

Implications of bride price on domestic violence and reproductive health in Wakiso District, Uganda

Dan K. Kaye¹, Florence Mirembe¹, Anna Mia Ekstrom², Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo³, Annika Johansson²

¹Makerere University Medical School, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology,

²Department of Public Health Sciences, Karolinska Institute, IHCAR, Sweden,

³Makerere University, Department of Women and Gender Studies, P.O. Box 7062, Kampala Uganda

Abstract

Objective: Bride price payment is a gender issue with implications on gender relations in different socio-cultural contexts. It also impacts Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. In a qualitative study on the perceptions of domestic violence in Wakiso district, payment of bride price emerged as one of the key factors associated with domestic violence. The study explored experiences, motivations, meanings, consequences and reproductive health implications of bride price payment in Wakiso district Uganda.

Methods: 10 single-sex focus group discussions and 14 in-depth interviews were conducted in Wakiso and Nangabo sub-counties, Wakiso district from July 2003 through March 2004. Data was analyzed by thematic content analysis, assisted by Easy Text software for data retrieval.

Findings: Participants perceived bride price as indicating that a woman was 'bought' into the man's household, which reduced her household decision-making roles. It limited women's independence and perpetuated unequal gender power relations, especially regarding health-seeking behaviour.

Conclusion: Bride price payment is a contextual factor that the community in Wakiso District, Uganda, perceived as associated with domestic violence, with serious sexual and reproductive health implications.

Key words: Domestic violence; Reproductive Health; Bride price payment; Uganda.

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Introduction

Historically, gift exchange has been an important integral part of marriage rites and ceremonies in African culture. It involves exchange of materials or money from the man's to the woman's household, but practices differ between communities. In most, it is men folk who participate in discussions that determine what, how much and how such a payment is made. Domestic violence is common in Uganda, a hospital-based study among pregnant women³ showed a prevalence of 57%, but only a few studies have explored the context in which domestic violence occurs in Uganda.^{1,2} Factors that influence a culture of violence were classified by Barzellato⁴ into originating, promoting and facilitating factors. Accordingly, violence originates from breakdown of social integration mechanisms, followed by weakening of the family's role in socializing individuals and finally promoted by absence of mechanisms for peaceful resolution of conflict⁴.

Heise⁵ proposed a framework for analyzing determinants of domestic violence as the interplay of personal, situational and socio-cultural factors. From this model⁵, violence results from interaction of factors at

different levels of the social environment, ranging from biological/personal factors, relationship factors and formal/informal institutions in which the relationship occurs. Bride price payment may be one of the factors that apply in this ecological model.

Bride price payment has implications on gender relations, values, expectations and roles. In her ethnographic studies in Kiisi District in Kenya, Silberschmidt⁶ conceptualized violence as a problem of transition from traditional to modern society. She found that men seemed to have lost identity and their position was weakened by altered gender relations following modernization, resulting into gender antagonism regarding perceived roles.

In a qualitative study carried out by us on perceptions and experiences of domestic violence in Wakiso district, payment of bride price emerged as one of the factors associated with domestic violence. Bride price payment has implications on gender relations in different socio-cultural contexts and impacts Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. The objective of this study was to explore perceptions of bride price payment and implications on reproductive health in Wakiso district, Uganda. Ethical clearance to carry out the study was obtained from Makerere University Ethics and Research Committee, Karolinska Institute Ethics Committee, local authorities in Wakiso district and Uganda National Council of Science and Technology. Both community and individual participants' informed consent were obtained.

Correspondence author:

Dan Kaye
Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
Makerere University Medical School
P.O. Box 7072,
Kampala, Uganda
Phone 256-41-533451; 256-41-534361
E-mail:dankkaye@yahoo.com

Methods

Wakiso district in central Uganda surrounds the capital city, Kampala. It has areas with markedly different socio-economic development, ranging from peri-urban suburbs to typically rural areas. Nangabo and Nabweru sub-counties were the setting of this study. The population is heterogeneous,² the majority are Baganda, a Bantu-speaking group, though most inhabitants understand or speak Luganda, a Bantu language dialect. The smallest administrative unit in the district, the Local Council 1, has nine positions of which one is reserved for women to handle family and gender issues.

