



"Her Weight in Gold" by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris c. 1921.

HOW THE DOWRY SYSTEM CHECKS HYPERGAMY

Shah Mirza



ABSTRACT

Dowry and bride price represent a transfer of wealth made at the time of marriage. Dowry-practising societies are typically characterised as monogamous, stratified, and as valuing private-property land ownership. In dowry-practising civilisations, hypergamy is of greater concern. This article shows how the dowry system discouraged hypergamy and helped maintain an ecosystem of balanced and equal marriages, especially within a society so often characterised by monogamous marriage and private-property ownership. Perhaps it is time to revitalise some of the core principles of the dowry system, rather than continuing to blame men for “falling behind” or “not stepping up,” and insisting that men should be the ones tasked with the financial burden of marriage.

Keywords: dowry, hypergamy, marriage, monogamy, love



In our modern world, especially in the West, marriage is an expression of romantic love, something meant to validate a couple's affection for each other. This is what our more recent ancestors called a "love marriage" and what some in the East still call it today. Newspaper articles from even 100 years ago debate openly which type of union is better: the marriage of reason or the marriage of romance?

"You marry for love, even though your choice may displease your parents. We marry to please our parents, even though the choice may displease us. You consider our way as revolting, and we think yours is asking for trouble." (Peh Der Chen, 1932)

This idea that a marriage based on romantic love is unreasonable, and frankly irrational, would strike most people today as odd, and even insulting to our cultural values. It would evoke ideas of "only transactional relationships" or "only something the rich might do". In fact, it is usually those in our society who claim to be proponents of "traditionalism" and aim to "conserve Western values" who most often perpetuate this idea that marriage is simply about love between a man and a woman. They even take it a step further and say "a woman should never have to worry about finances, and that it is a man's job to provide everything as far as finances are concerned". The pressure of the heavy financial lifting is often placed solely on the man, with women only needing to work insofar as they feel an inclination or desire to do so.

However, this version of marriage is a more recent corruption of a system that is older, more consistent, and far more reliable for establishing a new familial unit on a solid foundation, something which has become increasingly rare in our modern age. That system of marriage, the marriage of *reason*, is the marriage type that was the norm during the era of the dowry-system. Dowry-based marriage is a system that compelled families to consider pragmatic factors and concerns when negotiating and bargaining for marriage. This system emphasised a financial "proposal" and subsequent negotiations, a necessity prior to marriage, which ensured men and women of similar status and rank were most likely to marry and encouraged checks on hypergamy. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the dowry system discouraged hypergamy and helped to maintain an ecosystem of balanced and equal marriages, especially within a society so often characterised by monogamous marriage and private-property ownership.

Before we go further, it is necessary to define our terms. The Cambridge Dictionary defines *hypergamy* as "the fact or custom of marrying someone from a higher social class or position than yourself" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). This is contrasted to *hypogamy*, which is marriage into a lower caste, class, or social group (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Another source, Collins' dictionary, describes *hypergamy* as "any marriage with a partner of higher social status" (Collins, 2025). Then we have *isogamy*, which Oxford Reference dictionary defines as individuals of similar social statuses marrying each other (Oxford University Press, 2025). Isogamy is also used in a strictly biological sense to describe the fusion of similar gametes; however, for the purposes of this article, I will be using the prior definition that refers only to marriage. Another notable term is *endogamy*, this describes a marriage where men and women from families of equal social status marry, but



can also refer to marriages between people within a group such as a clan, lineage or religion (Anderson, 2007; Britannica, 2025). For the purposes of this article, I will be using the term *endogamy* to refer to men and women marrying within their own economic class.

The term *hypergamy* is increasingly used in popular culture, inaccurately, to describe relationships of equal or higher value, not always within marriage. Though this is accepted as a definition in popular media, it is incorrect in the strict sense. Hypergamy, in an academic sense, only applies to marriage. Relationships between two individuals from a different status may be related to hypergamous impulses, but the act of hypergamy has not been consummated until the marriage is made legal and recognised by society, thereby creating a new “conjugal fund” or “conjugal estate” in which both individuals have now become one economic unit that occupies the same social position or status as a family or household.

