



## Socioeconomic Implications of Dowry on Family Welfare in Developing Societies

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### ABSTRACT

This study explicitly aims to analyze the socio-economic implications of dowry on family well-being in Dili, Timor-Leste, with a focus on the relationship between financial stress, social demands, and household well-being. Using a mixed methods approach, data was collected through a household survey of 80 respondents and was complemented by 10 in-depth interviews with community leaders, parents, and young couples. Quantitative data were analyzed by regression to measure the relationship between dowry expenditure and family welfare indicators, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis to capture cultural perceptions and meanings. The results show that excessive dowry spending significantly increases the burden of household debt, hinders investment in children's education, and strengthens unequal power relations in marriage. The qualitative findings also confirm that dowry remains seen as a symbol of social status and cultural legitimacy, which at the same time creates a tension between the preservation of tradition and economic sustainability. This study concludes that dowry has a multidimensional impact that goes beyond financial alone, so integrative policies and community-based awareness are needed to minimize its negative consequences. Theoretically, this research enriches the discourse on economic, cultural, and gender interconnectedness, while practically offering a contribution to efforts to improve family welfare in developing societies.

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## INTRODUCTION

The practice of dowry or dowry in marriage is a phenomenon that still persists in various developing societies, including in South Asia, Africa, and parts of the Pacific region. Although normatively seen as a tradition that binds family ties, in practice dowry often has significant socio-economic implications. In Timor-Leste, this phenomenon is known as *barlake*, which is the giving of property by the groom to the bride's family as part of a wedding procession. This tradition is not only of symbolic value, but also has a direct impact on the economic condition of households. Several studies show that dowry practices can increase family debt, limit investment in children's education, and strengthen gender inequality in households (Makino, 2022; Camellia & Fattah, 2020). This condition makes the topic of dowry relevant to be researched in relation to family welfare in developing societies.

The dowry phenomenon at the global level shows variations in its form, purpose, and impact. In India, for example, a study by Calvi and Keskar (2021) found that dowry spending has serious consequences on household resource allocation, especially for poor families. In Bangladesh, dowry practice has been shown to be a driving factor in the increase in child marriage rates, as families try to reduce the financial burden by marrying girls early (Camellia & Fattah, 2020). Meanwhile, in Nepal, dowry is still seen as an indicator of social status, although legal policies have banned the practice (Shrestha, 2022). This pattern suggests that although the social contexts are different, the impact of dowry on family well-being tends to be similar, i.e. it magnifies economic vulnerability and strengthens unequal social structures.

In the context of Timor-Leste, the practice of *barlake* has a deep cultural significance and serves as a mechanism of social legitimacy in marriage. However, the economic burden it causes often raises debates between the preservation of traditions and the needs of family welfare. Local reports indicate that many families in Dili and its surroundings have had to sell productive assets or go into debt to meet the demands of *barlake* (Gutterres, 2023). This poses a dilemma between maintaining cultural identity and ensuring the sustainability of the household economy. This gap makes Timor-Leste an important case for understanding how traditional practices impact socio-economic development in developing societies.

A review of the literature shows that most research on dowry focuses on the South Asian region, particularly India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, with little attention to the Pacific and Southeast Asian contexts. For example, a study by Sasa and Sisi (2023) highlights how modernization and urbanization are changing dowry demand patterns in South Asia, but does not address how similar practices are taking place in other regions. This creates a research gap regarding local contexts such as Timor-Leste, where *barlake* has its own characteristics that are different from dowry practices in South Asia. Thus, this research has an academic urgency to expand the scope of the analysis to underrepresented regions in the global literature.

In addition, most previous studies have tended to use quantitative approaches that focus on financial expenditure without delving into the cultural

significance and subjective experiences of the perpetrators. Calvi and Keskar (2021), for example, emphasize the aspect of resource allocation, but do not explore the perception of families regarding the social value of dowry. Such an approach has the potential to ignore the non-economic dimensions that actually affect dowry practices, such as social legitimacy, family status, and power relations in the household. Thus, a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data is needed to make the analysis more comprehensive and contextual (Makino, 2022).

Based on the background and gaps of the study, this study aims to analyze the socio-economic implications of dowry practice on family welfare in Dili, Timor-Leste. Specifically, this study will explore the relationship between dowry spending and indicators of family well-being, including income, debt burden, education, and child health. In addition, this study also seeks to understand public perceptions of the social and cultural meaning of dowry and how it affects the dynamics of gender relations in households. This goal emphasizes not only the economic dimension, but also the cultural aspects inherent in the practice of *barlake*.

The contribution of this research is multidimensional. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on the relationship between household economics, culture, and gender in the context of developing societies. By presenting empirical data from Timor-Leste, this study expands the geographical scope that has been dominated by studies from South Asia. Practically, this research can provide insights for policymakers, civil society institutions, and indigenous leaders in designing interventions that balance cultural preservation and improving family welfare. Thus, the results of the research are expected to be the basis for a more inclusive socio-economic development strategy in Timor-Leste.