Ten single-sex focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted as follows: 3 and 2 with men and women aged 16-30 and above 30 years respectively in 4 purposively-selected parishes (peri-urban and rural). Participants were identified by the first author assisted by civic leaders from different villages per parish. Purposive maximum variation) sampling provided diversity regarding ages, marital status and socio-economic background of participants, and subsequently diverse views and opinions. The first author moderated most discussions, while research assistants (both mid-wives) acted as note-takers. In 4 FGDs, (2 with men and women separately) the above roles were reversed. From suggestions and views that emerged from the FGDs, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 purposively-selected people who represent 'gate keepers' (people identified by the communities as key sources of information). These included civic leaders, women local council members, religious leaders, heads of Non-government Organizations and health workers. FGDs were conducted in Luganda while in-depth interviews were conducted in either English or Luganda. All interviews and FGDs were tape recorded. The information was transcribed before translation into English. Field notes were utilized to ascribe quotations. Analysis was by thematic content analysis employing phenomenological and hermeneutical perspectives. Systematic comparison of emerging codes and categories across texts as described by Corbin⁷ and Creswell⁸ was done, using the Easy Text (EZ) software for data retrieval.

Results

Though there were no marked differences in views expressed by participants from rural compared to peri-urban areas, perceptions and interpretations varied somehow with sex and age-group. Probed about motivations for bride price payment, respondents identified this as need for social security and increased status among peers and community members. The amount of money or material gifts exchanged and the value attached to them by the community were symbolic of what the girl is worth. Gift exchange increases prestige of the couple and their respective families, as exemplified by the following quotation from one FGD:

—men who can provide gifts or bride price are likely to

be more determined to marry or be marriageable (and) are more serious about marriage' (Young married woman)

For women, having been paid for enhances their social status, especially where they favor the relationship. For some men and the majority of women across all ages, bride price payment was viewed as an indication that those who pay it are more likely to sustain the marital relationship. Rich men and those who could afford a high bride price were perceived as more eligible as marital partners, as one respondent put it:

'Many women want to go with older partners who provide material benefits. However, many go for young or main boyfriends with whom they maintain a more serious relationship with intention of later marriage, if they can afford it (bride price payment)' (FGD, old woman)

Bride price payment was found acceptable to many older women and perceived as necessary by older men. For the men, it symbolizes the new bond between families, and indicates a form of ownership or control over the woman. Men justified arguing that payment for sexual favors exists at several levels of sexual relationships, albeit in an indirect way. This was illustrated by one respondent:

'Some form of gift or monetary exchange is necessary at the beginning of the relationship "to cement" the relationship'. (Old man, FGD)

Though participants perceived some form of payment was common, some younger participants perceived this unacceptable. One respondent, a traditional midwife, referred to it as '*commodification of sex.*' Men and women were divided about usefulness of bride wealth during marriage rites in the current social and economic context. The women were of the view that bride price takes away their rights and reduces them to objects for sale, whose value is equivalent to money or material items. To acquire wealth from bride price, participants noted that girls are forced to marry at a young age, and many are forced to leave school for marriage. Such girls may develop low self-esteem and lack knowledge about sexuality, which is often taught during formal education.

The young participants in the FGDs were divided regarding relevance of bride price payment in modern times and some suggested its abolition, while the consensus among the older people was that it should be retained. Young women's view is illustrated by one respondent:

'It has lost value. ... women are forced to marry at young age because (they) want cows. Those who cannot afford to pay may not marry or may just elope. How do you equate a woman to cows, goats or money? It does not matter even if the woman is educated, her value is reduced to cows or goats.'

In contrast, reasons expressed by young men as to why bride price should be abolished were that presently, it is expensive and unaffordable. Some young participants, however, found bride price payment necessary since what was paid to the men's family was used by men as bride price (when the latter wanted to marry).

On perceived implications, girls may be forced to marry at an early age in order to get bride wealth for unmarried men in a given family with girls. Their brothers then get what to pay for their wives. Secondly, many men often perceived themselves as 'superior to the woman' because they (or their families) paid bride

price to bring the woman 'into the man's household'. Older men expressed that they felt compelled to exercise their authority in the home with the justification they paid bride price, a view common among young men too. Where they sensed a real or imaginary threat to their authority, men were said to resort violence, as exemplified by two key informants:

'Men are dominant in decision-making. The woman has no power for anything. Where the man is suspicious or insecure, domestic violence is common. This is mainly where the man is unemployed or the woman has higher education and social status. ... He expects the woman to show him respect as the village women should. He may even refuse her from working outside home. Such women may be assaulted.... I am not sure whether people who have grown in the town experience the same. (Young woman, NGO)

'Women lack power to make decisions in the home. The culture does not allow them to stand up to the men. The laws are also (support)men, especially over sexual matters. If (women) want to leave, they pay back the bride price first.' (Local Council chairman)

Thirdly, women in many families were dependent on economic support from men. Since the perception was that women were 'bought', the 'buyers' controlled all financial and social resources (the wife inclusive). This reduced the woman's decision-making, enhancing gender power imbalances. Such women feared leaving an abusive relationship as the man may demand repayment of bride price by her family.

