

# Implication of Inflated Bride Price on Women Empowering Capacity in Sidama People, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

*Bride price is an amount of money or property, which is paid by groom or his parents to a bride's parents at marriage. It has symbolical meaning and practiced by Sidama people in Ethiopia. Before thirty years ago its amount was very small, however, since 2000 the amount of bride price dramatically increased and was affecting spouses, families and women empowering capacity. It requires investigation on root causes of bride price inflation and its effects on women life in Sidama. Thus this study aimed to examine over all causes of bride price inflation and its effects on women life. Qualitative research approach was used to collect and analyze data. It was understood that bride price is means to value for bride and approval for marriage. Its amount was increased dramatically because of misinterpretation meaning of bride price by this generation. Inflated bride price had more negative effects on women empowerment capacity than positive contribution. Local elders attempted to minimize exaggerated bride-price payment but they were unsuccessful, because it seems elders were not in power to enforce the traditional law as they were in previous generation. It was recommended that females, particularly girls are at right position to minimize exaggerated bride price in the society.*

**Key terms:** bride-price, implication, inflation, Sidama, women empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the study

Marriage payment takes in the form of bride price/wealth, bride service, and exchange of females, or dowry (Ember et.al, 2009). As it was stated in Oguli (2004), bride price is more common than other forms, however, the amount of bride price vary from societies to societies. Like, Subanun of Philippines pay more than three times of the annual income of groom and need additional 3-5 years of bride service. In Nandi of Kenya it is not more than one animal but Jie of Uganda it costs to 50 heads of cattle and 100 heads of stocks (Ferraro and Susan, 2010). In India, it is in the form of dowry, and it is too expensive (Dalamia and Lawrence, 2005 and Scupin and Christopher, 2005). In contrast, marriage payment has disappeared in developed countries like Western Europe (Tendai and Sambulo, 2013 and Anukriti and Shatanjaya Feb 2017) and decline in Toror Uganda (Adhola 2010.)

Amount of bride price was varying in different social groups and also differ within a same group. As Mulder (1995) stated Kipsigis of western Kenya pay high amount for early mature women because it was believed that there is greater reproductive success but low payment is required if a woman had given birth before marriage (Ferraro and Susan, 2010).

Bride-price has becoming to monetize form in some developing countries. It seems business of marriage and may causes problem for marriage. Although India passed a law in 1961 against compulsory dowry, the practice continued. Insufficient dowry was causing for domestic violence (Kottak 2009).

There are debates among scholars regarding to use of high amount of bride price. Evans-Pritchard (1951), cited in Scupin and Christopher, 2005, argued that high bride wealth help to insure marital stability by ensuring the transfer of right of women from her family to her husband's family. It makes marriage dissolution to be difficult when it was paid large amount of money for bride's relatives, because it requires return. Otherwise, if it is paid too low, marriage will be unstable and would be easily dissolved (Scupin and Christopher 2005 and Ferraro and Susan 2010). Here the writers not critical investigated other dimension of bride price that the influence of paying high amount pride price on the right of women. The writers missed whether it causes for domestic violence that women fear to break up marriage without re-pay of bride price even if she was ill-treated by her husband. That leads marriage instability if there is domestic violence.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Bride price has begun to lose its cultural meaning, function and significance in Sidama, Ethiopia. Now it seems in the form of a "wife-for-property" exchange since last first of 21<sup>th</sup> century. The practice becoming and taking form of commercialization and has lost much of its cultural values. Since second decade of 21<sup>th</sup> century, it solely seemed "buying of a wife as a commodity or equating the value of a woman to the amount of bride price paid." It becomes unaffordable for those who have low income. It seems monetize the value of girls against their right. In the era of too expensive living costs exaggerated bride price increasing burden on partners after marriage. It requires inquiring the root causes for its inflation and its effects on socio-economic life of women and their right.

## 1.3 Objective of the study

General objective this is to examine root causes of inflation of bride price and its implication on socio-economic life and right of women in Sidama people, Ethiopia.

### Specific Objectives

The specific objectives are:

- Describe importance of bride price in cultural context in Sidama people.
- Describe root causes for inflation of bride-price in Sidama people
- Explain major effects of inflation of bride price on women right in Sidama people.
- Find out alternatives to control negative consequences of inflated bride price in Sidama people.

