



# UNDERSTANDING DOWRY AND DOWRY BASED ABUSE

## Understanding Dowry and Dowry Abuse

Dowry, a centuries-old tradition practiced globally, involves a bride's family providing payments to her husband's family. This custom remains widespread in parts of South Asia, the Middle East, sections of Africa, certain areas of Eastern Europe and within some communities in Britain. When the husband's family perceives the dowry as insufficient, women can face severe abuse.

In the UK dowries were quite common in Victorian times amongst the upper class, being viewed as an early payment of the daughter's inheritance. The value of dowry was often tied directly to the groom's social standing, reinforcing class barriers by making it difficult for lower-class women to marry into wealthier families. Historically, families would go to great lengths, even mortgaging property, to provide a suitable dowry. The return of the dowry to the woman's family if a couple died childless also highlighted societal pressures on couples to have children.<sup>[1]</sup>

In modern contexts, the hidden nature of dowry abuse often draws comparisons to female genital mutilation (FGM) before it entered the public and law enforcement spotlight.<sup>[2]</sup> Global organisations, including the United Nations, increasingly recognise dowry abuse as a form of economic abuse and violation of human rights.



In India, dowries were outlawed by the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. In 1980, Bangladesh officially banned dowries and imposed sanctions, including imprisonment, fines, or both, for those who demand or accept dowries. However, the practice is deeply entrenched and persists across the Indian Subcontinent in Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and sometimes also within Christian communities. This also exists within this diaspora in the UK.

Dowry payments can put significant financial strain on the parents, leading to murders. In the state of Victoria, Australia, dowry abuse has gained increasing recognition as a form of family violence. It became the first state to specifically include dowry abuse within its family violence legislation. Additionally, in June 2018, the Australian government launched an investigation into the prevalence of dowry abuse, which particularly affects many migrant communities there.



[1] [Married to Money: Dowries in Regency England | BYU presents PRIDE AND PREJUDICE](#)

[2] [Shunned, beaten, burnt, raped: The dowry violence that shames Britain | The Independent | The Independent](#)

According to a U.N. study, forty to fifty per cent of female homicides in India result from dowry disputes.<sup>[3]</sup> Dowry abuse is also linked to other forms of gender-based violence, including sex-selective abortions.<sup>[4]</sup>

While dowry abuse is a global issue that manifests in various cultural contexts, this briefing focuses on the South Asian context, where cultural expectations surrounding dowry continue to shape family dynamics and potentially lead to patterns of economic abuse and coercion. While there is a significant amount of research and information addressing dowry abuse within the South Asian context, there is limited literature specifically tailored for the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) sector. This lack of sector-focused resources highlights a gap in understanding, identifying, and addressing dowry abuse within VAWG frameworks.

We acknowledge that this briefing primarily focuses on dowry abuse in heterosexual relationships, the impact of dowry abuse on lesbian women remains underexplored.

The aim of this piece is to raise awareness about dowry abuse, helping practitioners within the VAWG sector gain understanding of this type of harmful practice as well as understanding its inter-connectedness with other forms of VAWG. By doing so, we hope this will enhance knowledge around this issue and improve the support provided to all survivors at risk of dowry abuse.

### **Dowry abuse as a form of coercive control**

Economic abuse within South Asian households often manifests in distinct and complex ways, influenced by cultural practices like dowry; known as jahez in Urdu and dahej in Hindi, Punjabi, and Gujarati, dowry involves the transfer of gifts or assets to the bride and, significantly, to the groom and his family. This practice is prevalent within some South Asian Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities in Britain. This significantly influences financial expectations and family relationships, often creating pressures that lead to exploitative and coercive abuse.

Dowry abuse, like all forms of harmful practices, is a manifestation of coercive control. It is not limited to financial demands but often involves emotional, financial, and physical abuse.

[3] [Microsoft Word - Booklet\\_5\\_forlayout\\_16July](#)

[4] [Settled Alibis and Emerging Contradictions: Sex Selection, Dowry and Domestic Violence on JSTOR](#)

Demand for dowry becomes a tool in a broader pattern of control, where the victim is subjected to manipulation, intimidation and exploitation, impacting their autonomy, well-being, and safety. This abuse typically involves pressure to meet escalating demands, emotional degradation, financial manipulation and, in some cases, physical violence, all aimed at maintaining power and control over the victim.

