

Bride-Price, Poverty and Domestic Violence in Uganda

A British Academy Larger Research Grant has supported the first-ever research on how 'bride-price' may link to poverty and domestic violence in Uganda. Professor Gill Hague and Dr Ravi K. Thiara explain how this innovative research was carried out, and how it is helping to change some traditional attitudes.

THE EXCHANGE OF GOODS and the giving of dowry (passing in either direction) are intrinsic to marriage rites across the world. On a simple level, for example, they include the giving of diamond engagement rings.

Another example, from many African countries and elsewhere, is the practice of 'bride-price' or 'bride-wealth'. Typically in rural Uganda this consists of a contract where cattle (or other animals) or money are paid by the groom to the bride's family in exchange for the bride.

The pioneering research was undertaken from 2008 to 2009 through an international collaboration. On the one part there was MIFUMI, an NGO and women's rights agency based in Uganda working on domestic violence and poverty alleviation. On the other there were two UK research groups – the Centre for the Study of Safety and Well-being, University of Warwick, and the then Violence Against Women Research Group (now the Centre for Gender and Violence Research), University of Bristol.

The research aimed to investigate the impacts of bride-price, and to explore possible inter-relationships between the practice and both poverty and domestic violence. It was conducted in Eastern Uganda, where bride-price takes specific traditional forms, in various sub-counties in the four Districts of Tororo, Mbale, Palisa and Budaka.

Research approach used

The approach was built on the belief that research in rural African contexts cannot be imposed, but should be developed in collaboration with local people. We used a participatory action research approach, designed to feed into

social change in a dynamic process through focused cycles of planning, action and reflection.

A key part of this approach was the recruitment of 13 community-based researchers from local rural areas. They engaged in a participatory and collaborative training process with the UK researchers, in which we designed the research tools and methods together. A total of 257 interviews across tribes and clans in Eastern Uganda were conducted in four data-sets by the local and UK researchers:

- (1) women and men with experience of bride-price ($n=180$);
- (2) women with experience of domestic violence ($n=40$);
- (3) widows ($n=10$); and
- (4) key duty-bearers, professionals and experts ($n=27$). This last set included cultural leaders (e.g. the King and Prime Minister of the principal local tribe), religious leaders from village pastors to the archbishops, the police, the human rights commission, and local and national political duty-bearers.

After analysing the data, we undertook a participatory process of critical reflection with the local researchers and MIFUMI, and together developed collaborative strategies for action at both the national and the local level; this led to two 'round-table' events and various feedback meetings. The research is currently contributing to national, pan-African and global debates on bride-price. And it has developed skills and capacity in rural Uganda at the local level, through an action-



Figure 1. Women in Uganda take a stand to 'Say No to Violence against Women and Children'. Photo: MIFUMI

oriented dissemination plan. This includes the development and delivery of a community-sensitisation training model, which created a pool of local trainers, and will feed into a collaboratively developed community-sensitisation and training programme across Districts in Eastern Uganda.

Historical context and change

In rural communities more traditional bride-price practices remain common and tend to be accepted as the cultural norm. Various respondents confirmed the importance of considering the historical context and past value of bride-price as an ancient practice which aided communities and promoted social cohesiveness and harmony. However, it was suggested that, in recent times, bride-price had become a commercialised practice, particularly in richer or professional urban communities: money and goods are more commonly given in the form of non-refundable gifts. As modernisation has impacts on social customs, so the traditional value of bride-price is now less clear.

Modern-day bride-price was considered by the vast majority of informants to cement gender inequality, giving women little power, and possibly turning them into 'commodities' to be passed from family to family, leading to entrenched inequality between husbands and wives.

Given its longstanding nature, and despite differing systems of bride-price in the country, the payment of bride-price has become a way of life, often normalised in people's minds and difficult to challenge or change. It acts as a 'certificate' of customary marriage. Reform would need another method of recognising such marriages: this is being partially addressed in the new Bridal Gifts Ordinance in Tororo, which bans bride-price in its present form and suggests it could instead be a modest gift. Reform would also need to be seen as not disrespectful to traditional ways of life. Despite this, support for reform of bride-price was almost unanimous in this study.

Positive and negative impacts of bride-price

The study assessed both the positive and negative impacts of the practice. Overall, from all the data-sets, 65 per cent of interviewees suggested that bride-price had mainly negative impacts, and almost 35 per cent that there were both negative and positive impacts. Those suggesting mainly positive impacts were less than 1 per cent.