The word *dowry* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the money or property the wife brings her husband; the portion given with the wife” (Oxford University Press, 2025). The dowry is one type of marriage transaction, which is sometimes confused with another type of marriage transaction, called a bride price (Hebrew ‘*mohar*’), which is featured in the Old Testament. The bride price (more appropriately renamed bridewealth by anthropologists) is different from the dowry in that it is an often-uniform amount, paid by the groom’s side to the bride’s family (Goody, 1973). This amount typically forms what is called a circulating fund, which then enables the receiving family to procure another bride for their family in order to offset the loss of their daughter. This is considerably different from the dowry, which is property or wealth endowed upon the bride at marriage, and represents her pre-mortem inheritance from her birth family’s estate (Goody, 1973). The dowry remains her property, with her husband often having usufruct of it (Goody, 1973). Unlike a bride price, which is more likely to be uniform, dowry amounts vary.

The bride price is primarily associated with polygynous societies (one man married to multiple women) as opposed to the dowry, which is by and large associated with monogamy (Goody, 1973). Using the data provided by the *World Ethnographic Atlas*, a comprehensive data set created by George Peter Murdock (Goody, 1973; Anderson, 2007), which includes data on subsistence practices, kinship structures, religious beliefs and political systems focused on pre-industrial societies, we see that out of 1167 pre-industrial societies, bride price occurs in two-thirds of them, and dowry occurs in only 4 per cent. However, in terms of greater population influence, dowry has played a far more significant role than bride price because the convention of dowry has occurred mainly in Europe and Asia, where more than 70 per cent of the world’s population resides (Anderson, 2007).

The societies in which dowry is a feature tend to share certain characteristics: income stratification, class differentiation, private-property ownership, advanced agricultural tools such as the plow (which relies more on male strength), monogamy and lower divorce rates (Goody, J. 1973, Anderson, 2007, Schlegel & Eloul, 1988). By contrast, bride price - seen more recently in



sub-Saharan Africa and in ancient times in the Near East, as corroborated by the Old Testament—is typically associated with societies that hold land corporately, possess less advanced agricultural tools (where women make a larger contribution to farming), exhibit little or no income stratification, and practice polygyny, often with higher rates of divorce (Goody, 1973; Anderson, 2007; Schlegel & Eloul, 1988).

Keeping these characteristics in mind, it is then clearer to see how hypergamy is of greater concern in dowry-paying societies but not so much in bride price-paying societies. The very existence of class differences and income stratification among individuals, particularly among men, creates a scenario in which families are concerned with seeking high status grooms for their daughters. In a pre-industrial scenario, where male labour is worth more than female labor economically, it becomes necessary to endow one's daughter with a commensurate amount of assets in order to put her on a similar status with a prospective groom from a similar status background as her own family (Goody, 1973; Kaplan, 1985). This ensures that one's daughter, and consequently family, can cement their position and status in the class hierarchy. It creates a bond between families and ensures that a daughter will be taken care of, be able to bear children (who will be direct beneficiaries of both partners' wealth through inheritance) and be able to enjoy a similar lifestyle that was afforded to her by her family (Schlegel & Eloul, 1988; Balwick, 1975).

What we see in this system is a bargaining between families in the marriage market. Daughters with large dowries are able to net higher-status grooms, and negotiations often centre around what contributions each person will be making to the newly formed conjugal fund (Anderson, 2007). Offers that are too low have a high chance of being rejected, whether that be a proposal from the groom's side or a proposal from the bride's. The topic of the dowry amount, as well as the groom's income and future inheritance prospects, are weighed against each other, and a decision is made. This is followed by the creation and signing of a marriage contract which details the amounts of contribution as well as expectations. The back-and-forth negotiations between families lead to a positive assortative matching between couples where, instead of hypergamy, we see, for the most part, isogamous (economically endogamous) unions being made. The bargaining process itself puts a check on hypergamy and keeps other factors, such as beauty or love, from being the centrepiece of a union. This bargaining and careful consideration is what is historically referred to as a *marriage of reason*.