In many cases, dowry demands extend beyond the wedding, evolving into ongoing expectations that can place women under intense emotional, economic, and social strain. Families may face persistent requests for additional financial support or valuable items, which can lead to a cycle of manipulation, isolation, and abuse for women who feel obligated to meet these demands to maintain family 'honour' or avoid stigma. Such economic demands create economic dependence and pressure that complicate women's autonomy within their marital homes.<sup>[5]</sup>

### ► **Dowry abuse and intersecting forms of abuse**

Dowry abuse often interconnects with other types of VAWG, including domestic and sexual abuse, forced marriage, and honour-based violence. Faith and caste\* can also influence these dynamics, where spiritual based abuse might involve using religious beliefs to justify coercion, while caste considerations can exacerbate the stigma and social consequences if dowry demands are not met.



The concept of 'honour' and shame play a crucial role in understanding why many women do not leave such abusive situations. For some, the fear of tarnishing the family's reputation or the social implications of leaving a marriage bound by dowry agreements can be overwhelming. Many also worry about the impact on their families, who might face pressure, retaliation or shame from the wider community.

[5] [Punita Chowbey \(0000-0001-8400-468X\)](#) - ORCID

\*Caste-based abuse involves discrimination rooted in a social hierarchy where people are assigned to different caste groups based on ancestry or social status. Prevalent in the Indian subcontinent and among the Indian diaspora, this hierarchy ranks individuals within rigid social strata, often limiting access to education, employment, housing, and other essential resources. Those from lower castes, or "outcastes," frequently face stigma, exclusion, and targeted violence due to their caste status, leading to deep-rooted social and economic marginalization. Dowry abuse often intersects with both gender and caste, resulting in a specific form of oppression where women, particularly from lower castes, face compounded discrimination and abuse.

According to Sikh Women's Aid [6] ongoing demands for dowry after marriage can be used to shame and manipulate the bride's parents. To maintain their family's honour, they may feel pressured to meet these escalating demands at any cost. Additionally, colourism within South Asian communities complicates this dynamic. Parents of darker-complexioned daughters may face societal shame and pressure, leading them to comply with their in-laws' demands for dowry to avoid returning their daughter home. This compliance might involve borrowing money, re-mortgaging property, or selling land, as the fear of familial disgrace drives them to ensure their daughters continue in the marriage, even if it means enduring an abusive relationship. The priority often becomes maintaining community status over the well-being of the daughter, highlighting the alarming intersection of cultural expectations and personal trauma.

Numerous by and for agencies trained to address dowry-related abuse report that it is prevalent within diaspora and migrant communities in the UK. This form of abuse often occurs alongside other harmful practices, including honour-based abuse, acid attacks, and forced marriage.[7]

By acknowledging and addressing dowry-related abuse as part of the broader issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG), we can improve support for survivors and explore issues that are often overlooked in standard risk assessment tools.

### **How dowry abuse can over-lap with other forms of VAWG including harmful practices:**

**Caste abuse:** Dowry expectations can be significantly influenced by caste. Women marrying outside their caste may face discrimination, isolation, or financial demands for the perceived loss of caste status. Also, higher-caste families may feel social or cultural pressure to provide large dowries to maintain their status. A woman, especially perceived as being from an oppressed caste\*, may be coerced into providing more dowry or may suffer abuse for 'violating' caste norms and experience abuse through caste-specific slurs.

**Forced marriage:** Dowry practices are sometimes tied to forced marriages, where a woman's choice may be ignored to facilitate an arrangement that benefits her family socially or financially. In such cases, dowry is used as a form of economic leverage or bargaining tool, and the woman may be pressured or forced to marry against her will to fulfil these financial expectations. This marriage can then become a setting for dowry abuse as financial demands continue or increase after the wedding.

[6] Written evidence from Sikh Women's Aid [HBA0022]

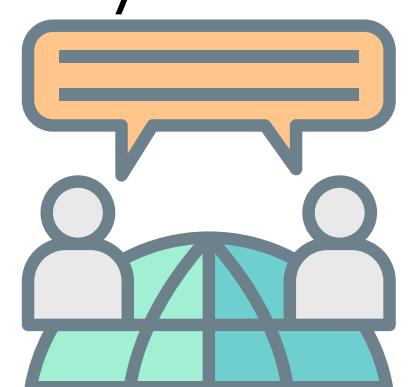
[7] CO ACTION HUB FACTSHEET DOWRY BASED ABUSE

\*The term oppressed caste is used here instead of "lower caste" to reject hierarchical language that perpetuates caste-based discrimination.

**'Honour' based abuse:** 'Honour' based abuse often impacts women who are seen as bringing 'shame' to the family by not meeting dowry expectations, not complying with in-laws' demands, or questioning forced or arranged marriages. If a woman resists dowry demands or reports abuse, this can be seen as dishonouring the family, triggering further violence or isolation.

