

Exploring Alternative Economic Models to Counter Dowry-Related Practices

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Abstract

The concept of dowry system is not new to our society but it is an old age tradition or precisely can be called a curse for our society. The roots of this system of dowry are so persistently involved in our culture that it looks very much natural to the society. The financial implications of the dowry system in the society creates economic burden on the bride family that sometimes a kind of debt trap created

Despite various legislations available in the social discourse the economics of dowry is such that to separate the effects of dowry in the society alternative economic models need to be evolved. This essay explores how alternative economic models—such as cooperative economies, women-centric microfinance, social entrepreneurship, and Universal Basic Income (UBI)—can effectively counter the economic incentives and social structures that perpetuate dowry practices. It argues for a multidimensional approach that goes beyond legal prohibitions to economically empower women, reshape patriarchal market logic, and create communities where marriage-related transactions are irrelevant or discouraged.

Introduction

The system of the concept of dowry is not only specific to India but in economies of south Asia also. As a result gender injustice occurs due this system of dowry in various countries. It results in contribution to gender biasness despite laws such as the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), the practice remains pervasive. Dowry, originally intended as a form of inheritance for women, has evolved into a coercive and burdensome tradition. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), thousands of women face harassment, domestic violence, or death over dowry disputes each year.

Traditional approaches—legal, punitive, and educational—while crucial, have not succeeded in uprooting the socio-economic foundations of this practice. This essay posits that exploring alternative economic models can provide structural solutions to a problem that is as much about economics as it is about culture.

Dowry as an Economic Practice

Dowry is not merely a social custom but an economic transaction embedded in the patriarchal structure of marriage markets. Families often see daughters as economic burdens and sons as assets. Marriage becomes a transfer of wealth, with grooms' families demanding money, property, or goods as a condition for the union. This transaction mimics a market where grooms are commodities and marriage is a contract facilitated by dowry.

In this context, dowry becomes a form of social capital exchange, often rationalized as necessary for ensuring a "good match" or upward mobility. The dowry amount tends to rise in correlation with the groom's education, job status, or family wealth, reflecting a commodification of human relationships.

The Failure of Legal Frameworks Alone

Laws like the Dowry Prohibition Act and Sections 304B and

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498A of the Indian Penal Code provide mechanisms to punish dowry harassment. However, their enforcement remains weak due to deep-rooted social acceptance, lack of awareness, fear of societal ostracism, and often, the complicity of law enforcement officials.

Legal deterrents function best when societal norms support them. In the case of dowry, the economic rationale behind the practice frequently outweighs the fear of legal consequences. Therefore, alternative economic models are essential to shift the underlying economic calculus.

Cooperative Economic Models and Community Ownership

One promising alternative lies in cooperative economics, which emphasizes shared ownership, mutual support, and community welfare. In cooperatives, individuals pool resources for collective benefit, undermining hierarchical and individualistic wealth accumulation models that fuel dowry culture.

For instance, women's self-help groups (SHGs) in India often operate on cooperative principles. These groups not only provide financial services but also act as support systems where women challenge patriarchal practices collectively. SHGs in Kerala and Tamil Nadu have successfully created networks that actively resist dowry-related demands through community pressure and legal aid.

Moreover, community ownership of assets—such as land, businesses, or local banks—reduces the need for individual families to accumulate wealth as a strategy for securing advantageous marriages.

Microfinance and Women's Economic Empowerment

Microfinance institutions (MFIs) and self-help group (SHG)-linked bank programs have been instrumental in empowering women financially. When women have access to capital, savings, and credit, they gain autonomy and bargaining power within their households and communities.

Studies have shown that when women become economic contributors, families are less likely to treat them as liabilities. Their earning potential also reduces the perceived need for a dowry to 'offset' their presence in a new household. In Bangladesh, for example, Grameen Bank's initiatives significantly altered gender dynamics, with fewer dowry demands observed among empowered women borrowers.

