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Dowries blamed for Ugandan wife beatings

The Ugandan practice of wedding dowries - known as the bride price - is to blame for much of the country's domestic violence, experts say.

A grass-roots women's organisation, Mifumi, has been leading the campaign in Uganda for the abolition of the practice where a man pays his future wife's family for her hand in marriage.

Should the marriage end, the wife is expected to refund the bride price - often paid in livestock. But as women tend to have less wealth than their husbands, many are trapped, advocates say.



Bride price is defended as a traditional practice

"Because women are paid for with the bride price, it is like they are bought," Dr Dan Kaye, a gynaecologist and student of women's studies at Makerere University, told BBC World Service's Outlook programme.

"So depending on where they go, they don't have much power."

Dr Kaye explained that this meant they had no decision-making ability, and no option to do anything to which their partner did not consent.

"For contraception, for immunisation, even going out of the home to seek aid if they have a medical problem, they need permission," he said.

"This permission they don't have, because they were bought."

'Bonded'

Mifumi director Atuki Turner said the groom was able to "treat or mistreat" his wife as he wanted because the bride price was a contract between him and his wife's father.

"If the woman is in an abusive relationship, she cannot leave because she is bonded to that marriage," she said.

"If she want to leave, she must return the cows.

“ It wasn't always a commercial issue - it used to have values attached to it ”

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"You need to live in a rural area with women to see them beaten, hurt, humiliated, burnt - and all in the name of the cow. Because when men fight and beat women in our villages, they say 'I am beating my cow'. That is what we are fighting against."

Dr Sylvia Tamale,
Makerere University's women'
studies department

Bride price is defended as a traditional practice in Uganda. Dr Sylvia Tamale, of Makerere University's women's studies department, said it was important to look at its "historical context".

"We should realise that it wasn't always a commercial issue, as it is today," she stressed.

"It used to have values attached to it, traditionally."

But she acknowledged there was now a strong link between bride price and domestic violence.

"What you have is something completely different - and yes, I believe it contributes to women's violence, it contributes to the bondage of women in very abusive relationships," she said.

"Therefore I think it should go."

'Violent mentality'

Beatrice Appolot, a regional councillor, described her experience of surviving a horrific attack by her husband.

"On that night, my husband beat me badly, stabbed my body all over, including my private parts," she said.

“ If you bring me a car, I will always look at that car and think 'this is my daughter, she is doing well elsewhere' ”

"I became unconscious. I was taken to hospital and stayed for four months."

Paul Kabile
Kampala

However, she added that getting rid of bride price would not in itself end domestic violence in Uganda.

"African men - especially Ugandan men - have the mentality of being violent to their spouses," she said.


"Bride price alone may not solve the problem."

Meanwhile, on the streets of Kampala, not all are keen to see the end of bride price.

"Bride price is gesture of appreciation that I have taken your daughter," said one man, Paul Kabile.

"If I'm a parent and my daughter has been taken, I would want something.

"Therefore if you bring me a car, I will always look at that car and think 'this is my daughter, she is doing well elsewhere'."

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