## 1.4 The Scope of the study

This study includes Dale, Bensa and Harbegona districts of Sidama Zone. It focuses on rural areas expecting more indigenous traditional practice than urban areas. The study concerns on the issues such as importance of bride price, root causes of inflation of pride price and it implication on socio-economical life marriage partners and women right. It used qualitative research as major approach because it studies ethno-history of cultural aspect of Sidama people.

## 1.5 Significance of the study

The result of this research will help to know fundamental patterns of changes of indigenous marriage payment traditions and its effects on women right. Finding would be valuable for public, government, social policy makers and other institutions that are working on socio-economic life of households and women right in Sidama people.

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Sidama people who live in 5' 45" and 6' 45" latitude in north and 38' and 39' longitude in east in Ethiopia (Wolassa, 2016). Qualitative research approach was used. It mainly targeted on Bensa, Dale and Harbegona districts among the nineteen districts because now a day Habagona is one of the districts that has more indigenous cultural traits than others but the rest of two were cash crop areas and they are among the districts that experienced with imported cultural elements.

Both primary and secondary data sources were used to have deep information on the issues. Primary data was collected from interview, focus group discussion and observation. Secondary data were collected from written materials.

Data were analyzed using qualitative description approach because almost all of data were collected through open-ended questions. There are few data, which were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

### 3. Data Presentation and Analysis

#### 3.1 Definition and Origin of Bride Price in Sidama

In Sidama language bride price is known as *Miine*. It is an amount of money or property, which is paid by groom or his parents to the parents of a bride at marriage. It is paid in the form of cash or in kind for only when girls marry first time but not for remarriage.

According to Elders and Betana, (1983 E.C/1991) in Sidama culture girls are expected to circumcise before two months of wedding. If husbands' family is rich, they offer *ameessu saa* (milking cow) to bride's family. It was given to feed circumcised bride. This cow was return back to husband after marriage considering spouses had no cattle immediately after they started independent life. Poor families of groom were offering money to bride's parent in order to avoid discomfort that caused by unable to offer *ameessu saa*. This tradition continued from generation to next generation and later this practice become to known as bride-price.

#### 3.2 Importance of Bride-price

Pride price has symbolical meaning. It is considered as compensation for bride's parents. It is also perceived as a means for a groom to show his appreciation to bride's parents for raising her, associated with fund of wedding of couple or to prove that groom is in a financial position to manage family. Elders in Dale districts confirmed that:

*groom or groom's parents should pay value for bride and bride's parents for their bringing up valuable wife and allowed for his marriage... also show groom's economic capacity to take care for her(elders in Dale).*

This quotation shows that a payment of bride price has association with parents of bride for their investment to bringing up valuable daughter. After marriage, she would serve parents of her husband and her children will be recognized through father's descendants. One of local elder said that '*daafurre mulla gatantenni mittore adha woyyate*' (rather than left with empty hand after tired bringing up, it is better to have something), because parents of bride paid a lot to grow their daughter by clothing, feeding, educating and taking health care and so on. If the child is son, he will remain with his parents, serve his parents, provide labor, and inherit his parents. It is not, if the child is daughter. She will marry and left her families. She gives labor and other services for her husband lineage.

In focus group discussion informants explained why groom pay bride price. As they stated:

*Men pay bride price to show love from their heart. In our society marriage question first come from a man but not from a woman. Don't you see current boys invite tea-coffee or food for their girlfriends requesting sexual relation? Why they cover invitation costs? It is to show that they love them and share what they have. This indicates that bride price serves as a means to convince a woman for marriage that husband shows he want her from his heart (elders in Harbagona)*

This shows that bride price is one of means to convince bride for marriage and a means a groom to show his hearty feeling love toward bride. In addition it is paid to show value of a woman. If a girls married without payment to her parents, she is considered as not wanted by others. Her value is very less and after marriage she feels inferior among her colleagues. To avoid such kind of discomfort, groom expected to pay bride price for her parents.

### 3.3 Historical Trends of Growth of Amount of Bride-price

As Elders stated, during previous generation, amount bride price was very small or it was given only so called “*goodane*” /female lamb/ for mother of bride; “*seemma*” (a thick cotton garment, mantle of four folds which is used as blanket or cloth for elders) for father and “*gonfa*” /men’s suit made of cotton/ for uncle/mother’s brother/. Bride price in kinds was replaced by money very recently. Before 30 to 40 years ago, amount of bride-price was not more than 100 Ethiopia birr. It was grown as follows.