This is made clear in looking at past legal documents such as marriage contracts, wills, or even court cases. In the book, *Marriage and Love in England: 1300 – 1840*, a discussion on average dowry amounts in England is given and broken down by class. Here is a relevant excerpt:

The overall value of this portion varied enormously, both between social levels and over time. Among the upper gentry the sums involved were very considerable: Evelyn mentions portions of £3,000 and £8,000 going with brides, and Thomas Isham, a Northampton-shire gentleman, paid a total of at least £4,000 with his three daughters.” At both this level and that of the aristocracy, the sums seem to be equivalent to about three years' income from



the man's estate.' The same sort of ratio seems to have occurred at the level of wealthy yeomen, traders and the 'middling' sort. Thus, Josselin gave his three daughters portions varying between £240 and £500 apiece, the clergyman—yeoman Giles Moore gave his daughter about £300, and a northern yeoman states that he had £300 with the girl he married. With annual incomes of between £50 and £100 in the seventeenth century, these were probably again roughly equivalent to three years' income. At the husbandman level, as far as we can yet see, a sum of between £10 and £50 was considered reasonable. Between 1550-1720, in Lupton, near Kirkby Lonsdale, where most of the inhabitants were husbandmen, out of 39 portions mentioned as being given to daughters (though not specifically tied to marriage), 33 were under £20. In Earls Colne between 1550 and 1800, of thirteen portions the mode (four cases) was between £40 and £50. The rest were widely distributed. These seem smaller sums in relation to annual income — probably one or two years' on average. Likewise, though it is very difficult to find evidence, the portion of a labourer's child was probably even smaller, perhaps one to five pounds at the most. The really poor would probably have no portion. (Macfarlane, 1986)

The above excerpt is just one example among many that demonstrates the character of the dowry. We can see that the dowry amount varies by class and that certain amounts, give or take a small adjustment, are required in order to bargain for and obtain a suitable match. A failure to provide this amount would lead to the rejection of not only a 'hypergamous' proposal, but also an isogamous one. Take this excerpt from the same source quoted above:

"The situation was particularly difficult, as one diarist observed, if a poorer family married into a richer one; the poorer family might well have difficulties trying to provide an adequate portion for their daughters. This is exactly how a check on marriage would occur." (Macfarlane, 1986)

This situation highlights the cost of hypergamy. If one family desired to marry their daughter to a higher-status groom, and thereby increase the prestige of their own family, their daughter would need to be endowed with an even larger dowry than otherwise would have been the case if she was to be married to a groom with a similar class status as her own.

From this example we can see that when hypergamy did occur, it was accommodated for and made balanced by the requirement of a corresponding dowry. The same was true in the reverse scenario: if a man had little income and not much of an expected inheritance, he too would be rejected since his contribution would not be commensurate with the prospective bride's endowment. Jack Goody, in his book *Bridewealth and Dowry*, observes:

"Dowry transactions place a premium on the matching contributions of the spouses. What women and men bring, either in concrete dowry or in inheritance chances, vary, although among conjugal pairs these tend to match." (Goody, 1973)



This quote shows that the back-and-forth bargaining between prospective spouses and their representatives leads to a positive assortative matching as matches form between economic equals. In his paper, *“Romantic Love or Material Interest: Choosing Partners in Nineteenth Century Germany,”* Peter Borscheid echoes the same sentiments as Goody above. Borscheid uses data from the seventeenth century through the early twentieth century, made available by the *Law of Succession*, which required “all citizens, rich and poor alike, to have a certificate drawn up by a public notary that itemised all the possessions brought into the marriage”. Borscheid discusses his results in this excerpt:

