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## The Changing Dynamics of Dowry in Bihar:

Migration, Economy, and Social Impact

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# Executive Summary

The dowry system in Bihar reflects a complex intersection of culture, economy, and gendered power relations. Once a customary practice known as *stree dhān*, meant to ensure a woman's financial security, it has transformed into a deeply institutionalized form of coercion and economic exploitation. Despite legal prohibitions, the practice continues to thrive, adapting to changing social and economic contexts.

Bihar's contemporary scenario illustrates the persistence of traditional patriarchy amid modernization. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (2024) reveals Bihar as one of the leading states in dowry-related offences, with over 3,600 reported cases and more than 1,100 dowry deaths in 2023 alone. This alarming trend underscores how dowry has evolved into a symbol of social prestige and economic aspiration, sustaining gender inequality and financial pressure across caste and class lines.

The findings of this report reveal that dowry today operates as an economic institution. Education, caste rank, government employment, and migration, particularly to Gulf countries, determine a groom's "market value". Families of the bride frequently finance these payments through loans or the sale of land, creating long-term debt cycles that reinforce poverty and gendered dependence.

Caste still shapes dowry expectations, but rising incomes and migration are diluting these boundaries. Remittance-earning grooms from lower castes now command dowries comparable to those from upper castes, prompting families to prioritise income over caste purity.



Economic mobility is quietly reshaping Bihar's marriage market, where dowry terms increasingly outweigh traditional hierarchies.

The form and composition of dowry have also modernized. Cash, gold, motorbikes, and cars have largely replaced traditional items like land or livestock, reflecting the rise of consumerism. In urban and semi-urban Bihar, a car or motorcycle is now considered essential to signify respectability and progress. This transition has effectively rebranded dowry as a symbol of "modern success" rather than an outdated custom, making resistance socially difficult.

Importantly, the report highlights how dowry sustains intergenerational control. In households with migrant sons, a significant portion of dowry inflows often remains with the groom's parents, financing their consumption. Thus, migration not only increases dowry demands but also strengthens patriarchal authority through financial centralization within the older generation.

Policy analysis shows that while Bihar's welfare schemes have improved awareness, they have not dismantled the underlying cultural acceptance of dowry. Legal enforcement remains weak, with conviction rates for dowry-related crimes below 35% (NCRB, 2023). Community mediation and social stigma continue to suppress women's voices, reinforcing cycles of silence and impunity.

The study concludes that ending dowry requires more than legislation; it demands structural and attitudinal change. A holistic approach combining stronger law enforcement, women's economic empowerment, gender education, and community engagement is essential. A dowry-free Bihar will emerge only when social values shift from wealth and prestige to dignity, equality, and mutual respect in marriage.



The institution of dowry continues to hold a powerful grip over the social fabric of Bihar, influencing not only marriage practices but also the broader structure of gender relations, family honour, and economic exchange. Historically conceived as *stree dhān*, a form of voluntary gift or inheritance offered to a daughter at the time of her marriage, the practice was rooted in affection and concern for the bride's future security. However, with the passage of time and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms, this custom has undergone a fundamental transformation. What was once a symbol of goodwill has evolved into an obligatory and often exploitative social demand, placing severe economic and emotional burdens on the bride's family.

What makes dowry particularly enduring in Bihar is its ability to adapt to wider social and economic changes. Increased education, urbanisation, and exposure to global lifestyles have not weakened the practice; instead, they have reshaped it into a more formalised and aspirational economic exchange. Dowry today operates as a conduit for social mobility, a marker of respectability, and a means for families to negotiate prestige within caste and class hierarchies.

The rising value placed on education, government jobs, and especially the migration of grooms has further intensified marital transactions, turning marriage into a negotiation driven by economic valuation rather than a relationship based on equality.

Understanding dowry in Bihar, therefore, requires moving beyond legal definitions and examining the deeper structural forces that sustain it.





The practice intersects with caste-based expectations, gendered power relations, aspirations of upward mobility, and persistent consumerism. These intersecting dimensions shape not only dowry demands but also the lived experiences of women who face emotional, economic, and social vulnerabilities within marriage.

The objectives of this research report are to analyze the evolution and persistence of dowry practices in Bihar, to assess the socio-economic and cultural factors that sustain it, and to evaluate the effectiveness of legal and policy interventions aimed at its eradication. The study also seeks to highlight the lived realities of women who experience the consequences of dowry-related violence, coercion, and discrimination. By combining historical analysis with contemporary data and field insights, this research aims to offer a clearer, multidimensional understanding of how dowry functions as both a cultural institution and a form of systemic gender oppression.

In essence, the report situates the dowry system not merely as a private family matter but as a public issue of social justice, human rights, and gender equality. It calls for a comprehensive approach that integrates legal reform, social awareness, education, and community mobilization. Only through a collective transformation of social attitudes and power structures can the practice be dismantled and replaced with values rooted in equality, dignity, and respect for women's autonomy.



## Methodology

This report examines the persistence of dowry in Bihar through a socio-economic and gender lens, drawing upon secondary data, regional case studies, and field testimonies from districts such as Buxar, Gaya, and Siwan. It situates dowry within Bihar's broader social order, where caste hierarchy, migration, and consumerism intersect to sustain patriarchal control.