**Transnational marriage abandonment (TMA) and dowry:** Transnational marriage abandonment (TMA) occurs when an abusive partner and their family take the victim to a different country and subsequently abandon them. This form of abandonment exploits cross-border legal gaps, leaving the victim and sometimes their children vulnerable and without support, often facing severe financial, social and emotional harm.

The act of stranding a spouse in a foreign country, constitutes a form of domestic abuse where the abusive husband and in-laws abandon the wife (the victim) in her home country or another location without resources or support. Dowry plays a central role in such cases, where women are married into families abroad, only to face abandonment and demands for additional dowry after moving. [8] Due to the cross-jurisdictional nature of transnational abandonment, this creates unique challenges for women. Often, after abandonment, women struggle to recover dowries, which are frequently withheld.



### ▶ **Identifying Dowry Abuse**

**Financial demands and extortion:** Victim-survivors and their families are often pressured to provide gifts, money, or assets as dowry, with demands frequently escalating over time. If these demands are not met, the woman may face abuse. This can occur when prospective in-laws, particularly those with British citizenship, visit countries like India, allowing limited time for marriage preparations and using their overseas status as leverage. In some cases, even the bride's family may support the arrangement, viewing it as a desirable opportunity for her to settle abroad, only for abuse to escalate later.

**Economic abuse:** The victim-survivor may be denied access to her own family resources because of ongoing demands for dowry, with control over finances to make her financially dependent. In some cases, debt is incurred in her name without consent, leaving her with significant financial burdens.

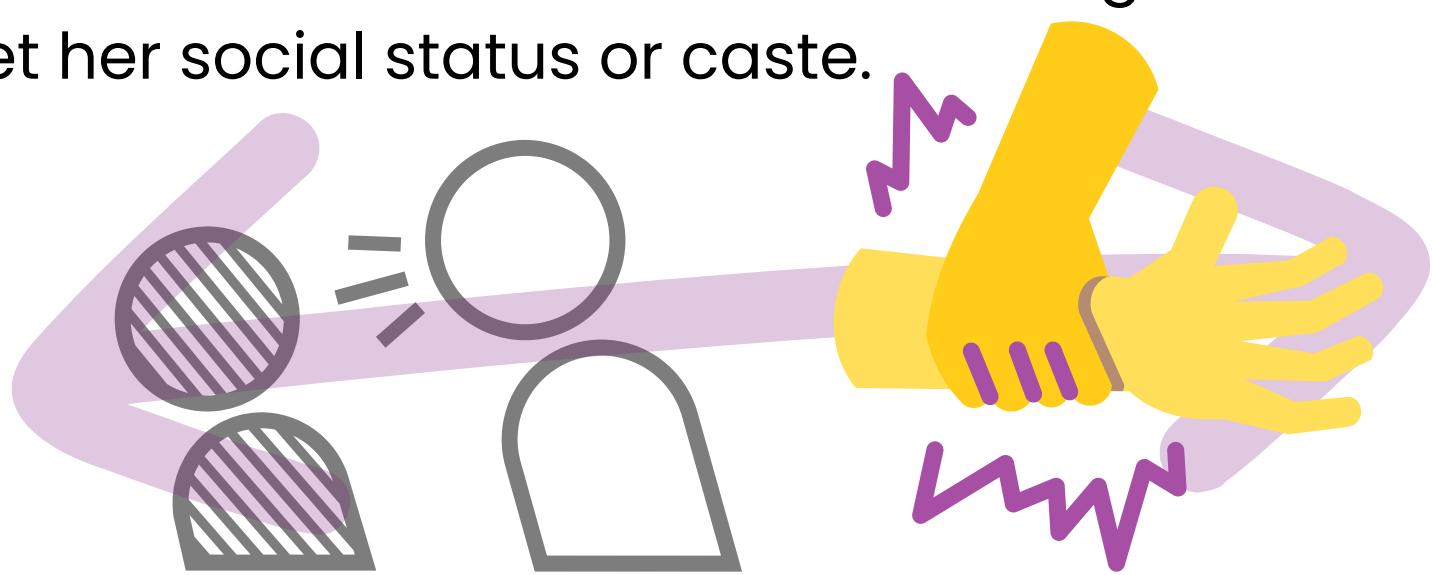
[8] [Changing nature and emerging patterns of domestic violence in global contexts: dowry abuse and the transnational abandonment of wives in India](#)

Following separation, dowry abuse can persist as the husband and in-laws may continue to demand dowry-related assets, refuse to return wedding jewellery and gifts, or assert control over shared or personal property. This ongoing financial control serves to maintain power over the victim-survivor, compounding emotional distress and potentially prolonging economic dependency.

