



IMAGENU

Policy Brief

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Bridewealth in Northern and Eastern Uganda: Transformations of generosity between partners and generations

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Executive summary

Bridewealth – in different forms of gifts and services – constitutes social and economic exchange and cohesion between families and generations that can serve to express, confirm and acknowledge partners' and generations' mutual respect. Yet, bridewealth is sometimes (mis)conceived as 'payment'. Consequently, amounts of bridewealth have escalated over time and many now cannot 'afford' marriage. A Marriage Bill has been formulated but not yet been passed, due to political disagreements. Bridewealth in public debates is often considered from male and older generations' perspectives and seldom from women's and children's. Families, cultural leaders and politicians all have roles to play in creating transformations. Parents can lower their expectations and use expressions such as 'gifts' rather than 'payment', and cultural leaders and politicians can suggest ceilings on bridewealth. Refund of bridewealth in case of divorce is prohibited, and we recommend further enforcement of this prohibition.

Introduction

This brief addresses practices of bridewealth and is aimed at families, cultural, religious leaders and politicians. It is based on studies between 2019 and 2023 as part of the IMAGENU – Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda – a research project funded by DANIDA and carried out by researchers from Gulu, Copenhagen and Aarhus Universities.

Marriage rates are declining, which creates vulnerabilities for children and older generations. One reason for this decline and insecurity is rising expectations of and demands for bridewealth. Bridewealth is regarded as legitimising a marriage by a gift from the groom and his family showing respect and gratitude for the bride and her family. Yet expectations of bridewealth have escalated

The Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies (IPSS), Gulu University is implementing the Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda (IMAGENU) project, a four-year research collaboration bringing together researchers from Gulu University (Uganda), Aarhus University and University of Copenhagen in Denmark. This project is supported by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs through Danida Fellowship Centre in Denmark and aims to build research capacity in universities between the global North and South.



over time, and many perceive it as a payment for marriage. This causes problems, when young men are unable to raise the funds; there are also conflicts over ‘refunds’ in cases of divorce. As a consequence of declining marriages and bridewealth exchanges, relationships between partners, children and the partners’ parents have become more uncertain but also more flexible. We have examined the gendered and generational dynamics related to transformations in bridewealth practices.

Background

Exchange of bridewealth - often called dowry and brideprice - varies across ethnic groups, class and rural-urban contexts. In most parts, it involves animals, items, and money. In the Ik community bridewealth is mainly provided as brideservice where the groom works for parents-in-law.

In the Acholi, Langi and Teso, bridewealth is given as an appreciation to the bride’s kin, and it is negotiated. Expectations to bridewealth are often high. Some communities have marriage by-laws that put a ceiling to the amount, but they are seldom followed. Negotiation of bridewealth has changed and now many parents prefer money rather than animals. Investment in girl child schooling has led parents to demand exorbitant bridewealth. This is said to be responsible for the decline in marriages, increase in violence and divorce. More women are getting educated and increasingly have their own resources which destabilizes practices of “marriage as exchange.”

In cases of divorce families would historically expect the bridewealth to be given back to the husband’s family. Since 2015, this has been illegal, but the threat of having to refund bridewealth still lingers on. The parliament has attempted to pass a bill to regulate issues around marriage, bridewealth, inheritance and separation/divorce, but no agreement has been reached yet. The delay resides partly in political disagreements about bridewealth that has been contested as seeing women as “economic objects” that can be traded vs seeing women as “economic actors” who can claim property and land in cases of divorce and inheritance. Disagreements also concern polygyny, legalising cohabitation and giving cohabiting partners property rights, which some religious, cultural and political leaders think will undermine the institution of marriage. On the other side, Uganda Women’s Parliamentary Association emphasize the need to modernize rules and regulations around marriage.

