



BRIDE PRICE IN GHANA: AN ASSESSMENT OF ITS SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN GHANA

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Abstract

Demand for high bride prices for marriage has been cited for the increasing abuses women face in Ghana. In 2014 alone, the DOVVSU of the Ghana Police Service received 17,655 cases of gender based violence, prompting calls from gender and human right activists for its abolition (DOVVSU, 2014, Actionaid, Ghana, 2012). This paper assessed the social representation of bride price in selected communities in northern Ghana regarding its link to women's vulnerability. 360 respondents made up of male and females were sampled from the three northern regions for interviews. Focus group discussions were also done while data from key institutions was elicited through the use of questionnaires. The findings did not reveal any direct link between high bride price and women's vulnerability but revealed that due to economic challenges, men find it difficult to pay the bride price, which makes them lose face and authority over their wives. The abuses women face in the study are mainly attributable to women's increased economic power through access to economic opportunities, which has altered the gendered role of men's sole provision of economic needs of the family and thus reduced male power over their wives. In reaction, some men resort to violence as an outlet of their frustration. The paper recommends alternative income generation opportunities for men in the study area, a reduction of bride price to make it easier for men to marry and sensitisation on the recognition by males of increasing co-dependency of couples.

Key words: Bride price, Women, Gender Based Violence, Vulnerability, Northern Ghana

Introduction

Bride price continues to generate debate within the Ghanaian media and civil society (The Agenda, 2002, Kaye, et al 2005, Daily Guide, 2012, Actionaid, 2012). The practice has been linked to the increasing incidence of violence and other acts of aggression against women. The worsening economic situation in Ghana makes the bride price and women's vulnerability debate more significant because of the link between the practice and poverty. In 2014 alone for example, 17, 655 cases of gender based violence cases were reported to DOVVSU, as against the 11, 708 cases reported in 2012 and 2013 (DOVVSU, 2014). The emerging and worrying trend is the conversion of the livestock normally demanded to cash, which has been blamed for the demand for high bride prices, particularly in urban areas (Hague, & Thiara, 2009; Asiimwe, 2013). Similar calls have been

made in other parts of Africa against the practice citing the health, economic and social implications of the practice on women. While Kaye, et. al. (2005), Muhammad (2005), Bawah et.al. (2009) and Ngusor (2013) blame the practice for the limitation it places on women's rights to decision making power and accessing health care, over her body and reproductive life and livelihood choices, UNDP (2005) blames the practice for predisposing women to abuse and domestic violence. Kaye (2004) linked bride price to women's vulnerability, with the argument that; a woman is deprived of "bodily integrity" when she is not involved in determining the bride price, but she is the one who suffers abuse from her husband. He also argues that the sexuality is exploited through commercialisation when she becomes the object of exchange through payment of the bride

price. He also asserts that a woman is deprived of her personhood i.e. the right to self determination and also of her status of equality with her husband as a person. A woman is unable to escape from a violent relationship when her parents are unable to refund the bride price to her husband, one of the conditions for divorce if the woman does not want the marriage. This allows us to consider the argument that by paying the bride price, the men acquire legitimate rights over their wives and may use violence to assert their masculinity in the context of profound marginalisation and leave the women vulnerable.

Bride price refers to the payments that a man or his family makes to the family of his wife in order to formalize the marriage (Encyclopedia, Britannia, 2012). According to Huntingford, (1932) payments made to formalise marriages predate modern civilisation and are paid either as Bride price or Dowry, He traced the practice to the ancient civilisation of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians and Hebrews in 3000 BC from where it spread through much of the world`s societies. Schwimmer (2003) explained that two thirds (2/3) of the world`s and ninety (90%) percent of Sub Saharan Africa practice the system of bride price with only 3% practicing the dowry system. Bride price is currently practiced mainly in Africa, the Middle East and East Asia. Maitra (2007) attributes the differences in the practice of marriage systems to the norms that govern the social and cultural ties of societies and that bride price is practiced mainly in societies where polygyny is tolerated while dowry associated with monogamous societies, but Anderson (2007) disagrees, citing parts of Asia, where as a result of female infanticide has fewer women but practice the dowry system. The various forms of the payments made for a wife include Bride price or wealth, Bride service, Sister exchange and Token bride price. The difference between these forms lies in how the payments are effected but the objective is the same; “give for a wife”.