**Isolation:** Often, the woman is cut off from friends and family to prevent her from seeking support, reinforcing her dependency on her in-laws or husband. This lack of understanding is also reflected in how the police respond. In many cases, when victims call the police, they are told it is a civil matter and that they could not get involved, failing to recognise the isolating control tactics that exacerbate the vulnerability and dependence of victim- survivors.

**Emotional and psychological abuse:** Victims- survivors may be blamed, shamed, or humiliated and may face ongoing criticism, shaming, and humiliation for what in-laws or family members consider "insufficient" dowry contributions. They may be constantly compared to others, insulted, or accused, which can damage their self-esteem. These insults will often target her social status or caste.

**Threats and coercion:** Threats to end the marriage or send the woman back to her family are common tactics to maintain control and pressure her family into compliance with dowry demands.



**Physical abuse and intimidation:** Dowry-related abuse can escalate to physical violence, often used to enforce compliance or punish the woman for not meeting financial expectations. In severe cases, this abuse has led to unexplained deaths and domestic homicides.

**Cultural and social pressure:** Fear of cultural stigma or community judgment can discourage victims from seeking help, as dowry issues are sometimes considered private family matters in certain communities.

**Close monitoring to control freedom:** Victims may be denied personal freedoms, restricted in communication, or closely monitored, culminating severe coercive control reducing opportunities to seek support.



## ▶ **Addressing dowry abuse: gaps and challenges:**

The law in England and Wales regarding dowry disputes is still in its early stages.[9] While there are no laws specifically around dowry abuse, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 expanded the definition of domestic abuse to include economic and coercive control by family members.[10] This can apply to dowry-related abuse to support victims and survivors who are victims of the harmful practice of dowry abuse.

There is a critical need for professionals and VAWG specialists to gain awareness and training around dowry abuse and its impacts. Social services, housing officers, health professionals, and legal practitioners should understand the financial and coercive elements of dowry abuse. This knowledge would enable them to identify warning signs, provide appropriate support, and ensure survivors access the right resources. Dowry abuse can impact survivors' physical and mental health, including increased risk of chronic illnesses, depression, and anxiety. This awareness is vital for providing holistic care and for ensuring that all professionals work together in supporting survivors across multiple sectors.

While some by and for agencies and BME IDVAs have expertise in dowry-related abuse, many IDVAs and frontline professionals in the VAWG sector lack knowledge and understanding and have never had any specific training on this issue. As a result, many professionals lack a comprehensive understanding of dowry abuse, its manifestations within different communities and faiths as well as its implications for victims. This can significantly affect their ability to effectively identify and respond to cases of dowry-related abuse. This gap impedes the effective identification and response to cases of dowry-related violence and abuses.

## ▶ **The key issues surrounding dowry abuse:**

Dowry abuse and barriers:

- **Lack of recognition:** There is a widespread failure to acknowledge dowry abuse as violence against women and girls, leading to inadequate attention and resources directed toward addressing it.
- **Under-reporting:** Victims may be reluctant to report dowry violence due to cultural stigma, fear of repercussions, multiple perpetrators, or a lack of trust in the Police and Criminal Justice System contributing to the invisibility of the issue.



[9] [Dowry Disputes | Duncan Lewis | Duncan Lewis](#)

[10] [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)

*"If police and coroners were trained to know about this, a proportion of unexplained deaths involving immigrant women would become explained."*<sup>[11]</sup> Usha Sood, Barrister who works in Nottingham and provides legal expertise regarding dowry cases

**Dowry abuse and mental health:** Dowry abuse is often associated with severe mental health issues, including depression and suicidal ideation , yet the links between these issues are not adequately documented or addressed in health and social services.

**Absence of data:** The lack of systematic recording of dowry-related incidents makes it difficult to assess the true extent of the problem, hindering the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies.<sup>[12]</sup>

**Policy development:** Without reliable data, policymakers may struggle to create policies or allocate resources effectively to tackle dowry abuse.