# Chapter 1

## The Economics of Dowry in Bihar: Tradition, Pressure, and Migration Links

The practice of dowry in South Asia has historical roots in the concept of *stree dhān*, wherein a bride's family traditionally offered gifts or wealth to the bride at the time of marriage. Initially, this practice represented affection and an inheritance substitute for women who were otherwise denied property rights (Sharma, 2014). Over time, however, *stree dhān* evolved into an obligatory social payment, dowry, transforming marriage into a financial transaction rather than a familial alliance. In Bihar, this transformation has been reinforced by caste hierarchy, economic inequality, and migration-driven aspirations (Jha, 2018).

Today, dowry functions as both an expectation and a measure of prestige. The amount given or demanded often determines the perceived respectability of a family within its social network. The inability to meet dowry expectations can lead to humiliation, marital discord, or even violence (Kumar, 2019).

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) underscore the seriousness of this issue: Bihar reported 3,665 dowry-related cases under the *Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961*, and 1,143 dowry deaths in 2023, making it one of the states with the highest incidence of such crimes. These figures reflect not only the persistence of dowry demands but also their lethal consequences.

Despite the *Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961*, the practice remains deeply entrenched. In rural and urban Bihar alike, dowry demands have become institutionalized, shaping the economics of marriage. With increasing male migration to metropolitan areas and Gulf countries, a groom's occupational location now directly influences the dowry rate (Kumar, 2019; Verma, 2021).



Employment abroad is viewed as a marker of status and security, creating a “migration premium” that elevates dowry expectations.

### **Dowry, Tradition, and Social Status**

In Bihar, dowry symbolizes far more than a mere financial exchange; it represents caste pride, family reputation, and social capital (Jha, 2018). Families often regard the ability to provide a substantial dowry as a matter of honour, while a smaller amount can invite gossip, ridicule, or social exclusion. Among upper-caste households, a lavish dowry is linked to prestige; among lower- and middle-caste groups, it becomes a means of aspiring toward upward mobility (Sharma, 2014). In either case, dowry payments sustain patriarchal hierarchies and perpetuate gender inequity.

The amount of dowry demanded is rarely arbitrary. It is shaped by a web of social and economic indicators, which include - groom’s caste, level of education, occupation, income, and even the location of employment. Families frequently stretch their financial capacity, often resorting to high-interest loans or selling property to meet these expectations. This economic pressure not only leads to intergenerational debt but also normalises the treatment of marriage as a market transaction (Singh, 2020).

### **Dowry and Caste Links**

Caste continues to shape how marriage negotiations unfold in Bihar. Despite legal and social reforms, caste endogamy remains a dominant feature, and dowry functions as a mechanism for both maintaining and negotiating caste boundaries (Jha, 2018).

Social expectations, community pressure, and the fear of losing honour or status make inter-caste marriages rare and difficult to sustain.



When such unions occur, dowry amounts can increase dramatically, as families try to “compensate” for the perceived loss of caste status (Jha, 2018). In this way, dowry does more than transfer wealth; it acts as a tool for preserving caste boundaries. It reinforces social divisions, ensuring that caste hierarchies remain stable across generations (Sharma, 2014).

Among castes such as Bhumihars and Brahmins, a high dowry is regarded as a matter of prestige, proof of lineage purity and family honour.

In contrast, among backward and middle-caste groups such as Yadavs and Kurmis, dowry has increasingly become a vehicle for social mobility, a way to imitate elite customs, a phenomenon sociologists describe as ‘Sanskritization’ (Sharma, 2014).

However, this imitation does not merely reproduce hierarchy; it also reconfigures it. Economic shifts, particularly those driven by migration and remittances, have blurred certain traditional caste boundaries. The growing participation of Yadav, Kurmi, and Koeri men in government jobs or overseas employment has elevated their economic status and bargaining power in the ‘marriage market’ (Kumar, 2020; Verma, 2021).

A 2021 survey by the Bihar State Women’s Commission (BSWC) found that dowry expectations among educated OBC families have increased by nearly 30 percent over the past decade, reducing the traditional gap between upper and backward castes (BSWC, 2021). These findings indicate that class standing and occupation are increasingly surpassing ritual caste rank as primary factors in marriage value (Das & Roy, 2020). The groom’s employment, especially in government roles or abroad, now holds more significance than his birth status, transforming dowry from a symbol of caste purity into a marker of economic success.



### **Migration, Remittances, and the Changing Flow of Dowry**

In households with a migrant son, particularly those employed in the Gulf or metropolitan cities, the dowry economy takes on a new shape. The groom's parents still manage marriage negotiations, but the dowry inflow, whether in cash, gold, or goods, often benefits the groom's family far more than the couple themselves.

Studies from Gopalganj and Siwan reveal that a large fraction of the dowry received in migrant households is retained by parents for personal or household consumption, to buy consumer goods, or to host community events (Singh, 2021; Kumar & Mishra, 2019). This pattern reflects how patriarchal authority persists through financial control, with dowry serving as a means for the older generation to convert their son's migration into social and material gain (Verma, 2021).