The literature on vulnerability had previously associated the concept with climate change and natural hazards, but it has recently been adapted to various subject areas including human or social ecology and political economy. The social ecology framework draws attention to violence as a multifaceted phenomenon that interplays between factors at the individual, interpersonal,

institutional and wider societal contexts (Heise, 1998, Bott, et al 2005, WHO, 2005). Dow, (1992) defined vulnerability as the differential capacity of a person to deal with a hazard based on his or her position within the physical and societal environment. O`Riordan, (2002) explains that vulnerability diminishes the capacity of individuals to anticipate, cope, resist or recover from the impact of hazards, and is often associated with poverty. Linking this to women, he argues that the status of women, particularly those in patriarchal societies, has been deeply affected by the material conditions of their lives and the nature of male power in such communities, which is related to lack of access to resources and decision making, which he asserts, results in lack of invisibility and voice in public spheres. This paper defines vulnerability as the exposure of individuals, particularly weaker persons to traditional practices that tend to reduce their ability to stand up to or lead to the loss of their rights to self and decision making in major areas including abuse. The Centre for Relationship Abuse (2013) defines abuse as a pattern of controlling and coercive behaviour exhibited by a stronger partner in order to maintain power and control over a weaker one in intimate relationships. This abuse is usually perpetuated as physical, emotional or economical and occurs in all racial, ethnic, socio-economic and cultural settings.

Kaye (2004) argues that bride price inures to the benefit of men because the motivation for bride price serves as social security for the man, i.e. a proof of his ability to marry; it raises his status socially among his peers and also enhances his economic security, since it is only “rich men” who have the capability of taking care of a wife. These motivations serve the interest of the husband and or the father of the woman without any consideration for the woman on whom the bride price is paid. This reduces her to an object to be pawned whenever the need arose thereby making them vulnerable. Osuma, (2003) also blames the practice for perpetuating gender inequalities and inequities in society, and commercialising sexuality, i.e. when young and educated women or those who come from families of high social status attract higher bride prices than their peers. She argues that the desire to take the bride price could also cause a parent to withdraw his girl child from school or force her into an early marriage, sometimes to

older men. She adds that bride price is also likely to perpetuate dangerous cultural practices or rites such as widow inheritance or levirate marriage thus taking away her decision making or negotiating power, which all render a woman vulnerable to abuse, particularly when she rejects the decision. All these arguments are summed by (Bawah et. al., 2009) when they concluded that when a man pays bride price for a wife, he assumes “ownership” over her including her reproductive rights and resources and may require his authority to exercise any of these rights. Others however justified the practice arguing that it has social, economic and political benefits for both the families of the man and the woman. In spite of these benefits, though, (Hague and Thiara 2009) argue that the amounts that are demanded for brides are rising, which gives the practice a commercial outlook.

In parts of Africa, bride price is paid in kind as livestock (cows, sheep, goats, guinea fowls) and or in cash. In Ghana, the modes of payments vary between the north and south and are influenced by culture, religion, and economic factors Bishai et al. (2009). The bride price in parts of Southern Ghana is demanded as cash and drinks while in Northern Ghana, particularly in the Upper East and West regions, it is in kind as cows, sheep or goats and drinks (Gyekye, 1996, Awedoba, 2001). In the Northern region of Ghana, where Islam dominates, and particularly among the Dagombas, bride price has been influenced by the religion and a Koran is added to the cash and cola nuts traditionally demanded (Mustapha, 2010). Varied as these forms of payment are, the one element that is common among them is the cost involved in marrying a wife, which is the thrust of the debates on bride price and its link with women`s vulnerability. For example, Maitra, (2007) Bawah et al. (1999), Kaye (2004), Muhammad, (2001, 2002), and Fuseini & Doodoo, (2012) argue that the cost a man incurs in marrying a wife can influence how he treats the woman including the demand of the total surrender of her rights to him. They explain that upon contracting the marriage, the man assumes responsibility for his wife socially and economically and so his consent is required before she can undertake any activity, including seeking healthcare. This argument is expanded by Sørensen and Mclanahan, (1989) who noted that in societies where roles are gendered and women depend on men for social and economic cover, wives are at a disadvantage and their

ability to pursue individual interests and aspirations are limited. Tapper (1981) who equates bride price with the social transfer of women between households, argues that it is part of a wider system of control of productive and reproductive resources, which tends to render women vulnerable to abuse and is one of the causes of violence against women in relationships. However, Ngutor, et al. (2013) looks at another dimension of the argument when he asserts that bride price could also have negative implications for the stability of the marriage and the family when the man after paying a high price for his wife is unable to meet the financial needs of his family. Even though all the studies done on the subject particularly in Africa have criticised the practice as degrading to women, none of them have demanded for its scrapping because of its grounding and acceptability in the communities that practice it.