- before 1980s it was 5-100 Eth. birr
- from 1980s-1990 it was about 300 Eth. birr
- from 1990 -2000 it was increased to 2,000 Eth. birr
- from 2000 -2010 it was increased to 4,000 Eth. birr
- from 2010 onward it was 6000- 30,000 Eth. birr

In 2014 it reached to 15,000 to 30,000.Eth.birr. Larger amount of payment was going to father and the rest to mother of bride. Minimum amount of money got to mother brother (uncle) (Markos, 2011).

### 3.4 Factors Determine Bride-price Payment

The amount of bride price is determined by agreement between two families in the range value of bride price. However, it is paid only for virgin girls, because virginity is highly valued among Sidama people. Before marriage, sexual intercourse is strictly forbidden. If a girl lost her virginity before marriage, it is shame for her parents, especial for her mother and bride's parent forced to return bride price even if it was paid and not gave child for first husband. According to Sidama culture if woman divorced her first husband and married another, there will be no bride price. It is not allowed to pay bride-price for a widow marriage

### 3.5 Factors Causing Inflation of Bride-price

Inflation of bride-price had associated with misperception of children bringing up costs and attitude of people toward bride-price, and also an increase of market prices of goods.

Bride’s and groom’s family argue in differently to receive and pay bride price. The bride’s family aims to maximize the worth of their daughter to get as high a payment as possible. The groom’s family, on the other hand, aims to minimize to pay in the current payment range. In light of this, the bride’s family will bring across all the status and image of their daughter but the groom’s families highlight all the current socio-economic realities in the society. After long debate they will reach to agreement by intermediates.

Bride's family use education level of their daughter to higher the value of payment that the higher the level of education higher the bride’s value. They claim to return the cost that they invested on bride's education which will be benefited by groom’s family. It was argued that after a marriage a girl left her families and give labor services which benefit husband's lineage. it was perceived that educated daughters are with money, that she will have salary. Education is not only justification factor to request the high payment, over all costs that invested in growing age of daughter in her life time, her skills and beauty taken as consideration for justification.

Nowadays market price of commodities also considered as another cause for rise of marriage payment. Elders pointed out that total cost of marriage ceremonies is too expensive and small amount of bride-price cannot cover all costs. If bride's families receive small money, they will be high in debt after wedding. People know effects of inflated marriage payments but what they say that how bride's family cover marriage costs. On the market the price of ox, sheep, goats or chicken is too expensive. Families invite many colleagues and relatives on wedding. If the bride price is too small, her families face with double costs, bringing up their daughter and wedding. After marriage, bride's family also expected to give gifts for spouses, which groom or his relatives

benefit. People associated high bride price with high social value of females. It is believed that if a groom pay too small, he not respects bride and her parents.

### 3.6 Implication of Inflated Bride Price

#### 3.6.1 Function of Bride Price

The practice of bride price considered to ensure integration of kinship, establishing very strong bonds between families, recognizing and legitimizing marriage and ensuring a legal status of children and their right to inheritance. It is also considered as a means of communication and gets permission for marriage. Payment of bride-price gave young couple an official permission to live together and have children. It seals relationship between bride's and groom's relatives. Once bride-price was paid, the marriage gets official recognition.

The payment of bride-price also discouraged divorce, because it was expected to return to husband if there is divorce before childbearing. It protects both man and woman to be together in marriage, one could not simply ditched by another. It provided for wife the right to own property in her new community, and it gave a right to be buried in the land of her husband's clan. It is believed as "a legal document signifying that marriage has taken place and that husband has conjugal right.

#### 3.6.2 Negative Effects of Inflated Bride-price

The increment of marriage cost pressurizes social and economic life of the people. It may affect women's post-marital wellbeing, lead to domestic violence, weakened social bond and capacity of economy of two families. Unknowingly it created reciprocity between the two parents. The groom pays bride price expecting return from bride's parent as a gift at "*kiifatto*" (introduction ceremony of newly married couples with two families) day. This implies that it created reciprocity between two families which was not in the previous generation. The major problem is if there was unbalanced payment between two families by bride price and gift reward on *kiifatto* day.