If we diagram the net values of assets brought into the marriage by both husband and wife in the pre-Romantic period [...], the nominal pairs form a cluster about the nearest-fit axis. We can see that people married in accordance with their economic and social status, seldom beneath or above it. The marriage market functioned strictly in compliance with economic rules. People tried to sell themselves at the best possible price and buy themselves in at a bargain price. As far as possible, all men aimed at marrying wealthy women and all women rich men. Nobody wanted to marry below standard because that would have entailed more work, more poverty, and a shorter lifespan. Since nobody wished to go down the scale, nobody went up either. A partner of equal standing was chosen for marriage, especially because marrying a rich woman would have diminished the man’s dominant position as breadwinner in the house. The marriage strategies of craftsmen, businessmen, civil servants, farmers, and labourers obviously served to stabilise the social structure of the towns and villages. To marry without consideration of the financial side of the relationship was considered foolish and unrealistic. (Borscheid, 1986)

This discussion helps shed light on how the dowry checks hypergamy. It takes something which can be argued is a natural impulse within *all* humans, men and women both, to seek a hypergamous match, or at the very least bargain for the best deal while trying to spend no more than is absolutely necessary. This leads to a system where hypergamy is pitted against hypergamy and results in isogamy, since if we assume the bargainers are rational actors using reason to negotiate, they will guard against being taken advantage of in the market. This can be observed in all dowry-practising societies, whether it be ancient Athens, Renaissance Italy, colonial Brazil, or even as recently as 1970s Cyprus.

The discussion of dowry tends to lead us to the question of family involvement in match selection for the individuals getting married. For a woman to have a dowry in the first place, and for men and women to marry at a young age, involvement from the family is necessary, especially in a world where class mobility, higher paying jobs, cheap rents and birth control were not the norm, and where it would be necessary for a greater pragmatism to be employed in marriage choice as opposed to giving way to passion and fancy. Wealth accumulation was conducted in a family-centric manner, with daughters of the poorer classes being required to work, even outside of the home, to save the minimum amount for marriage (Macfarlane, 1986). If no dowry was saved, a



woman could not expect to marry. Young women would have to work in the homes of well-to-do families to save for a dowry, along with other members of her family laboring to contribute as well, sometimes even leading to a delay in the marriage of male siblings (Goody, 1973; Macfarlane, 1986). Charities were often set up by the church or wealthy aristocrats to help poor girls obtain a dowry (Macfarlane, 1986). For families higher up on the class hierarchy, considerable pressure was still felt by the amounts expected of them to be paid as a dowry if they desired to remain at the same status level, and especially if they desired to move up in status, as mentioned earlier. Here another excerpt from Macfarlane's book is relevant:

It is clear from the descriptions of wedding contracts, from court cases, from wills and from other documents that, as in Josselin's case, a girl would often receive a lump sum as her portion or part of her parents' estate. While sons would have to wait for this until the parents' death, daughters would receive their share at or before marriage. It was recognised that this would put a strain on parents. There was a contemporary saying, 'Children are careful comforts, though good, daughters when marriageable, especially.'" The situation was particularly difficult, as one diarist observed, if a poorer family married into a richer one; the poorer family might well have difficulties trying to provide an adequate portion for their daughters.' This is exactly how a check on marriage would occur. If a daughter wanted to marry young, she would have to forfeit a chance of a large portion. Her parents could not stop her marrying, but they could point out that not much capital had been accumulated and she would thus be able to bring less to the marriage. The likelihood was that she would not obtain a good 'match', unless outstanding beauty, temperament or chance aided her. If her parents had married at 25, it was likely that only in their late fifties would they have accumulated enough to marry off their daughters. To give them each a good portion at the age of 15 (the mean age at marriage in many traditional societies) would have left them deprived of a substantial part of their estate. (Macfarlane, 1986)

Therefore, as the amount of dowry went up in value alongside class status, the family's involvement in the choice of spouse increased because the stakes in the bargain went up. These higher stakes in the deal would incentivise actors to make the rational choice, rather than an emotional one. This transfer, usually public knowledge, would help cement the status and prestige of both families, enabling them to demand a dowry of similar value for other members ready to be married.