However, microfinance must be carefully regulated to avoid debt traps and must be accompanied by capacity building, skill training, and

market access to ensure sustainable economic independence.

Social Entrepreneurship and Alternative Livelihood Models

Social entrepreneurship provides a hybrid model where profit is combined with social impact. Women-led social enterprises that hire and empower other women challenge the structural roots of dowry by:

- a. Generating local employment
- b. Creating role models of female leadership
- c. Breaking dependency cycles

For example, SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) in India supports over two million women in various informal sectors. SEWA members are more likely to resist dowry pressures, advocate for equitable marriages, and invest in daughters' education.

Social businesses focused on gender equality not only change economic behavior but also create narratives of success that counter the idea of daughters being financial burdens.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) and Financial Dignity

UBI is an emerging economic model that involves providing citizens with a fixed, unconditional sum of money. If implemented with a gender focus, UBI could:

- a. Provide women with direct financial agency
- b. Reduce the economic dependency that fuels dowry
- c. Alter intergenerational wealth distribution

Critics argue UBI may disincentivize work, but targeted UBI for women and girls could elevate their status in both natal and marital homes, thereby challenging the economic rationale for dowry.

Pilot programs in Madhya Pradesh (conducted by SEWA and UNICEF) demonstrated that unconditional cash transfers improved nutrition, health, and schooling for girls and increased their say in household decisions.

Education and Skill Development as Economic Tools

Though not a model in itself, investing in education and skill-building acts as a powerful economic tool. Educated and employable women are less vulnerable to dowry-related exploitation. Furthermore, families that invest in daughters' futures are less likely to treat marriage as the final or most important financial goal.

The economic model of human capital investment proposes that returns on education (in the form of earnings and social mobility) outweigh dowry transfers. Governments and NGOs can enhance this effect by subsidizing girls' education, providing incentives for vocational training, and linking education with job placement.

Marriage Market Reforms: Alternative Marital Practices

Alternative economic models must also rethink the institution of marriage itself. Collective marriages, promoted by some states and NGOs, offer a low-cost alternative to lavish weddings and eliminate dowry.

Examples include:

Madhya Pradesh Mukhya-mantri Kanyadaan Yojana: Offers financial assistance to low-income families for mass weddings.

Arya Samaj Weddings: Promote simple ceremonies that explicitly reject dowry.

Changing consumer behaviour around marriage can be achieved through behavioural economics interventions—such as social nudges, reward programs for dowry-free marriages, and shame campaigns against opulent displays of wealth.

Redistribution-Oriented Welfare Models

Redistributive economic policies can reduce the wealth and status inequalities that fuel dowry. These include:

- a. Land reforms that give daughters inheritance rights
- b. Pension schemes and health insurance for women
- c. Housing subsidies for female-headed households

When women have access to public welfare and private property, their bargaining position strengthens, reducing the perceived need for dowry as a security mechanism.

Programs like PM Awas Yojana, which encourage joint or female-only homeownership, help shift cultural narratives by giving women tangible assets.

Grassroots and Community-Based Economics

At the grassroots level, community-driven development (CDD) and participatory budgeting can provide women with control over local resources. When women participate in decision-making about public goods, their economic status improves, and gendered norms are challenged.

For example, in Karnataka, village-level planning bodies that include female members have allocated funds to women-centric infrastructure like schools, health centers, and vocational hubs—thereby reshaping community priorities.

Conclusion

The persistence of dowry cannot be addressed solely by legal prohibitions. Since it is deeply embedded in economic rationale and social practices, alternative economic models offer the potential to transform the landscape in which dowry thrives.

By empowering women financially, fostering community ownership, redistributing resources, and reforming marriage-related expectations, we can construct an economic environment where dowry is not just illegal—but unnecessary, irrelevant, and socially unacceptable.

To fully dismantle dowry practices, economic transformation must go hand-in-hand with cultural shifts, and alternative economic models may just provide the blueprint for both.

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