The Problem

The rise in violent abuse on women has heightened the bride price debate, with gender activists blaming the phenomenon on bride price (Tamale, 1993; Osuna, 2003; Actionaid, 2012). Critics of the practice have argued that bride price gives the husband unbridled control over the woman including her rights to resources and decision making power. Thus, a woman lacks the right to seek health care without the consent of her husband and the control over her reproductive rights and this opens her to the whims and caprices of the man and abuse. This weakens her ability to exercise her human rights and so increases vulnerability with negative implications for community and national development. Studies have confirmed that bride price has negative implications on women`s social-economic wellbeing (Osuna, 2003; Kaye, 2005; Hague & Thiara, 2009). The studies done by Fuseini & Doodoo (2012) and Fuseini (2012) on the subject and its impact on women`s lives in Ghana were generalised and related more to the situation in Southern Ghana. Considering that there are significant cultural and social differences between Northern and Southern Ghana; this paper sought to fill that gap. The paper therefore investigated whether the practice of bride price really weakens the ability of wives in Northern Ghana to exercise their rights. Specifically, the paper investigated what the respondent`s perception of bride price, what constitutes the bride price and if there is a relationship between the practice and wife abuse. It

ended by offering recommendations on how to reduce the perceived enslaving of women by the practice and to how the practice can be reformed to make it more acceptable to all stakeholders. Northern Ghana is of particular interest for the study because of its strong adherence to the patriarchal system of inheritance, high poverty and low literacy levels of the people, particularly among females and the perceived high cost of marriage. It was therefore seen as a good site to investigate if there are any possible links between vulnerability and bride price.

Ethical Consideration

All the respondents in the study were made aware of what the study was about and what it sought to achieve and told that their views would be made public to which they gave their verbal consent before the interviews were conducted.

Limitations the study

The study did not solicit the views of traditional and opinion leaders in the communities that the study was carried out, whose opinions are very important in the traditions and cultures of the people and who could influence change where it might be required. A comparative study between communities that ask for high or low bride price would have revealed if any had an effect on how women are treated.

Methodology

The Study Area

Northern Ghana comprises the Upper East, Upper West and the Northern regions and accounts for almost half of the country's land space. The 2012 Population and Housing Census puts the total population of Northern Ghana at 4, 177,798. Northern region has 2, 468,557, Upper East region, 1, 031,478 and Upper West 677, 763 (GSS, 2012). The male - female ratio for the three regions is 50.4 % - 49.6%, 51.6% -48.4% and 51.4%-48.6% respectively. The area is linguistically diverse and is made up of the Mole-Dagbon, Grusi and Guan language groups in order of numbers. Although the cultures of these ethnic groups have been influenced by diverse historical and religious experiences, the people share a lot of commonalities.

The people are mainly agrarian in economy and the major crops cultivated are maize, rice, millet, sorghum, yam, cassava, groundnuts, soya beans, cowpea and other crops such as sesame. Livestock such as cattle, sheep, goats, pigs' guinea fowls and chickens are raised for nutritional, economic, social and religious purposes. Northern Ghana has been described as the most deprived area in the country in terms of economic opportunities, infrastructure, literacy and high poverty levels. Marriages are potentially polygamous and are formalised by the payment of the bride price.

Sampling and Data Collection.