This transfer also helped to set up the new conjugal unit to enable them to marry younger, set up an enterprise, obtain a house, and procreate (Balwick, 1975). With so much on the line, families tended to exercise more influence in the mate choice of their sons and daughters who, as young people are wont to do, would be more easily persuaded by passion in mate selection. However, with the threat of disinheritance, the young men and women of the past had strong incentives to obey the wishes of their parents (Nazarri, 1991).



Love marriages, then, becoming popular only more recently, can be seen as a result of economic prosperity and the advancement of technology. If life outside of one's parents' home became more obtainable without the reliance on the parental estate, then one could have more latitude when choosing a spouse (Balwick, 1975). We can see this process unfold in recent centuries, even being documented in newspapers as entire societies grappled with the abandonment of traditional dowry-based marriage in favour of love marriages (Elam & Mirza, 2025). One such article titled "*Romance Versus Reason*," published 1906 in the Liverpool Evening Express, compares and contrasts the new love model of marriage in England against the traditional dowry model still being practised in neighbouring France:

Many couples undoubtedly marry under the glamour of love, thinking only of their immediate happiness and regardless altogether of what may follow the honeymoon or the first few years of married life. Perhaps the one drawback about our marriage system is that English parents, who are as well able to give their daughters dowries as are French parents, do not do so because they are able to marry their daughters without dowries. They forget that here is where a little reason would help the romance, by increasing the comforts of the newly-married pair and so minimising the chance of subsequent unhappiness. (Liverpool Evening Express, 1906)

Or this article from 1923 titled "*Dowries for Girls*" published in the Daily Mirror which expresses a similar sentiment:

Surely the dowry system has, as your contributor suggests, one great advantage. It enables a woman to claim that she brought something into the family. This gives her independence. Many Englishmen are proud of marrying penniless girls, and they consider the French plan "ungallant." For a portionless girl in France has much less chance of getting married than one with a dowry. This boast of Englishmen would be better justified if so many of them did not turn round after marriage and reproach their wives for having brought them no money. B. H. L." (Daily Mirror, 1923)

Another article, this time by an American writer Laura Jean Libbey, titled "*The Dot and The Dowry*" published in the Chicago Tribune in 1912, grapples with the vestiges of the dowry still present in the corners of American culture. Her article gives us a look at the transition period between marriages of reason and marriages of romance:

In a number of countries, of which the United States ranks first, love is the prime consideration leading to wedlock, while money and place take the back seat.

Yet Americans are not wholly free from the system which puts a cash consideration upon the marriage contract. Many of our young men and women are looking for title, wealth, and social position, instead of the greatest of all gifts—the gift of love.



Here we get a brief window into a time period where society is deciding whether it can afford to release the checks once placed on hypergamy. She goes on to write:

There was a time when love played little or no part in the uniting of men and women. If love came into their lives, it developed after they had married and lived and toiled together. Love then, like the century plant, took a long time to grow.

Civilisation, in my opinion, has had much to do with the elimination of the custom. Among the primitive peoples of bygone days, love was unknown. Marriages then were universally arranged.

I am emphasising this point, not so much to show that American marriage customs are wiser and better than those of other peoples, but to help and encourage girls who write telling me they have no fortunes to bring their husbands and to young men who complain they love girls who are rich. To these girls and men I want to say that our country is a democracy, which means we meet each other on a footing of equality, taking little cognisance of birth and wealth. Ninety per cent of the marriages in this country yearly are love matches.

In this country whatever a man's wealth and social position are, if he asks a girl to become his wife it is because he loves her. He is not looking for any money settlement—he is going to provide for the girl he wants to make his wife.