### **Are Caste Boundaries Softening?**

New economic opportunities are beginning to soften caste boundaries in Bihar's marriage market, though not to the extent of erasing them. For instance, a groom belonging to the OBC community, working in Qatar and remitting ₹25,000 per month, can now command dowries that rival those of upper-caste grooms (Verma, 2021). His family, once rigid about endogamy, might consider even a lower-status caste match if the dowry is sufficiently attractive. Conversely, upper-caste families facing economic stagnation or lacking salaried sons may accept matches with prosperous OBC families if wealth, migration, or education compensate for ritual differences (Kumar, 2020; Jha, 2022).



This trend indicates that economic capital is gradually contesting ritual hierarchy. Marriage alliances increasingly reflect what sociologists call ‘status fluidity’, a reordering of prestige based on income and mobility rather than birth (Gupta, 2021). While caste identity remains important for public respectability, private negotiations often prioritize economic opportunity over social purity.

### **Remittances and the Legitimacy of Caste Hierarchy**

Remittances have further complicated caste legitimacy. The regular inflow of money from migrants often offsets the social stigma historically attached to lower-caste identities. This financial visibility allows them to demand higher dowries or better matches. Thus, remittances serve as both an equalizer and amplifier, reducing the salience of caste in some contexts while strengthening economic hierarchies that cut across caste lines (Verma, 2021).

### **Shift in the Nature of Dowry: From Land to Cash, Gold, and Vehicles**

Across caste and regional lines, the composition of dowry in Bihar has changed dramatically. Traditional agrarian items such as livestock or land have been replaced by modern commodities cash, gold, motorcycles, and cars. Among urban and upper-caste families, cars and property remain symbols of affluence and modernity. Among OBC and middle-income households, motorbikes, gold jewelry, and household electronics dominate (Singh, 2020; Sharma, 2019). Even among economically weaker groups, cash payments are increasingly preferred due to liquidity and social visibility.

This material shift reflects both modernization and consumerism. As sociologist Chakraborty (2022) observes, the new dowry list mirrors a “culture of aspiration” where material possessions represent not only wealth but also moral worth.



In this sense, the dowry market in Bihar has transformed from an agrarian exchange into a cash-driven economy of prestige, uniting rich and poor, upper and lower castes alike under the same logic of conspicuous consumption.

This shift shows how modern consumer culture has blended with old traditions. Dowry has become a way to display not only social status but also modern aspirations cars, electronics, and property, now replacing cattle and utensils (Singh, 2020).



### **The “Gulf Factor” and Migration Premium**

One of the most striking changes in Bihar’s dowry system today is the rise of the “migration premium.” Today, a groom’s value is measured not only by caste or education but increasingly by his place of employment and income.

Men working in Delhi, Mumbai, or most lucratively, in Gulf countries often command significantly higher dowry amounts than those employed locally (Kumar, 2019).





The so-called “Gulf factor” has become particularly influential. Grooms working in countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or the UAE are viewed as emblems of success, despite the nature of their jobs. Families with daughters compete for such matches, often agreeing to dowries that include cars, property, or large sums of cash (Verma, 2021). The hope of a more prosperous and “modern” life drives these negotiations, even when the reality of migrant life may be far less glamorous (Singh, 2020).

However, when dowry expectations are mapped against the actual earnings of Gulf migrants, a clear disparity emerges. Field data from districts like Siwan and Gopalganj show that many Gulf workers earn between ₹18,000 to ₹30,000 per month, often living in shared accommodations and facing unstable job conditions (Kumar, 2020; Jha, 2022). Despite these modest earnings, dowry demands for such grooms can range between ₹10 to ₹15 lakh, far exceeding the groom’s real financial capacity.

Migration within India also affects dowry expectations. Men working in cities like Delhi, Punjab, or Mumbai are seen as better prospects than those employed in local jobs. These grooms may demand motorbikes, home appliances, or significant cash contributions for business ventures (Jha, 2018).

At the top of the dowry ladder are NRIs who are working in countries like the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom. Although rare, such matches can lead to dowry demands in the tens of lakhs (Sharma, 2014).



In these cases, dowry is not just about money, it becomes an investment in global status and family pride.

Migration has thus created a hierarchy within the marriage market: NRIs at the top, followed by Gulf workers, interstate migrants, and finally, local workers. With each step up this ladder, dowry expectations rise. This has intensified the financial strain on families with daughters, who struggle to keep up with these growing demands (Kumar, 2019). The prestige associated with foreign employment, especially in Gulf countries, has thus inflated dowry rates. Families often justify such payments as investments in their daughters' future security, though they frequently lead to heavy debt (Singh, 2020).

Dowry in Bihar is, therefore, an institution where economic aspirations, caste norms, and gender inequalities converge. It continues to define marriage negotiations and perpetuate social stratification. Migration and globalization have redefined its scope but have not diminished its hold. While modernization has changed its form, the underlying patriarchal and economic pressures remain intact. Combating this phenomenon requires not only legal enforcement but also sustained socio-cultural transformation through education, gender sensitization, and community awareness.