Methodology

We have conducted studies of marriage and bridewealth practices in Northern and Eastern Uganda. This brief refers mainly to studies in Lira, Gulu, Tororo, and Kaabong districts, where we used qualitative methods including interviews, participant-observation and Focus Group Discussions. We interviewed three generations in each place to learn about differences and perspectives. In Lira district we carried out 45 interviews and 2 FGDs, in Gulu district 58 interviews and 2 FGDs, in Tororo district 31 interviews and 2 FGDs, and in Kaabong district, Ik County 31 interviews and 4 FGDs and made a film about brideservice with the Ik.

Findings

Our findings differ across the regions and ethnic groups mainly in terms of kinds and expectations to bridewealth and the system of brideservice in Ik county. However, across the studies it was clear that different generations’ perspectives matter, as highlighted in the table next page: →



PROS AND CONS IN RELATION TO BRIDEWEALTH

Generational group	Pros	Cons
Young men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ A sign of maturity ✓ Respect from the clan and the community ✓ Appreciation of your wife ✓ Confirms relationship with in-laws ✓ Provides security in marriage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Exploitative when amount demanded is too high × Tension and conflicts with wife and in-laws × Wife can be removed when you cannot pay × The in-laws expect more even after marriage
Young women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provides security in marriage ✓ You command authority in the family and the clan ✓ You gain respect from your family and the matrimonial family ✓ The basis for asset inheritance including land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × In-laws equate bridewealth to purchase and you can be exploited by those who have ‘bought’ you × Can bind you in a violent marriage because your family cannot refund × Your family can remove you if no payment
Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Provides children with identity and filiation to paternal kin ✓ Children have stronger claim for support and inheritance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × In case of marriage dissolution, the children remain the father’s property × If no bridewealth paid, father’s family has fewer responsibilities × children lose rights to support and a secure future when bridewealth issues are not solved

Women's Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The husband and in-laws show respect for the bride's family ✓ Provides social cohesion between the two families ✓ Provides a sense of security in old age, when son-in-law will continue to help ✓ Perceived as a source of income in appreciation of a daughter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Perceive the loss of a daughter as loss of labour × Your daughter can be mistreated because of bridewealth given × The brides' parents perceive it as a source of income × May prevent daughter from divorcing even if marriage is violent because they have to refund the bridewealth
Man's Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ A sense of pride that they and their son are able to provide for a daughter-in-law ✓ An appreciated daughter-in-law provides reliable labour to the groom's family ✓ Provides a sense of security in old age, when daughter-in-law feels appreciated and will continue to help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Loss of assets to the groom's family × Daughter-in-law may escape if the bridewealth is not 'paid' × Daughter in-law may kidnap the children as 'hostages' if bridewealth is not 'paid' × The family and clan lose custody of the children over unpaid bridewealth

The differences between the gender and generation perspectives highlight that bridewealth in public debates is mainly considered from male and older generations' perspectives and seldom from women's and children's perspectives. Bridewealth has implications for everyone in society - not just the bride, groom and parents, but also the younger and older generations.

Recommendations

A multi-pronged approach and culturally sensitive legislation is needed on bridewealth. Families, cultural and religious leaders and politicians all have roles to play. Family members in all positions and cultural and religious leaders can focus on positive narratives around strong relations and social cohesion in families – no matter whether there is bridewealth or not.

Bridewealth should be regarded as an act of appreciation rather than a transaction. Parents can lower their expectations and use expressions such as 'gifts' rather than 'payment'. Cultural leaders and politicians can highlight ceilings on bridewealth to prevent unrealistic expectations. They must lead by example, by not spending lavishly on their celebrations.

In communities where a marriage by-law has been passed, the cultural institutions should liaise with clan heads to carry out wider sensitization; and in case of a new by-law, the cultural leaders must conduct consultations capturing the opinions of both rural and urban residents. Cultural leaders should consider lowering the amount of bridewealth ceiling in by-laws to make marriage realistic for all.

Culture and traditions are not set in stone but are dynamic forces that can change and we can make decisions about which practices should continue and which should be discouraged.