This research is expected to contribute to a global effort to understand how traditional practices can impact the socio-economic structure of developing societies. By paying attention to local and global dimensions, this research seeks to bridge the debate between the preservation of tradition and modernization. This is in line with the sustainable development agenda that emphasizes the importance of gender equality, poverty alleviation, and improving the quality of family life. Therefore, this research is relevant not only for Timor-Leste, but also for other developing societies that face similar challenges in balancing cultural traditions with socio-economic well-being.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Dowry as a Socio-Cultural Phenomenon in Developing Societies*

The practice of dowry has long historical roots and has persisted despite various legal policies that have sought to limit it. In many developing societies, dowry is not only understood as an economic transaction, but also a symbol of social status and a mechanism for binding relationships between families. However, this cultural meaning often poses a dilemma because it clashes with the limited economic reality of the family. Recent studies confirm that the dowry tradition is still going on massively in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and even extending to other regions such as East Africa and Southeast Asia (Yadav, 2023; Musyaffa Amin Ash Shabah, 2024). In Timor-Leste, a similar practice is known

as barlake, which involves not only the exchange of materials, but also the symbolic value and legitimacy of the customs (Gutterres, 2023). This phenomenon confirms that dowry remains a deeply rooted cultural practice, although it carries not mild economic consequences.

### ***Economic Implications of Dowry on Family Welfare***

The financial impact of dowry is one of the most studied aspects in the literature. Quantitative research in India shows that large expenditures on dowry have a direct impact on household resource allocation, lowering the ability of families to invest in children's education and health (Kurniawan, 2020). In Bangladesh, recent studies show that the economic burden of dowry encourages early marriage practices as families want to reduce social and financial costs (Sarraf et al., 2024). In the context of Timor-Leste, the practice of barlake often requires the groom's family to sell productive assets or go into debt, which has implications for long-term economic vulnerability (Gutterres, 2023). These findings show a consistent pattern that dowry increases the economic burden on families, especially in communities with limited resources.

### ***Gender Dimensions and Power Relations in Dowry Practice***

In addition to the economic aspect, dowry also has a significant impact on gender relations in households. Various studies highlight that financial obligations in dowry often reinforce gender inequality by placing women in subordinate positions. In Nepal, Yadav (2023) shows that despite the prohibition regulations, the practice of dowry is still legitimized through social norms that emphasize the role of women as a symbol of family honor. In Bangladesh, dowry-related social pressures exacerbate women's vulnerability to child marriage and gender-based violence (Sarraf et al., 2024). The gender perspective also becomes relevant in the context of Timor-Leste, where barlake is still seen as an obligation that imposes on the male side, but the implications are felt by all family members (Busyro et al., 2024). Thus, dowry functions not only as a cultural practice, but also as a mechanism for reproducing power relations in society.

### ***Research Gaps and the Need for Contextual Approaches***

The literature on dowry focuses mostly on South Asia, while the Southeast Asia and Pacific region is relatively rarely studied. Previous research has tended to emphasize the economic aspect alone, with little attention to the cultural dimensions and subjective experiences of the individuals involved (Muttaqin et al., 2024). In fact, dowry practices in various regions have unique characteristics that need to be understood contextually. For example, in Timor-Leste, barlake is not only a financial transaction, but also a means of preserving customary identity and social cohesion (Gutterres, 2023). This gap shows the need for a mixed methods research approach that is able to combine quantitative analysis of economic burdens with a qualitative understanding of socio-cultural meaning (Rismawidiawati et al., 2024). Thus, contemporary studies not only measure the material impact of dowry, but also uncover the cultural complexities that surround it.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Types and Approaches of Research***

This study uses a mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design. The selection of mixed methods is based on the need to combine the power of quantitative analysis in measuring the relationship between variables with the depth of qualitative analysis in understanding the socio-cultural meaning of dowry or barlake. This approach allows researchers to not only evaluate the financial impact of dowry on family well-being, but also capture the symbolic, gender, and social dimensions inherent in the practice (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

### ***Population and Sampling Techniques***

The population of this study is households living in the Dili region, Timor-Leste, who are directly involved in the practice of barlake. The sampling technique used is non-probability with the purposive sampling method, because the selection of respondents is based on certain criteria, namely families that in the last five years have carried out marriage with the practice of barlake. A total of 80 household respondents were used as a quantitative sample, while 10 participants consisting of traditional leaders, parents, and young couples were selected for in-depth interviews. This number is considered adequate to obtain data variations while maintaining the focus of research (Etikan & Bala, 2021).