# Chapter 2

## Dowry, Gender, & Justice in Bihar: Women's Narratives and the Fight for Reform

The socio-economic and psychological dimensions of marriage in Bihar continue to be shaped by the dowry system. However, its nature has changed from modest exchanges of household goods to explicit demands for money, property, and vehicles, and is now often presented as “gifts to the daughter.” Families frequently claim they are not giving dowry but offering gifts out of affection, masking the persistence of the same transactional expectations. The deeply ingrained practice of gendered inequality continues to persist beneath these new social justifications.

This chapter explores women's lived experiences of dowry, the hidden debt, the financial strain, and the changing trend influenced by education, migration, and emerging social resistance in the state.

### **Women's Experiences and Marriage Negotiations**

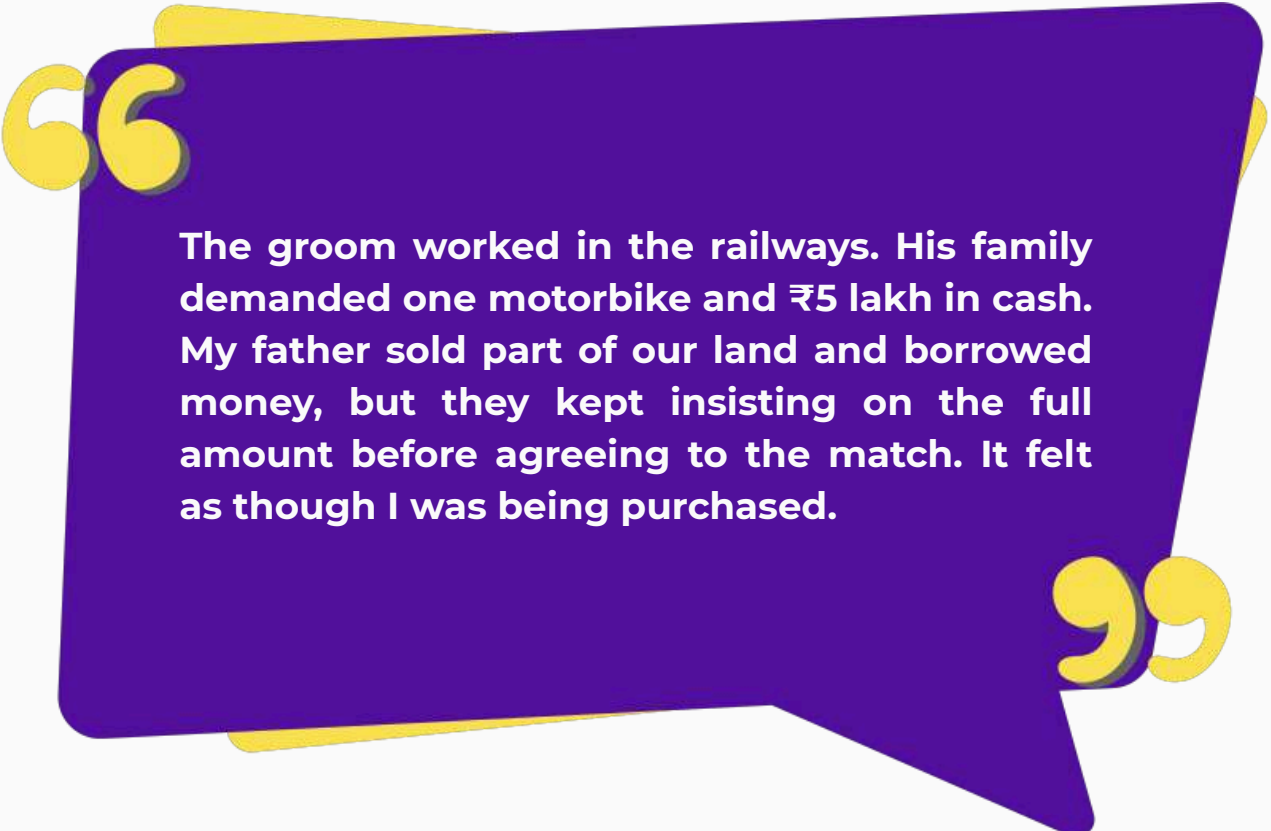
In Bihar, dowry is often perceived not as an unlawful demand but as a customary obligation, while women carry the emotional and psychological toll of these expectations (Sharma, 2018).



Here are a few testimonies of women who have experienced the pressures and consequences of dowry system in Bihar:

**Testimony 1: “The Price of a Railway Job” – Dumraon Region, Buxar District**

A young woman from the Dumraon region of Buxar recounted how her marriage negotiations revolved entirely around money.