From this we can better understand how recent a development the love match really is. Compared to the scope of civilized human history the love match is a recent aberration, the fruits of which are plain to see; a high divorce rate, an epidemic of single mothers, a family law system which is inextricably linked with a robust welfare machine whose main purpose, it can be argued, is to serve as a wealth transfer mechanism from primarily men to primarily women through child support and no-fault divorce. As society began to turn its back on the dowry system, which built the great civilisation we are a part of, in favour of a marriage based mostly on romance as the centrepiece, with no regard for or expectation of a matching financial contribution from women, families began to cede authority to the state.

The dowry system allowed families to self-regulate reproduction without the state's constant intervention, and its focus on material contributions from both parties ensured that a new family had the tangible means to succeed. However, as romance became the prime consideration for marriage, hypergamous impulses were encouraged on one side, the women, as evidenced from the excerpt above, and the other party's hypergamous impulses, the man's, were shamed for even being a consideration. This leads to marriages which are not endogamous or isogamous, but rather fundamentally hypergamous, as only one party is expected to provide and the other is meant only to be an object of love. In *"The Function of The Dowry System in a Rapidly Modernising Society: The Case of Cyprus,"* written in 1975, almost twenty years before Cyprus abolished the dowry, Jack Balwick presciently wrote:



One can only conjecture as to the possible effect which a decline in the dowry system will have on marriage. Whereas a more individualistically oriented method of mate selection may make for more meaningful marriage relationships, such an emphasis is also likely to increase the divorce rate. The ideology behind the dowry system emphasises marriage as a contractual agreement between two people and their families. The individualistic ideology behind romantic love and personal mate selection emphasises the personal happiness of the two people involved in the marriage. This later emphasis demands more giving and sharing of oneself, which is characteristic of an affectionate or companionship marriage relationship. Since personal happiness is held as a high value, if the husband and the wife no longer find affection and companionship from their marriage relationship, they most likely question the wisdom of attempting to continue in their marriage. With an individualistic emphasis in marriage, when affection is gone, the main reason for the marriage relationship disappears. (Balwick, 1975)

Unlike Balwick at the time of this writing, we now have a much clearer view. The consequences of abandoning marriages of reason are all around us. One need only look. Now that the fruits of modernisation are no longer as abundant as they once were at its start, we are seeing the cost of living increase significantly, the days of cheap rents being only a memory, as well as seeing wages stagnating and the value of college degrees lowering. Even the value of marriage itself has been lowered, as no-fault divorce has made marriage a shell of what it once was. The cost of individualism has become more than most can afford.

Perhaps then, it is time to revitalise some of the core principles of the dowry system in order to help families accommodate these changes, rather than continuing to blame men for “falling behind” or “not stepping up” and continuing to insist that men should be the ones tasked with the financial burden of marriage. In recent times we have seen men walking away from marriage, many believing that it is not worth it financially, instead opting to remain bachelors. Resurrecting aspects of the dowry system, a “dowry ethos,” could incentivize men to marry, by investing in them when they need it most, allowing men the time they need to grow into the providers those traditional conservatives say they want men to be, while also helping young couples navigate the new economy, and also allowing parents to have a greater influence over their children and helping to incentivize them towards decisions based on pragmatism rather than passion.



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AUTHOR PROFILE



Shah Mirza earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of California, Davis in 2012, with a focus on ancient political theory and international relations. He has worked primarily within government, specialising in the Child Support Enforcement Program, where he has gained insight into the operation and impact of modern family law. His research and collaborative projects include work with academics such as Stephen Baskerville and men's issues researchers including Paul Elam and Peter Wright. Shah has contributed to public discussions on family law, welfare policy, and historical marriage practices, joining prominent commentators on YouTube and other platforms. He hosts his own YouTube channel, [This Is Shah](#), where he continues to explore and discuss these topics.

Contact details: thisishahofficial@gmail.com