'The girl isdependent on the spouse, more so if she marries a much older or uneducated man. She can not take independent positions. Such men are even more jealous and possessive. Such women will be subject to domestic violence.' (Local Council leader, woman)

Bride price payment was perceived to curtail women's decision-making about health. Having no economic power, women were perceived to be at a disadvantage in negotiating sexual relations. This is illustrated from the interview with a midwife:

'Some women did not want to have sex with the spouses, yet the men demanded for it. But since many may not want (sex) yet their men want, they have nothing to do but accept, or else the men will force them.(men) they may not accept any reasons after all, they think it is their right—at any time.'

Similar sentiments were expressed by other participants. Having paid bride price is perceived by some men as implying absolute rights over the woman. This affects negotiation of use of contraceptives or preventive measures for sexually transmitted infection, as reported by one respondent:

'Men and women don't have equal power to decide. Men have overall power after paying for the wife. This is worse where the men are violent to spouses. If the woman insists on condom use, (this) raises suspicion of sexually transmitted infections. They (women) can never decide on their own, even in situations where their health is at risk. Often they can't report injuries

they suffer. They can miscarry or even die (of injuries)'. (Local Council Chairman)

Consequent to non-negotiation, high fertility rates, low contraceptive use rates and poor health of women were perceived to be related to bride price payment. This sentiment is illustrated by one elderly man in FGD:

'Early marriage, poverty and frequent pregnancies are common, as the men may not allow women to use contraceptives suspecting that they may end up being promiscuous. They (men) get insecure if women start using contraceptives, especially for women who have some work outside the home.'

Consequently, bride price payment and domestic violence were perceived to have some connection, whose basis was gender inequality. When probed whether bride price payment, domestic violence and reproductive ill-health were related, respondent thought so, as illustrated by an abstract from the interview with one midwife:

'Yes, some men think that contraceptives will make women barren, so they beat up women who use them. Others believe contraceptives make women wild, that they may either get more interest in sex, or become more 'carefree' as they know they will not conceive. Often, they are younger (than men). Many women 'hide' any evidence that they are using them (contraceptives). In case they get problems, they don't let their husbands know. They just stop using (them), conceive and later may get rid of the pregnancy. At times you sit both (man and woman) together, but they fail to agree on what methods to use, or even (using) any methods. Some (couples) agree for the sake, but later change their mind, and the man always has the final say.'

Discussion

The major finding of the study is that respondents perceived a strong connection between bride price payment and domestic violence, age differentials between spouses, early marriage, poor sex negotiation, contraceptive non-use, high fertility, unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion. Bride price payment was perceived to worsen existing gender inequalities and inequities, especially regarding reproductive health decision-making. In different societies, the importance of bride price is dependent on what form it takes, when is it paid (stage of the woman's life cycle), how payment is made (lump sum or installments), whether there are situations for repayment, and community perceptions of implications for such repayment.

Bride price as a gender issue affects the broad context of people's lives as it influences what roles are considered appropriate. Where bride price payment reduces the power and prestige of the woman, the perception that the woman was paid for, belongs to the man and has less household decision-making power is manifestation, basis or consequence of gender inequality. Repayment of bride-price creates divorce restrictions. Fear of stigma, social vulnerability and lack of financial independence may keep women in such relationships.⁹ Landenburger¹⁰ describes a complex process of coping with violence occurring in 4 stages. In the binding stage, there is rationalization or denial, where women focus on the positive aspects of the relationship. In the enduring stage, there is shift in perception: cover up, self blame and behaviour modification. In the disengagement stage, there is help seeking, while the recovery stage is marked by leaving. Gender inequality

maintains the entrapment and complex coping process.¹⁰

Analysis of bride price (as a contextual factor for domestic violence) is in agreement with Levinson¹¹ who identified four factors consistently related to violence. These are gender economic inequality, male dominance, divorce restrictions and use of violence for conflict resolution. Payment of bride price in many cultural contexts relates to the above factors through perpetuating economic inequality. Secondly, it perpetuates the culture of male dominance in prestige, power and decision-making. Thirdly, repaying bride price on separation creates divorce restrictions, is costly and is socially stigmatizing. While findings don't imply that bride price payment is the root of gender inequality, they indicate its importance as a contextual factor for gender inequality, domestic violence and reproductive ill-health in Wakiso district, Uganda.

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