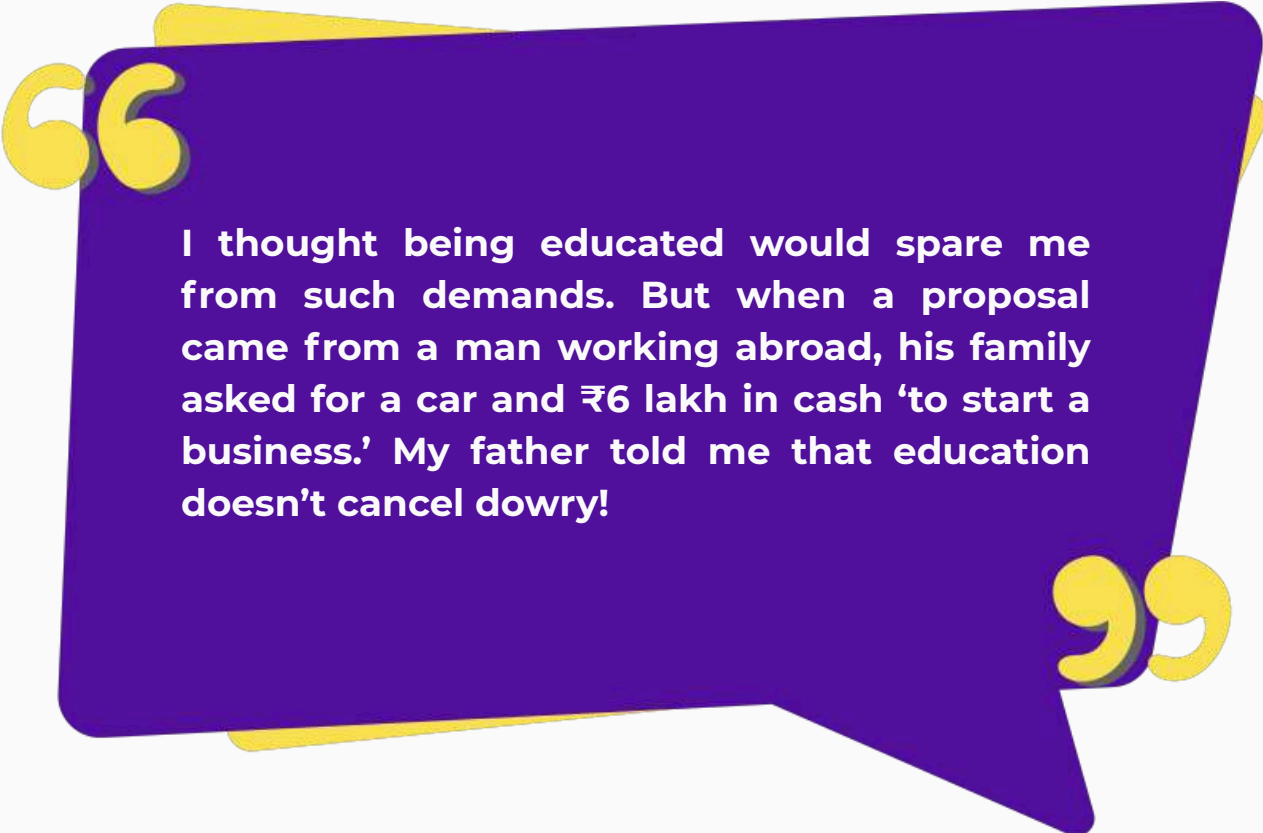
**The groom worked in the railways. His family demanded one motorbike and ₹5 lakh in cash. My father sold part of our land and borrowed money, but they kept insisting on the full amount before agreeing to the match. It felt as though I was being purchased.**

The marriage eventually took place, but her family remained in debt for years. This experience mirrors a widespread pattern in Bihar, where government jobs, especially in the railways, police, or teaching sector, carry a “dowry premium” (Jha, 2022). In western districts like Buxar and Bhojpur, even low-level government employees are treated as high-value grooms because of their job security and pension benefits. As a result, marriage becomes less about companionship and more about transaction.



## Testimony 2: “The Educated Bride” – Gaya District

A postgraduate woman from Gaya shared how her education did little to protect her from dowry expectations.



I thought being educated would spare me from such demands. But when a proposal came from a man working abroad, his family asked for a car and ₹6 lakh in cash ‘to start a business.’ My father told me that education doesn’t cancel dowry!

This account highlights a deep paradox: while education empowers women socially and economically, it does not necessarily liberate them from dowry-related pressures. In fact, in many cases, such pressures increase. Families often expect educated women to marry men of even higher social and economic standing, and such grooms, in turn, demand larger dowries to match their perceived “value” (Gupta & Singh, 2020).

### Gendered Pressures and Dowry Negotiations

Many young men in Bihar find themselves trapped in the social machinery of dowry, compelled to conform to expectations set by both family and community.



Even those who might personally reject the practice often feel pressure to maintain their family's "honour" and social status by accepting dowry as a sign of prestige (Kumar, 2020).

The association of a man's worth with his income, job, or migration status creates an unspoken competition among families, turning marriage into a market for status and validation (Jha, 2022). Men in government jobs or having migrated to the Gulf, for instance, are viewed as assets whose "value" is measured by the dowry they command. This coercion is both emotional as well as cultural. Many young men fear that refusing dowry could be seen as a rejection of tradition or a loss of masculine authority (Sharma, 2018). Consequently, they participate in a system that benefits them materially but confines them morally, creating a quiet tension between personal ethics and collective conformity (Chakraborty, 2022).