#### Implication on Women Right

Inflated bride-price has an implication on man to have a feeling of "I bought you so I want to control you." Participants explained this as follows: "bride price created idea behind exchange money to receive something to own possession. So when a man pays money, it is not for charity, he is buying something out of it." Such commercialization perception stripped its symbolic meaning and reduced women's reproductive rights. Here it important to ask question like does human being respected because of being paid more? How much human being's price? The answer is left for readers. The inflated bride price reduces woman to an object of sale and hence commoditize her. Nowadays the amount of bride-price is out of the range of cultural scope. In current market, the total price of all properties, which were used for bride-price during previous generation, was not more than 4000 Ethiopia birr but the current value of bride price is more than six to eight times.

Elders stated that inflated bride price has implication of women are under men's control. Men's payment leading them to believe that they are entitled to and deserving of woman's service because payments seems misinterpretation as a monetary transaction as explained by the participants. This has negative connotation for a woman. It is perceived as a trade for woman to serve man. Marriage payment awards men claim rights from woman, which include domestic service, sexual and childbirth rights. Key informant explained: "a groom developing feeling that I invested a lot of money to get you expecting return from your parents as gift or service from you." This has similarity with exchange of commodities. This leads women to have either feeling of pride or inferiority. She develops inferiority which leads to develop low self-strength. In contrast, she feels like she is more valuable and if paid a lot.

Distribution of bride price for father and mother of daughter is not fairly. Mother received too small ratio from the total. What is implication of this? Mother should has right to benefit large proportion because she tired bringing up a daughter since pregnancy to marriage age but what disqualifies her benefit from it. Why she receive very small amount of the bride price? Who took care when a daughter was in the form of liquid in the womb? Then after birth who played great role when she was in baby? It is obvious that mother paid a lot

sacrifices. If bride price is a way of recovering the costs of rising a daughter, particular father should earn too small proportion and mother's share should be large but it is not. It has not good implication on women social position in the society.

### **Implication on Economy of Partners**

High marriage cost increasing pressure on the income of two families. Too high bride price forces grooms to sell permanent properties, which will be guarantee for future life of spouses. It makes empty of saving account of groom or his parents. It forces groom or his family to take credit, which will enslave spouses to work for debt after marriage. High debt also weakened the economy of spouse and unable cover living cost for long time. Thus, it increases economic burden of spouses after marriage, which further will cause dissatisfaction of marriage. Some time it leads to divorce. It is obvious that divorce disintegrate social networks between bride and groom families.

Bride price affects psychological independence of women. It makes them depended on their husband for considering as he is providers and decision maker. It also affects man's financial ability to take care of his intended family. It would seem that by virtue of having paid bride price the man lessens his financial ability to provide for his family as expected.

### **Implication on Gender Roles Stratification**

High bride price was creating boundaries for masculinity and femininity. It can be one of factors for the gender role stratification. It inculcates men as providers of highly valued properties, money, while women are service providers in home. It has an implication of a man paid for his woman to employ in the family and to enjoy sexual right. He plays only on supervision roles. The routine activities are left for a wife.

### **Implication on Social Networking**

Marriage creates and strength social bond between two groups and made them close relative. In case of Sidama people marriage takes place between not close relatives. Marriage makes close social relationship. After marriage, grooms are expected to respect the families of brides. In Sidama culture even it is not allowed a husband to call name of mother and father of his wife. He call "**ama**/mother/ and **anna**"/father/ as his biological parents. Parents-in-law is highly respected close relatives among the Sidama nation.

Elders stated that exaggerated bride-price is affecting social networks between two parents-in-laws. It is because parents of bride expect a lot of money but if groom pay too low they feel that they are not respected and their investment on their daughter considered as invalid. They feel that their moral is degraded in the local area. This creates dissatisfaction which may lead further problem on marriage.

Nowadays high bride-price is also associating with high return expectation from the bride's parents. Groom expect high gift from his parents-in-law during "*kiifatto*" ceremony. If it is not happen, social network between two families become not good. There were cases, which can be example in the study sites. Discomfort goes to the house of spouses. Husband returned gifts back with complain that I paid a lot but your parent give us too small. Therefore, your parents not respected us and not valued my effort for them. This dissatisfaction weaken the social network between the two families.