Positive impacts included bonding the couple and the families together, giving worth and importance to the bride, and offering a

'thank you' to the bride's family. Bride-price was also seen to validate marriages and promote a woman's 'official' status as a wife and as a 'worthy' woman. Indeed, women may feel – and be viewed as – worthless, valueless and a failure if bride-price is *not* paid.

The negative impacts of bride-price were many. Examples included wives being regarded as property, and then being abused if they were seen as not being 'good value' or not performing their traditional duties.

Bride-price can lead to the 'selling' of human beings because the family needs wealth. Young girls can be de-prived of education as parents need the bride-price, and so early or forced marriage can occur. If a wife leaves without bride-price being paid back, her children may be taken away or withheld by her husband's relatives. Women's parents are unlikely to allow them to return on marriage breakdown since they cannot repay the bride-price. Women are then forced to stay in, or



Figure 2. *The community mobilises: action research as a catalyst for change. Photo: MIFUMI.*

return, to violent marriages. If her husband dies, a widow may be forced to leave the marital home and become destitute since bride-price was paid for her. The practice was shown in the inter-views to result in landlessness and homelessness for many women.

For men there are also difficult issues. Young men may not be able to marry, or may have to borrow substantially so that the married couple start off in impoverishment and debt. It may make having children impossible, as young people are entrenched in poverty, holding back development and community life. Very young brothers may be left to pay back bride-price for a sister leaving her husband.

Are bride-price and domestic violence connected?

The vast majority of interviewees in all the data-sets believed that there was a strong connection between bride-price and domestic violence, though this connection was acknowledged to be a complex one, since

domestic violence is a much broader social problem. Bride-price was recognised as a contributing factor: it can lead to men feeling that, since they have 'paid for' their wives, they have a right to dominate and control them, including through the use of violence.

Are bride-price and poverty connected?

Approximately 83 per cent of interviewees believed there was a connection between poverty and bride-price (with 12 per cent believing there was not), although the connection was recognised as complex. Wealth tends to be transferred to older, more established community members (the bride's parents) at a key time in young people's lives. Instead of a 'levelling out' effect through the transfer of wealth around a community, younger people can be left impoverished or destitute.

Difficulties created by bride-price are often issues of poverty. In poor communities people struggle for survival, and families may depend critically on the receipt of bride-price. People may therefore be turned against each other through the struggle to survive and to compete for scant resources. For example, parents may be forced to refuse to take separated daughters back because they cannot repay the cows and goats given, and brothers may drive a widow away unless the bride-price is returned, resulting in destitution and malnutrition.

Interviewees believed the overall problem to be that of entrenched poverty, but bride-price was seen as a factor in increasing it.

Are there connections with HIV infection?

A variety of ways in which bride-price may contribute to increased HIV infection were identified in the study. For example, older (undeclared or unknown) HIV-positive men may be able to attract a young wife by paying a good bride-price to her parents. Or women could be forced to stay with unfaithful husbands because of bride-price and then become infected by them.

Reform

The vast majority of informants believed that bride-price should be reformed or abolished (88 per cent of the 'members of the public' interviewees, and 98 per cent of 'duty-bearer' interviewees).



The mechanisms through which such reform could be carried out were suggested as follows:

- to make bride-price a gift of modest size, voluntarily given (and not an expectation);
- to make bride-price non-refundable;
- to outlaw the validation of customary marriage by the payment of bride-price, and to replace it with another simple form of validation;
- to remove official and religious expectations that bride-price must be paid.

Policy and legislation need to be developed by the national Government of Uganda. As an initial step, the research has been used to support the current Constitutional Petition to the Constitutional Court to make bride-price unconstitutional.

At the local level, strategies and guidelines have been developed to address violations, including the further implementation of the Tororo District Bridal Gifts Ordinance, the first of its kind. The 'round-tables' resulted in the setting-up of a 'first-ever' high-level local Committee to implement the Ordinance. The provision of advocacy and support services for those affected has been highlighted. And the development of a community-sensitisation model is facilitating grassroots work and training on bride-price, which in turn will enable the collaborative development of strategies of action in local communities. This programme of community education will also include community radio broadcasts, leaflets and sensitisation meetings.

Although progress may be slow in effecting the reforms highlighted, some have already taken place, and it is hoped that this research will help to inform and act as a catalyst for future action and change, not only across Uganda, but also in other parts of Africa.

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The full final report on 'Bride-Price, Poverty and Domestic Violence in Uganda' can be found via www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/news/2009/39.html

Figure 3. Women from Mifumi village train to support survivors of domestic violence. Photo: Kate Barker.