For working women, the navigation of dowry expectations is complex and often paradoxical. Employment and education offer them financial independence and a voice, yet these very achievements can heighten dowry demands, as families of grooms perceive educated, working women as capable of contributing more to household status and income (Gupta & Singh, 2020).



While some women use their earnings to negotiate greater agency, refusing matches involving dowry or delaying marriage, many still face emotional manipulation framed as a “family duty” (Das, 2021). Working women in urban areas may experience subtle forms of dowry, such as expectations for expensive gifts or shared financial contributions masked as mutual investment (Chakraborty, 2022).

However, women engaged in collective networks or self-help groups increasingly challenge these norms, asserting that professional success should not come at the cost of personal dignity (Mahila Shakti Kendra, 2022). This evolving resistance shows that while employment alone may not dismantle dowry, it equips women with the social and psychological tools to question it.

### **Hidden Costs: Debt, Family Strain, and Domestic Violence**

Many families in Bihar fulfil the dowry expectation by selling their ancestral land, by mortgaging jewellery, borrowing from moneylenders, or taking informal loans. It often takes years to repay the loans, leading to household instability and widening inequalities (Kumar & Mishra, 2019).

Reports from the districts such as Buxar, Siwan, and Gopalganj indicate that dowry payments are among the leading causes of rural indebtedness. Nearly 40% of small land sales in these areas are linked to marriage expenses and dowry settlements over the past decade (Singh, 2021).

Dowry also leads to family feuds, as the selling of land to fulfil the dowry demand often divides families. Studies in Madhubani and Vaishali districts reveal that approximately one-third of surveyed households reported conflicts or separation after paying or receiving dowry (Kumari & Sinha, 2022).



The psychological burden faced by women after payment of insufficient dowry also deserves attention. Women often experience harassment, violence, dishonour, and even death. In 2022, Bihar accounted for nearly 9% of India's total cases registered under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, which addresses cruelty related to dowry (National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2023). These cases reflect the persistence of dowry as a deep-rooted social evil and the continued glorification of expensive dowry items as symbols of social prestige and enhanced status.

### **Voices of Resistance: Women's Movements and Local Initiatives**

In recent years, education, grassroots mobilisation and activism have begun challenging the dowry system in Bihar. The *Dahej Mukh Bihar* campaign, launched in 2018 by a local organisation with the support of the state government, urged citizens to take a public pledge against dowry (Patna Women's Network, 2019). Through street plays, rallies, and school debates, the campaign sought to redefine dowry not as a cultural tradition but as a social injustice.

NGOs and community groups like *Jagriti Mahila Samiti* and *Mahila Shakti Kendra* have also been instrumental, particularly in districts like Muzaffarpur and Vaishali, by providing legal aid, awareness sessions, and financial literacy workshops (Mahila Shakti Kendra, 2022). These initiatives encourage women to become financially independent and resilient against social pressure.

Digital activism has expanded these efforts. Hashtags like *#StopDahej* and *#DahejMuktBeti* have mobilised youth to share experiences and build online solidarity (Sinha, 2021). However, such campaigns remain largely urban-centric, often failing to penetrate areas where patriarchal authority is more deeply entrenched.



## Legal Awareness and Policy Gaps

The *Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961* is a social legislation that prohibits both giving and taking dowries, but its execution is still lacking strength in Bihar. A large number of people maintain the practice of treating dowry as a social obligation rather than a crime (Government of India, 2021). Police apathy, social pressure, and lack of awareness contribute to underreporting (Das & Sinha, 2020).

There has been a pattern of higher crime rates linked to dowry but lower conviction rates in Bihar. Conviction rates for dowry-related cases in Bihar remain below 35% (NCRB, 2023). This is due to the hesitation of families to file complaints out of fear of social stigma or retaliation. Community elders sometimes mediate such disputes privately to “preserve family honour,” further silencing victims.

To make real real-life impact, policy measures must go beyond legal provisions and challenge entrenched inequalities. Incorporating gender sensitisation into school curricula, promoting dowry-free marriage pledges through Panchayati Raj institutions, and offering economic incentives for non-dowry marriages could be effective interventions (Kumar & Das, 2022). Empowering women through education, employment, and property rights remains central to long-term reform.

A dowry-free Bihar will only emerge from a shift in consciousness, where women are valued for their individuality, not their “price.” Ending dowry means reclaiming dignity, equality, and partnership as the true foundations of marriage.



# Chapter 3

## Policy Review and Possible Solutions

Bihar, one of the economically backward states, continues to report among the highest levels of dowry-related violence in India, accounting for nearly 17% of the country's total cases as per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023). Despite decades of legal prohibition, the dowry system remains deeply embedded in Bihar's social fabric. While the *Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961*, criminalised the giving and taking of dowry, its enforcement has been limited, and the practice continues under the guise of "gifts" or "customary exchanges." These figures highlight a persistent gap between legislation and social practice, requiring a deeper evaluation of both policy design and ground implementation.

Though other government initiatives like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (2015) and the *Domestic Violence Act* (2005) have helped make people aware of the need for empowerment of women, they have not significantly altered marriage market behaviours. Furthermore, the state's economic landscape, shaped by significant male out-migration and restricted female employment opportunities, has intensified dowry pressures rather than reducing them (Kumar & Jha, 2021). This chapter reviews the policy landscape, assesses implementation bottlenecks, and suggests reforms that integrate legal, social, and economic interventions.