A multi approach to data collection was employed for the study. Three hundred and sixty (360) respondents were sampled through a simple random design for the interviews. Ten persons consisting of 4 male and 6 female per each community were purposefully sampled for focus group discussions. One (1) person each from three (3) key informant institutions per region were also purposefully sampled for questionnaire administration. For primary data, semi structured interviews were organised, using interview guides for the individual respondents and the focus group discussions and questionnaires were administered to the key informant institutions. Secondary data was obtained from desk reviews, including reports, journals and books on the subject. As the study was mainly a qualitative one, two communities, each from one district in each region, were chosen for study. These are Tongo and Pelungu in the Tallensi district of the Upper East region, Tafiase and Bugubelle in the Sissala East district of the Upper West region and Gbanyamni and Nyanshegu in the Tamale Municipality of the Northern region. Gbanyamni and Nyanshegu and Tongo are peri-urban communities while Pelungu, Tafiase and Bugubelle are rural communities. The respondents comprised men and women of varied educational and social backgrounds. One focus group discussion each for male and female members from each community also held for their views on the subject. Key informant interviews were conducted with a representative each of the Ghana Police Service and the Ghana Health Service and an advocacy NGO in each region. This is because these organisations are the ones that are reported to for arbitration, support or health care.

Findings;

Definition, nature and significance of bride price

All the respondents in the study area defined bride price as payments made either in kind or in cash to the family of a wife in order to formalise the marriage. The Tallensi of the Upper East region and Sissala of the Upper West region take the items after the lady has moved to the man's house, sometimes after the birth of the first child or later while the Dagomba of the Northern region take it before the lady moves to the man's house. The Tallensi refer to bride as "Poa Solig", the Sissala call it is "Jaring" and the Dagomba refer to it as "Pag` bori ligiri" or "Asadachi", an Hausa (Muslim) term.

The respondents in the Tallensi area indicated that bride price consists of four cows, two sheep, guinea fowls, drinks and cola nuts, while the respondents from the Sissala area listed one cow, one goat, a fowl and an unspecified amount of cash as the bride price. Female cows and goats are usually demanded instead of the male because cows reproduce and can multiply. The respondents from the Tamale area indicated that bride price consisted of an unspecified amount of cash, cola nuts and a Koran for those who are Muslims. The money requested is not fixed, and is usually a token amount which they claimed is not realistic with the current cost of living, so suitors pay according to their abilities. This, they lamented, has given parents the leverage to charge very high amounts, and the suitors, in order to show off or to outdo other suitors, pay huge amounts. For example, older or well to do suitors add items like suitcases and motorbikes or cars to the bride price, which was not part of the recommended items, and which the younger and not well to do men complain, makes it difficult for them to attract girls for marriage. Some respondents from the two upper regions complained that even though the bride price is in kind and fixed, some parents are beginning to ask for a conversion of the items to cash, particularly the educated ones. One of the problems that was identified with the practice is the escalation in amounts demanded for a bride, a complaint that stems from the rise in prices of goods, which makes the amount needed to buy the cows and other items very high and thus difficult for young men who are starting out in life and do not have family support to afford. The respondents admitted that bride price has very important cultural and social significance

to them as a people, for example, it formalises the relationship between a man and his wife and when it is not paid, the relationship is considered as not valid and the man cannot claim children born in such a relationship legally. Also, in the event that the woman dies before the bride price is paid; the man has to give it before he can bury the woman as a wife, particularly, if she is a first daughter. To avoid the ridicule that this brings to both the man and woman and their children, the man does everything in his power to pay or the woman puts pressure on him to do so. Sometimes, their children do so, on behalf of their father if he is unable to. This confirms Osuna's (2003) assertion that the man stands to lose his status in his community if he does not pay the bride price on his wife and consequently his authority. In societies where marriage and children give status to both the husband and the wife as proof of their maturity, paying the bride price is not an option but a responsibility.

As to whether they considered paying the bride price as purchasing the woman, all except one of the male respondents responded in the negative. The one said that he considers it as buying explained that, "*I paid cows and sheep for her and that cost a lot of money, what one acquires with money is considered as bought*". This result is consistent with Kaye (2005), Hague & Thiara (2009), Asimwe (2013) and Fuseini's (2013) finding that the majority of men in Africa do not consider paying bride price for their wives as buying them, and so dismiss the argument that the practice is equivalent to a purchase of a wife, and leave her at the mercy of her husband to treat her anyhow he pleases.