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

Data collection is carried out through two stages. First, quantitative data was collected using a structured questionnaire that contained indicators of family welfare, such as income, debt burden, children's access to education, and health conditions. Some of the question items were adapted from previous research on the economic impact of dowry in South Asia with adjustments to the Timor-Leste context. The validity of the questionnaire content was tested through expert judgment by academics and local figures, while the reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient with the help of SPSS software version 26. Second, qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews that explored experiences, perceptions, and cultural meanings related to barlake practices. In addition, participatory observations at several traditional wedding events were carried out to enrich contextual understanding.

### ***Research Procedure***

The research procedure was carried out sequentially. The initial stage begins with a literature study to formulate a conceptual framework and research instruments. Furthermore, a questionnaire test was carried out on 15 respondents to ensure the clarity of the instruments. After the final instrument was prepared, a field survey was conducted on 80 households in Dili with the help of trained enumerators. Once the quantitative data is collected, the next stage is the conduct of in-depth interviews with 10 key participants. All qualitative data was recorded with the consent of the respondents, then transcribed and analyzed. The final stage involves triangulating quantitative and qualitative data to ensure the validity of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2022).

### *Data Analysis Techniques*

Quantitative data were analyzed by multiple linear regression to test the influence of dowry withdrawal on family welfare indicators. This analysis was performed with SPSS software version 26. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques with the help of NVivo 12 software. Thematic analysis was carried out through the initial coding stage, category identification, and the formation of themes that describe people's perceptions of barlake and its impact on family well-being (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The results of both types of data are then integrated to provide a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic implications of dowry in Timor-Leste.

## **RESEARCH RESULT**

### *Financial Pressures and Debt Burden*

The results of the quantitative analysis show that the practice of dowry or barlake has a significant impact on family financial stability. Of the total 80 respondents analyzed, as many as 64 percent stated that they had to sell productive assets, such as livestock, farmland, or other valuable goods, to meet the demands of barlake. The sale of these assets not only reduces the family's wealth reserves, but also eliminates long-term sources of income that previously supported daily needs.

In addition, 41 percent of respondents reported that they were forced to borrow money, either through relatives or informal financial institutions with high interest rates. This debt then becomes a sustainable structural burden, as the family has to allocate most of the post-marital income to installment payments. Multiple linear regression analysis showed that the greater the value of the barlake paid, the higher the increase in household debt burden, with a regression coefficient of 0.62 and a significance level of  $< 0.05$ . These results suggest a strong causal relationship between the practice of barlake and the economic vulnerability of the family. The following table shows the distribution of family strategies in fulfilling barlake obligations:

Table 1. Family Strategies in Meeting Barlake Obligations (n=80)

<b>Barlake Fulfillment Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Selling productive assets	51	64.0
Borrowing from relatives	23	28.7
Borrowing from a financial institution	10	12.5
Using savings	18	22.5
Other resources (grants, aid)	7	8.7

*(Source: Primary Data, 2025)*

This table reinforces the picture that the majority of families cannot rely on savings or external assistance alone, but rather have to sacrifice productive assets and bear the burden of debt. Thus, the practice of barlake has direct

implications for reduced family financial security and increases the risk of falling into long-term poverty.

***Impact on Children's Education and Health***

In addition to creating a financial burden, *barlake* also has a significant impact on family investment in education and children's health. Of the 80 respondents, as many as 53 percent stated that they had to postpone the payment of their children's school fees after marriage, either in the form of school fees, the purchase of uniforms, or study supplies. Meanwhile, 37 percent of respondents admitted that they could no longer afford to pay for routine health services, such as immunizations, periodic health checks, or the purchase of medicines.

The results of statistical analysis showed a significant negative relationship between the amount of *barlake* expenditure and family investment in children's education, with a coefficient value of -0.47 and a significance level of < 0.05. These findings indicate that the larger the funds allocated to *barlake*, the lower the family's ability to finance the child's education and health. This condition shows a real trade-off between fulfilling cultural obligations and basic family needs.

Table 2. Impact of *Barlake* on Children's Education and Health (n=80)

<b>Impact on Children</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Delay in payment of tuition fees	42	53.0
Temporarily dropping out of school	12	15.0
Decreased quality of nutritional consumption	25	31.2
Unable to afford health care	30	37.5
Reduce the cost of tutoring/additional activities	28	35.0

(Source: Primary Data, 2025)

The table shows that the burden of *barlake* not only has an impact on the macroeconomic aspect of households, but also affects the quality of the next generation of human resources. Education and health, which should be the top priority for family sustainability, are actually reduced due to cultural obligations. Qualitatively, in-depth interviews also found that some parents feel guilty for not being able to meet their children's educational needs in full, but at the same time they still feel obliged to carry out *barlake* in order to maintain the honor of the family.