### **Case Study:**

*The case below, shared by a colleague at AWRC, illustrates the devastating impact of dowry abuse and its connection to other forms of abuse. All identifying details have been changed to ensure confidentiality. It evidences the devastating impact of dowry abuse, and its interconnectedness to other forms of abuse, cultural expectations and financial pressures within marriage.*

*Anita\*, a woman from a South Asian background, entered marriage with a family that had significant expectations regarding dowry. These expectations were not merely financial; they were deeply intertwined with the family's caste status and social standing within their community. Her family agreed to provide gifts and financial support as part of the marriage proposal for their daughter, including household items, jewellery, and a substantial sum of money.*

*Shortly after the marriage, Anita's in-laws began demanding money and valuable items, saying they needed it for their business and household expenses. As members of a higher caste, they felt entitled to additional dowry contributions, seeing these demands as necessary for upholding the expectations and family's honour within the community.*

[11] [Shunned, beaten, burnt, raped: The dowry violence that shames Britain | The Independent | The Independent](#)

[12] [ibid](#)

\*Name is anonymised

*When Anita's family could no longer meet the escalating demands, her in-law's behaviour became abusive. They limited her access to finances and subjected her to verbal and emotional abuse. She was blamed not only for failing to bring a "sufficient" dowry but also for supposedly bringing shame and dishonour to her husband's family. They frequently threatened to send her back to her family in disgrace unless their financial demands were met, implying that her return would be a mark of shame on her family. Her husband, who initially seemed supportive, soon sided with his family's demands, further isolating her and accusing her of dishonouring him when she questioned their expectations.*

*As the abuse escalated to physical violence, her husband would intimidate her whenever she resisted the family's requests for more money. She felt trapped, she spoke to her parents who could not get the required amount, and hoped things would change and her parents would save some more. Her in-laws restricted her communication with friends and family, making it difficult for her to reach out for help. With limited access to finances and no means of independent income, she became financially dependent on her husband and in-laws.*

*The cultural stigma and potential judgment from her community deepened her isolation, as she feared that reporting the abuse would bring further dishonour to her own family. The pressure to maintain her husband's family's honour, combined with caste expectations, kept her trapped in a cycle of dowry.*

*Despite the challenges, Anita, with the agency's empathetic support, was able to navigate the reporting process and find a safe place. The agency addressed the financial abuse, coercive control, and complexities of her situation, connecting her with solicitors who understood her specific circumstances, including family dynamics, caste, and dowry pressures. This support made Anita feel genuinely seen.*

*Many by and for agencies play a vital role in assisting women like Anita through casework, helplines, and advocacy, offering critical support for survivors facing similar forms of abuse.*

### **Conclusion:**

Dowry abuse is a complex form of economic and coercive control, often intertwined with other forms of abuse, cultural expectations, and financial pressures. Addressing it effectively within the VAWG sector requires a collaborative, intersectional approach. Expanding awareness around dowry abuse and building knowledge on its nuances are essential steps to ensure that victim-survivors receive comprehensive support. Creating safe learning spaces within organisations encourages practitioners to reflect on and openly discuss challenges related to racism, hate crimes, and discrimination.

These conversations help staff understand how these issues intersect with broader Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) concerns, such as dowry-related harm, while addressing biases and misconceptions. There is a need to understand all forms of harmful practices without communities being stereotyped. By challenging racist narratives and stereotypes, practitioners can strengthen support systems and enhance their ability to respond effectively, ensuring justice for women across diverse communities is at the heart of their work. To widen and expand their understanding of these complexities, agencies should engage with and for organisations for collaborative working and specialised training, which enriches the sector's capacity to respond to domestic abuse and other less visible forms of harmful practices.

Victims-survivors maybe reluctant to disclose due to these cultural or religious barriers but also because of the biases they may encounter within euro-centric approaches of statutory authorities and mainstream services. These approaches may fail to explore issues like dowry abuse. Furthermore, there is often an overemphasis on legal or formal pathways, such as obtaining protective orders, which can feel inaccessible or unsafe for survivors due to mistrust of authorities or fears of community ostracization. It is crucial that commissioners prioritise and fund initiatives promoting collaboration between faith communities and VAWG services.

However, engaging with faith communities must be approached critically and thoughtfully, acknowledging complexities, potential biases, and the need to prioritize survivor-centred approaches while ensuring accountability within these collaborations. These partnerships can be key in raising awareness about dowry abuse and supporting community based intervention.

Through such initiatives, the government can more effectively address abuse within diverse cultural and community contexts, ensuring that victim-survivors receive appropriate support and clear referral pathways for disclosures.



**Coaction Projects Hub's Knowledge Hub offers a collection of valuable resources and articles on harmful practices, including honour-based abuse, forced marriage, dowry abuse, female genital mutilation, caste-based abuse, and spiritual abuse ([Harmful Practices Resources](#) | [AWRC](#) | [Women's services Brent](#) | [Welfare advice Brent](#) | [Women's services Brent](#)).**

**To support good practice in statutory and non-statutory agencies and encourage referrals to specialist agencies please see HPSP's factsheet on various forms of harmful practices including dowry abuse. [HPSP — Standing Together](#)**



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