Economic and social implications of bride price on the family

The majority of married male respondents across the study area, (95%) indicated that they had fully paid the bride price of their wives, out of which 93% said that they paid it outright, while 2% said that they paid it by instalments. Ninety-eight (98%) of the married female respondents also indicated that the bride price on them has been fully paid while 1% said that they were not sure and another 1% said it had not yet been fully paid. Both male and female respondents admitted that the cost involved in paying the bride price is very high and this makes it difficult for them to pay. A male respondent explained that he had to migrate to the south of Ghana to

work on a cocoa farm, to raise the amount needed to buy the items for the bride price. This, he explained made the beginning of their marriage life very difficult as he had to save up to pay the bride price and also take care of his wife who had also had a child by then. Another male respondent from the Upper West region explained that after 15 years of marriage, he has not yet been able to pay the bride price on his wife, because he has not yet been able to save up for it, but he has not been pressurised to do so. He added however that this is not always the norm: *“in my case, my in-laws know that I am not an irresponsible man and that I will pay up as soon as I am able to acquire the items, besides we have a very cordial relationship and I fulfil all other obligations as an in-law”*. These results are consistent with studies on the subject in other parts of the world that high cost of living is one main cause for the agitation for a review of the “price” in order to meet the current challenge of economic difficulties and change (Kaye, 2004; Hague & Thiara, 2009; Asimwe, 2013). This makes employment of any kind important in generating income for cash to pay for the bride price and also ensure that newly married couple do not suffer unduly due to finances. The majority of the male respondents were self-employed and those in formal employment were in the minority.

Some of the respondents explained that paying the bride price is a demonstration that they recognise, value and respect their wives as partners in the relationship of their ability to take care of the woman materially. A 72 year old man from the Upper East Region commented that *“It is only an irresponsible man who will refuse to pay the bride price on his wife”*. This statement mirrors the pride a man feels when he fulfils this requirement of marriage and also affirms the argument that most men do not equate the practice with a business transaction, neither does it warrant the treatment of their wives as purchased items. A female participant in one of the focus group discussions said that women who are in polygamous marriages and whose bride price has not been paid pressurise their husbands into paying to prevent the humiliation of being taunted by their rivals and other women as “mistress” or “prostitute”. This has affected many new couples who have difficulties at the beginning of their marriages because the men spend so much money on bride price and still have to perform a

Christian or Muslim wedding after that. This can trigger conflict situations, and eventually, the dissolution of the marriage when as a husband one is unable to meet the needs of his wife because he spent too much money to marry her. Some of the male respondents lamented the negative effects of modernisation that is changing the traditional communal family system, where the extended family supported young men to pay the bride price. *“Now everyone is on his own, paddling his own canoe”* lamented a middle aged teacher. Consequently they called for a review of the bride price which they said could help reduce the economic pressure on newly married couples and improve their quality of life.

When asked to be specific in their request, respondents from the Upper region asked for a reduction from 4 to 2 cows, two sheep including the guinea fowls. Those from the Northern region suggested uniformity in the amounts demanded to discourage the discretion that causes well-to-do but older competitors to edge out young but enterprising young men from the competition. Hague & Thiara, (2009) argued that the cost debate on bride price has resulted in parents opting for rich and affluent men who lavish them with money and expensive gifts in order to marry their daughters, thus encouraging high bride prices.

Beneficiaries of Bride price

Respondents from the Upper East and Upper West regions indicated that the bride price would normally go to a family head, who held the items in trust for the family. These are used later to pay for the bride price of a brother or other male family members of the woman, what Hague & Thiara (2009) argued is “borrowed” from and so indebted to the woman. Consequently, the benefits are accrued to the entire family, but not directly to the woman. On the other hand, in the Northern region, the bride price is taken by the family head, a portion of it is given to some female relatives of the woman such as her mother and paternal aunt (s), who use the money to buy some basic items as cooking utensils for her use in her marital home and another portion to the woman for her to start a petty trade with. In this case, the woman benefits directly from the bride price. On the whole however, the benefits go beyond the individuals and family to the communities since familial ties are fostered between the two families and community (Bawa, 2012). For example, when the woman is “cared for well”, other

men from the groom's community stand a very good chance to get wives from the bride's community and vice versa, because they have proven their worth. This serves as an insurance against wife abuse and violent conflict between the two communities because of the familial relationship developed. Dyson and Moore (1983) however disagree with this and argue that whether the woman benefits directly or indirectly from the price, she has become a commodity of exchange, is therefore owned by the buyer. In order to investigate the link between bride price and women's vulnerability, it is helpful to examine the causes of women's vulnerability.