### **Implication on Female Education**

Exaggerated bride price may force female involvement will be dominated around home; because it strength early marriage and increase drop out of females from schools. To reduce education cost and living burden, parents of female facilitate early marriage and prefer free from load of living cost. Males also prefer to marry those who are low grade level because completion of high education level associated with high bride-price. Marriage after completion of first degree is too cost than high school girl. This has negative effects to get empowered and highly qualified females.

## Attempts to Control Exaggerated Bride-price

Traditional and religious leaders attempted to control exaggerated bride-price at zone level. In 2000, representatives from all districts of Sidama zone come together and met in Aleta Wondo, one of the districts of the Sidama administrative zone, and discussed how exaggerated bride price was affecting social and economic life of two families and marriage partners. They tried to explain and clarify what bride-price is for Sidama people. After a long discussion it was decided to be 400 Ethiopia Birr. However, it was not limited to this amount. Two families, groom's and bride's families, were continued paying and receiving beyond the amount that was decided by elders at Aleta wondo meeting. Then after 2002 representatives from all districts again met and decided it should be only 400 Ethiopia birr. Again this decision was not effective. The issue became serious agenda for community because exaggerated bride-price was affecting socio-economic life of marriage partners and two families. Then in 2009 representative elders from all districts met and improved the previous decision and it was decided to be between 2000 and 3000 Ethiopia birr. In addition elders allowed 50 Ethiopia birr for mediators, 50 Ethiopia birr for uncle (mother's brother), 100 Ethiopia birr for *ilileette/* literary ululation of happy that a groom sends news of virginity of bride for her parent/ and 200 Ethiopia birr for "*kiifatto*".

Even though elders made strong attempted to control exaggerated cost of marriage, the attempts was not successful. In 2012, it was observed that elders worrying that they unable to apply traditional law in the community. In 2012 the amount of the payment reached to 12,000 Ethiopia birr. Then after end of 2013 the amount extended to 10,000 -25,000 Ethiopia birr. In end of 2013 elders again decided to be 2000 Ethiopia birr for parent and 40 Ethiopia birr for mediators. During this time, elders also declared people not prepare extravagant wedding ceremonies because it puts people into high costs. Relatively this decision was good. It was reduced in front payment. Government body also forced to apply elders' decision. However, some people submitted for elders' decision and pay in front of mediators as elders' decision but add more amount of money in secret. Even though there were strong repeated attempts to minimize exaggerated bride price, it was continued and become beyond the capability of the low income people. During this research time thirty six marriage cases were observed and presented as follows.

Table 4.1 bride price payment in front mediators and in secret of mediators

R.N	paid in front of mediators, Ethiopia birr		Added more money in secret of mediators, Ethiopia birr	frequenc y	Percentage	Total %
	For parents	For mediators				
1	2000	40		17	47.22%	47.22 %
2	2000	40	2000	3	8.33%	52.78 %,
3	2000	40	3060	1	2.78%	
4	2000	40	500	1	2.78%	
5	2000	40	1000	1	2.78%	
6	2000	40	5040	2	5.56%	
7	2000	40	18,000	1	2.78%	
8	2000	40	8000	1	2.78%	
9	2000	40	6000	1	2.78%	
10	2000	40	2000	1	2.78%	
11	2000	40	12,400	2	5.56%	
12	2000	40	13,400	1	2.78%	
13	2000	40	14,400	1	2.78%	
14	2000	40	15,400	2	5.56%	
15	2000	40	8200	1	2.78%	
Total				36	100%	

Source: survey of 2016

As it was shown on the above table 47.22% (17/36) submitted for elders' decision and paid only 2000 Ethiopia birr for bride parents and 40 Ethiopia birr for mediators. However, 52.78% not submitted for the elders'

decision. They added more extra money up to 18,000 Ethiopia birr in behind of the mediators. It was paid in secret by making agreement with bride's family. In front of mediators they conformed only they paid as it was decided by elders. This implies that how people were not submitted for the elders' decision.

## Conclusion

Bride-price payment was highly inflated since 2010 in Sidama people. It was affecting social network and income of two families, and empowering women capacity. Traditional elders attempted to control its inflation but they were not successful. People were paying permitted bride price in front of mediators but in secret, they were adding more money.

## Recommendation

Awareness creation requested on how exaggerated marriage payment affects women empowering capacity. In addition females, particularly girls, are at right position to minimize exaggerated bride price in the society because without their agreement payment was not applicable.

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