### Existing Legal and Policy Frameworks

- **The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961**

The Dowry Prohibition Act was India's first national legislation targeting dowry. It prohibits both giving and taking dowry.



Further, it penalises dowry harassment with imprisonment and fines. However, the Act's impact in Bihar has been limited due to weak enforcement and social acceptance of dowry as a “status symbol” (Sharma, 2019). Local police often treat cases as private family disputes, and conviction rates remain below 20% (NCRB, 2023). Furthermore, the Act's vague definitions, especially regarding voluntary gifts, allow families to disguise dowry payments as traditional exchanges.

- **The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005**

While not exclusively aimed at dowry, the PWDVA (2005) is closely linked to it, as many cases of dowry harassment manifest through domestic violence. The Act expands legal protection beyond physical abuse to include economic, verbal, and emotional violence — forms commonly experienced by women when dowry demands are unmet. It provides for protection officers, shelter homes, and legal remedies to support affected women. Yet, in Bihar, limited institutional capacity undermines its effectiveness. A 2022 report by UN Women India found that only 12% of districts in Bihar have functional protection officers, while most cases are mediated informally, often in favour of the husband's family.



- **State and Central Schemes**

Various welfare schemes implicitly deal with dowry by promoting girls' education and financial independence. For instance, Bihar's *Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana* provides cash incentives for girls completing intermediate and graduation levels, while *Kanya Vivah Yojana* offers financial aid for economically weaker families during marriage. According to the Bihar Women and Child Development Department (2023), these schemes reached over 1.2 million beneficiaries, but studies suggest they often fail to change social attitudes. Many families view such cash transfers as partial funding for dowry rather than as empowerment tools (Sinha, 2023).

At the national level, initiatives like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)* and *Sukanya Samridhi Yojana* have focused on changing perceptions by associating education and savings with gender equality. However, data from NFHS-5 (2019–21) shows that only 12% of women in Bihar participate in household financial decisions, suggesting that deep-seated power dynamics remain unchanged.

### **Implementation and Ground Realities in Bihar**

Legal and welfare measures commonly struggle in Bihar because they do not appropriately engage with local power hierarchies, particularly caste and migration structures. Field interviews and testimonies (as seen in Chapter 2) reveal that even educated families justify dowry as compensation for a groom's earning potential. Migrant grooms, particularly those working in Gulf countries or metropolitan cities, attract "migration premiums," often demanding dowries exceeding ₹10–15 lakh (Kumar, 2020).

Additionally, police and legal systems remain inaccessible to rural women. According to NCRB (2023), there is a 91% pendency rate of dowry-related cases in Bihar.



Many women fear social stigma or economic retaliation if they report harassment. The Bihar State Commission for Women (2022) reported that over 60% of complaints were resolved through family mediation, resulting in convictions or compensation in only a small percentage of cases.

Awareness campaigns, such as *Dahej Mukh Bihar Abhiyan*, launched in 2018, have made symbolic progress by involving schools and local panchayats; however, these efforts are episodic and poorly funded. A 2023 NITI Aayog evaluation found that less than ₹5 crore was allocated annually for dowry awareness programs across Bihar's 38 districts, reflecting the low administrative priority given to the issue.

### **Comparative Perspectives: Lessons from South Asia**

Parallel situations from neighbouring South Asian countries show that policy integration rather than isolated legal bans works better. Bangladesh's Dowry Prohibition Act (1980) is similar to India's but has been supported by community-based monitoring networks and stricter local enforcement mechanisms (Huq, 2020). Nepal, after criminalising dowry in 2009, incorporated anti-dowry pledges into marriage registration laws and public ceremonies, leading to a measurable reduction in reported cases (UNESCAP, 2022). These examples suggest that Bihar could benefit from integrating anti-dowry clauses within local governance frameworks such as panchayat-level marriage registration or self-help group (SHG) monitoring.



## Key Gaps and Challenges

- **Weak Legal Enforcement:** The conviction rate in dowry-related crimes remains below 15% in Bihar (NCRB, 2023). Police underreporting, social pressure, and lengthy judicial processes deter victims from pursuing justice.
- **Cultural Normalization:** Dowry persists as a social expectation, cutting across class and caste. The notion of “status dowry” among middle-income and migrant families sustains the practice despite higher education levels (Singh, 2022).
- **Lack of Institutional Coordination:** There is minimal coordination between law enforcement, social welfare departments, and women’s commissions. Schemes often operate in silos without shared monitoring mechanisms.
- **Limited Economic Alternatives for Women:** With Bihar’s female labor force participation rate at just 8.5% (PLFS, 2022), women remain economically dependent, reinforcing marriage as a financial transaction.
- **Inadequate Awareness and Education:** School-based sensitization on dowry and gender rights remains limited. Rural girls often receive information only after marriage or through crisis intervention.