Causes of women's vulnerability in marriage

a. Dependency in marriage

Key informant interviewees attributed the vulnerability of women to roles assigned by traditions based on gender where males are assigned to wealth creating roles that give power, while females are assigned to care giving roles that make them dependant on the men. From birth, women are socialised to depend on their male relations for resources and protection. In Northern Ghana for example, fathers are inherited by the eldest son, even if he is the youngest child and women depend on their male relations for decisions concerning their lives. Paradoxically, a woman neither fully belongs to her father's nor her husband's house. Her natal family view her growing up as in transition to her husband's house, while her marital family also view as a "stranger" and do not fully accept her. In some communities, even when a woman has the resources, she cannot own or buy a piece of land without a male front. A key informant observed that when a woman depends totally on her husband for everything, it communicates to the man that he is in charge over her and he tends to demand total obedience. If he does not receive it, he may use force resulting in abuse. Sørensen, and Mclanahan, (1989) blame sexual division of labour on sole dependent relationships.

This situation is changing, however, due to the socio-economic dynamics that have made it very difficult for men to play the "household head" role effectively without support from their wives. It therefore calls for recognition of the supportive roles that women play in the management of the home and the financial support they give to their husbands, that the relationship in

marriage is a co-dependent one that demands mutual respect (Actionaid, Ghana, 2012). Because culture is dynamic and changing, this recommendation should be one that is appreciated by all but its acceptance would likely be gradual since it takes a long time for people to change in belief systems.

b. Reduction in wives total dependence on husbands

The effects of environmental change have distorted the gendered roles in the communities in the study area, whose economy is mainly agrarian. Lands have either been sold out to private developers or become scarce due to population increase, resulting in many households having less or no lands to farm on. Soils have become depleted due to over use, resulting in low yields and rainfall unpredictability and the high cost of farm inputs have forced men to either drop out of farming or to diversify into other sources of livelihood (Kasei et.al, 2012). The reduction in livelihood options available has also affected the ability of men to meet the family economic obligations solely. On the other hand, income generation opportunities have increased significantly for women in the study area over the past years through poverty reduction interventions by NGOs who target mainly women. The changing climatic conditions have also brought dynamism in wealth creation opportunities for women such as dry season gardening through irrigation farming and retail trade and other creative cottage industries like basket and cloth weaving and commercial rice processing among others (Kasei et al, 2012). This has increased the ability of women to have regular incomes and so reduce their economic dependence on their husbands, and in some cases have become the sole bread winners for their families (Amenga Et'go, 2012). Some female respondents said that with the ability to make an income, they are now able to take care of the basic needs that they hitherto depended on their husbands for. Some also said that they are also able to pay the fees of their children whenever their husbands are unable to do so, reducing their total dependence. With this emerging development in the provision for family needs, men appear to have lost the power they once wielded over their wives, which causes them to become irritable and to resort to violence as a means of asserting their authority in the home. Some of the male respondents indicated that they beat their wives in order to demand obedience as revealed by Wood

(2005). This confirms Muhammad's (2005) assertion that violence against women in marriage is a product of the transition from traditional to modern societies. It is worthy of note that the women in this category are still the minority though.

c. Illiteracy and poverty

Linked to dependence on husbands due to poverty is the high rate of illiteracy of women in the study area. Illiteracy limits opportunities for employment particularly for women and also puts them at a disadvantage when seeking redress for abuse. Some cultures discourage women from speaking out about abuse they suffer to law enforcement agencies, and doing so could cost such a woman her marriage (FGD, Tamale, 2013). Key informants and some female respondents blamed the low regard that their husbands and society have for them, their views on issues and low decision making power on their illiteracy. A female respondent explained that her fellow women who are literate and are gainfully employed are better respected than she is. Poverty and illiteracy increase women's vulnerability in terms of their ability to escape abusive relationships. In the Upper East Region, when a woman escapes from her marital home due to abuse, her parents are required to refund the bride price. The inability to do so due to poverty may compel her family to insist that she remains in the relationship. If she refuses to comply, she may have to escape to the urban areas to avoid being returned to the relationship. Without employable skills, she may resort to engaging in menial jobs to survive, which has its own implications for their health, safety and security.

