope up with the changing situation. The challenges of the new world have triggered the vulnerability of women. For example, man's and women's jobs are not equally recognized by the family and society. Women are less paid for the same job in some cases. Even if a woman earns equally in a family, her contribution is valued less by the member of the family. Studies show that even women paying dowry have to face more violence. It is not considered as an equally valued contribution for the family. Sometimes, it even increases lured for dowry.

*Activities:* The traditional division of labour involves man and women to perform particular task that is attached with reward. Earlier this highly agriculture-based society depended on their female family members for agricultural food processing and other related activities. The increasing trend of landlessness had a direct impact on the households and economy and it further reduces the women's positions in the families. Besides, children were considered as a very significant resource for a family. With the expansion of market and increasing rate of cost of living, it has become quite difficult for a family to maintain children. Reproductive work is now becoming a less valued activity. The government and even the families consider more than one or two children as burden for the family. This change in the social system has devalued the traditional role of women in the family, market and state.

*Resources:* As it is considered that the men's responsibility is to feed the family, men are given privileged access to resources such as land and other properties. Existing laws such as inheritance laws provide half share for daughters. Still this is not implemented. Women are deprived from their due share as daughters and there are values that women shouldn't claim their shares. Thus, the concentration of resources at men's hand makes women more vulnerable.

*People and power:* Men are in the upper position of the hierarchy in different situations. It regulates the policy making and policy implementation in institutions.

Kabeer stated (1994 cited in March, Smyth, and Mukhapadhyay 1999, pp.104-109) that the unequal distribution of resources and responsibilities, together with the official and unofficial rules which promote and legitimise this distribution, ensures that some institutional actors have authority and control over others. These individuals then promote practices which entrench their privileged position, and they are most likely to resist change. Therefore, modernization fails to reduce dowry practice in the country moreover it has provided some extra fuel to accelerate the situation.

## **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

Dowry is not a new phenomenon in the Indian subcontinent, but the practice taking place today is in different form. It was confined among the Holy caste Brahmin as a symbol of status. Now it is widely practised among the Muslims in the subcontinent causing much violence against women. The inflation of dowry practice, the violence and brutality caused by it has raised the concern of the government and other organizations. But all approaches to stopping dowry have not proved effective yet. Perhaps the problem needs to be addressed differently by working with many stakeholders and organisations across the public and community sectors. Society also needs to become more effective in enforcing our legal and other policy approaches. This requires a change in values. It is not easy to draw a definitive conclusion on such a large scale problem based on such a small scale study. Nevertheless I would like to provide some recommendations, based on the study of secondary data.

Recommendations include:

a) Changing the Existing Law

Legal drawbacks for dowry practice and dowry violence in Bangladesh include the legal definition of dowry. I agree with others (Nangia 1997, pp. 656-661; Umar 1998, p. 273; Banerjee 1997; Hitchcock 2001 cited in Kaushik 2003, p. 111) that the definition of dowry should further clarify the "in connection with marriage" requirement as sometimes the dowry demand does not have any connection with marriage. The law needs to be reformed to include "expected" gifts. It is difficult to distinguish what is dowry and what is gift. The custom of giving and receiving gifts becomes a problem in stopping dowry practice in society. Considering the evil of dowry practice we need to think about stopping the custom of giving and receiving gifts. The lust for luxurious gifts is also causing trouble in conjugal life. Besides, there is no provision for compensation for dowry violence to women or their families in Bangladesh. We have to have compensation for women for injury caused by violence and social dishonour. The provision of compensation can prevent the practice and violence in society.

b) Strengthening the Support System

Compared to the magnitude of dowry practice and violence the support service is very limited. There should be more support service centres and shelter house for abused women in every lowest unit of field administration.

c) A Legal Body to Implement Inheritance Law

As mentioned earlier, some claim that dowry has a relation with inheritance, although even those who do not have property face dowry demands and dowry violence. However, we need to establish the property rights for women. The existing law should be implemented. Most of the problems with property arise when the daughter claims it and the parents don't want to give them the property. Nevertheless, the government can take initiative to distribute the property among the heirs after the death of the parents or whenever necessary. A legal body can be set up to do the work on behalf of the parents and ensure justice and implementation of the existing law.

#### d) Strengthening Social Networks

A social network developed with the state and civil society could be implemented. A strong network among the eligible unmarried and married women can help them handle dowry. The government could provide patronage for such a network. Networks could be strengthened by working with religious leaders and addressing values. Dowry was not a custom among the Muslims in Bangladesh and it is not even allowed by their religion. The religious leaders of the community can participate in the anti-dowry movement.

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