## Policy Recommendations

- **Strengthen Legal Enforcement and Fast-Track Courts:** Bihar should establish diligent Dowry Prohibition Cells at the district level and initiate fast-track courts for dowry-related offences. Increased police training and gender-sensitisation modules must be compulsory, following the Kerala model of Gender Desks in every police station (UNDP, 2022).
- **Integrate Anti-Dowry Clauses into Local Governance:** Panchayats should play a greater role in validating marriage registrations, ensuring that no-dowry declarations are signed at the time of the ceremony. Linking dowry-free certification to social welfare eligibility, such as access to housing or income schemes, could incentivise compliance.
- **Economic Empowerment through Skill and Credit Linkages:** State schemes like *JEEViKA* (Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project) can be expanded to include marriage and financial literacy modules for women. Linking microcredit access with anti-dowry pledges could foster community accountability.
- **Reform Cash-Based Schemes:** Programs like *Kanya Vivah Yojana* should shift from direct marriage incentives to conditional cash transfers based on girls' education or entrepreneurship. Evidence from Bangladesh's Female Stipend Programme shows that linking education to delayed marriage reduces dowry prevalence (World Bank, 2021).
- **Promote School and Youth-Led Campaigns:** Integrating gender sensitization and anti-dowry education in school curricula can alter social perceptions over time. The *Dahej Mukh Bihar* campaign could be restructured with measurable targets and annual progress audits.



Bihar's dowry problem is not merely a legal challenge but a social and economic one, interwoven with caste hierarchies, migration, and gender inequality. Existing laws like the *Dowry Prohibition Act (1961)* and *PWDVA (2005)* provide a strong legal base but fail to address localised enforcement and attitudinal change.

A shift toward integrated governance linking panchayat monitoring, economic empowerment, and digital transparency can bridge the gap between law and practice. As Bihar continues to urbanise and witness rising female education, the state stands at a critical juncture to redefine marriage not as an economic transaction but as a partnership of equals.



# Key Findings

The study reveals that the dowry system in Bihar remains deeply entrenched, shaped by caste, class, education, and migration. Despite modernization and legal prohibition, dowry continues to function as a social obligation that reinforces gender and economic hierarchies.

The key findings are as follows:

- **From Custom to Compulsion:** Once a voluntary cultural gift (*stree dhān*), dowry has evolved into a compulsory social transaction. The amount demanded is often linked to the groom's occupation, family background, and social status, turning marriage into an economic negotiation rather than a union of equals.
- **Weak Legal Enforcement:** The *Dowry Prohibition Act* (1961) remains poorly implemented due to social acceptance, lack of awareness, and fear of stigma. Informal settlements are often preferred over legal remedies, perpetuating silence and impunity around dowry-related violence.
- **Economic and Social Aspirations:** Consumerism and the desire for upward mobility have transformed dowry into a status symbol. Families view it as an “investment” that enhances prestige, particularly when marrying into households with stable government jobs or urban connections.
- **Caste and Patriarchy:** Dowry practices vary across caste groups but consistently reinforce patriarchal control. Among upper castes, it signifies honour and prestige, while among Dalit and backward communities, it acts as a means to imitate upper-caste norms—thus perpetuating inequality across social layers.



- **Education and the Paradox of Progress:** Education, expected to empower individuals, has ironically intensified dowry expectations. A groom's degree or employment, especially in government service, raises his "value" in the marriage market. While women's education has improved, it has not dismantled patriarchal norms; instead, it often increases family pressure to provide higher dowries to secure "educated" alliances.
- **Migration and Market Value:** Migration, both domestic and international, has reshaped dowry dynamics. Men working in cities or abroad are perceived as financially superior, driving up dowry amounts. This "migrant groom premium" has commercialized marriage further, intertwining economic mobility with gender subordination.
- **Gendered Violence and Institutional Gaps:** Dowry-related harassment, emotional abuse, and deaths remain widespread. Weak institutional support and limited awareness reduce women's access to justice. Civil society initiatives have made progress, yet resource limitations hinder sustained impact.

The findings show that dowry in Bihar persists not due to ignorance, but because education, migration, and modernization have been absorbed into patriarchal structures instead of dismantling them. Legal reforms alone are insufficient when social acceptance and status anxiety continue to normalize economic exploitation. This creates a need for broader social transformation, one rooted in gender equality, education reform, and community-based awareness, which forms the central argument of the report's conclusion.



# Conclusion

The persistence of the dowry system in Bihar reflects the broader contradictions of Indian modernity where legal progress coexists with entrenched social conservatism. Despite the presence of legal safeguards and feminist activism, dowry continues to thrive as a normalized cultural expectation, shaping both marriage and gender relations.

The study concludes that tackling dowry requires more than legal reform; it demands a transformation in social attitudes and economic structures. Education, financial independence, and gender-sensitive community programs must be integrated into policy implementation. Moreover, strengthening institutional accountability through police reforms, fast-track courts, and social monitoring can help reduce impunity.

Ultimately, the dowry system in Bihar is not merely a relic of the past but a reflection of contemporary inequalities. The way forward lies in reimagining social practices through feminist perspectives, fostering awareness among youth, and promoting equitable development that empowers women to claim autonomy and dignity in both private and public life.



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