Bride price and women's physical and abuse

Representatives of all the key informant institutions confirmed that women in the study area were vulnerable to physical abuse, which they blamed on alcoholism and male dominance. Except for one man, all the men admitted to ever hitting their wives and all the women admitted that they have ever been hit, insulted, belittled before others and or forced into sex. The men however did not consider their action as abuse, but "*putting the women right*" or "*asserting their headship over her*". Defending his actions one man explained that it is okay for a man to "*put some sense into a woman's head*" (beat her) once in a while, another said, "*a woman is like*

a donkey, if you do not beat her she will never do the right thing". Some of the women also did not see anything wrong with the abuse they suffer but equate it to a show of affection by their husbands. Some of them however believe that they suffer the abuses because they are weak and dependent on their husbands.

Although it was established that wife abuse is common in the study area, less than 1% of the respondents saw a direct link between wife abuse and bride price. They argued that contrary to the assertion that the status of women is weakened by the practice, bride price actually does give value to a woman and cannot be the cause of wife abuse. For example, a properly married woman has high status both in her natal and marital home. This is seen in the roles a woman plays in both her husband and father's homes during funerals and other cultural and social events. She feels honoured when her husband comes with his clan members with music and dancers and reciprocal gifts to "mourn" her fathers' or mothers' which is consistent with Asiimwe's (2013) assertion that bride price increases the status of women and cannot be said to expose her to abuse. Thiara (2005) and Fuseini & Doodoo, (2012) agree with the position but also argue that the payment of bride price could have negative implications on gender relations. They explain that a woman can be abused by her husband if she fails to meet the expectations placed on her by societal values, the roles and other social expectations. They argue that although there is no direct link between the practice and abuse, the amounts demanded should be reduced to lighten the burden on young couples, which can trigger conflict in the marriage and then lead to physical abuse.

This leads us to the question as to whether the issue of wife abuse is not a gender based violence issue and not really a bride price one. For example women abuse is common even in cohabiting relationships where marriage and also in societies such as India, where the dowry system is practiced but women suffer all kinds of derogatory treatment (UNDP, 2010). UNDP (2005) had earlier reported that a woman is abused by a male partner every three minutes worldwide and are generally unable to cope with the demands of society resulting from cultural, social, economic and political values. Women in Africa are burdened by the triple burden of performing productive, reproductive and community managing roles; these render them vulnerable to abuse.

Paying the bride price merely increases this vulnerability level as it transfers the “ownership” of the wife from the father to the husband.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study confirmed that bride price is an important socio-cultural practice that is essential in formalising marriages and enhancing stability in marriage and binds familial and communal ties that safeguards the security of women. Critics of the practice have criticised it as disempowering women and empowering men to treat their wives as their property. This, they argued increases vulnerability in women as it offers the potential for the perpetration of violence against them. The study identified factors that contribute to this vulnerability in women to include dependency, illiteracy, poverty and non-access to resources. It also found out that the violence against women is fuelled mainly by the dynamics of a changing society that has altered gendered roles in the family support system where men are no longer the sole providers for the family’s upkeep, and the increasing contribution of or takeover of the responsibility from the men. This reduction in absolute power of men over their wives has tended to create violent tendencies in some men as they seek to assert their authority over their wives. The paper did not find a direct link between bride price and women’s vulnerability even though it concedes that the cultures of the study area work together to reduce the decision making power and independence of wives and not just the practice. Even though the study showed that men physically and emotionally abuse women, literature reveals that wife abuse is a global phenomenon and cannot be blamed on bride price. It therefore concluded that bride price is not the cause of current high rates of wife abuse in the country. The paper therefore recommends that;

- Education and advocacy should be intensified in the country on violence against women and structures put in place to protect women. DOVVSU is doing much in this direction but some cultures sanction women who report husband abuse. NGOs could

work together with traditional authorities on the advocacy aspect.

- In order to lessen the financial burden on newly married couples the amounts demanded as bride price could be reviewed downwards. Tied to this is the need for standardisation in the bride price in the different communities so as reduce competition that tends to raise the amount involved. This is to make it easier for rich and poor alike to marry.
- Also, in view of the fact that land is scarce and yields from poor soils are poor, NGOs could assist them to diversify livelihoods to other areas so that they can earn income and meet their family commitments, and increase their egos. This can go a long way to reduce the abuse they mete out to their wives as a result of frustration.

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