Thus, the practice of *barlake* presents a huge dilemma: on the one hand it serves as a social mechanism and cultural identity, but on the other hand it comes at the expense of children's well-being, potentially creating cycles of socio-economic vulnerability between generations.

### ***Gender Relations and Household Dynamics***

Qualitative findings show that barlake not only burdens the family economy, but also forms a pattern of unequal gender relations in households. Women are often placed in subordinate positions, while men face social pressure to prove family status through barlake.

One mother stated: *"After marriage, I was often considered a burden because the barlake for me was huge. Sometimes my husband's family feels burdened and blames me"* (O-03, July 14, 2025 interview). This view shows the stigma experienced by women due to the high value of barlake.

From the male side, social pressure is very strong. One young couple revealed: *"If the barlake is not big enough, the villagers will say that I don't respect my wife's family. It makes me owe a lot of money"* (P-02, July 18, 2025 interview). This statement emphasizes that the fulfillment of barlake is an instrument of social legitimacy as well as a source of financial burden.

Traditional leaders add a dimension of gender legitimacy: *"Men have to pay barlake as a sign of responsibility. But sometimes people see women only as a symbol to be traded, this is what creates problems in the household"* (T-01, Interview July 11, 2025). Thus, barlake plays a role in strengthening gender inequality as well as becoming a point of conflict in household dynamics.

### ***Social Perception and Cultural Values***

The majority of people still consider barlake as a cultural obligation with sacred value. It is seen not just as an economic transaction, but as a symbol of the legitimacy of marriage and respect between families. However, there is a sharp difference in perception between generations.

Traditional leaders emphasized the cultural meaning of barlake: *"Barlake is not only about property, but about family ties and respect for women. If there is no barlake, the marriage is considered invalid customarily"* (T-02, Interview July 15, 2025). This emphasizes the position of the barlake as a strong cultural institution.

However, some parents are beginning to admit the dilemma: *"I am proud to be able to pay barlake for my daughter, but sometimes the amount is too much to the point where the family is struggling. So this custom needs to be made lighter"* (O-01, Interview July 19, 2025). This view shows that the middle generation is aware of the economic challenges it poses.

The younger generation is even more critical. A young couple said: *"We want to keep respecting the customs, but barlake should not make the family suffer. That tradition must adapt to the times"* (P-04, Interview July 22, 2025). This quote shows a shift in the meaning of barlake towards a more rational and adaptive direction.

### ***The Tension between Tradition and Economic Necessity***

Results The results of data integration show that the community faces a big dilemma in responding to barlake. On the one hand, barlake is maintained as a cultural identity. On the other hand, it poses a serious economic burden on families.

A traditional leader emphasized the importance of preserving tradition: *"If barlake is eliminated, then the custom will be lost. It's not just about the economy, it's*

*about who we are as Timorese*" (T-03, Interview July 12, 2025). This view shows the symbolic dimension of barlake which is closely linked to cultural identity.

However, parents are beginning to question its sustainability: *"I see a lot of young people struggling after marriage. If the barlake is too big, they start living with debt. It's not good for the family's future"* (O-05, July 27, 2025 interview). This statement affirms the urgent need to balance tradition and economic reality.

The young couple even proposed a reform of the tradition: *"Barlake can remain, but it must be simple. It's just symbolic, it doesn't need to make families poor"* (P-06, Interview July 25, 2025). This quote illustrates the direction of value change in the younger generation who are more pragmatic.

Thus, barlake is at a crossroads between the preservation of tradition and the economic needs of the family. This tension opens up space for social negotiation that could give birth to new forms of barlake practice in the future.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the practice of barlake in Dili, Timor Leste, poses multidimensional consequences that are closely related to the economic burden on the family, a decrease in the quality of human resource investment, the reproduction of gender inequality, and the tension between tradition and economic reality. Quantitative and qualitative analysis conducted in a triangulative manner shows how strong customary norms are maintained despite providing serious pressure to the sustainability of households.

The regression findings showed that the higher the expenditure on barlake, the greater the increase in household debt burden, with a coefficient of 0.62 at a significance level below 0.05. Empirically, 64 percent of respondents sold productive assets such as livestock or land, and another 41 percent were forced to owe to relatives or informal institutions. This is in line with the findings of Calvi and Keskar (2021) who affirm that dowry has direct implications for family financial vulnerability. The long-term consequence of the sale of productive assets is the loss of the family's economic capacity to maintain income and food security (Tran, 2024). Thus, barlake serves as a cultural mechanism as well as an instrument that can trap families in a cycle of debt and poverty.

Regression analysis also showed a significant negative relationship between spending on barlake and investment in children's education (coefficient -0.47). Field data support this result, with 53 percent of respondents delaying their child's school payments and 37 percent reducing their allocation for routine health. Comparative studies in South Asia found a similar pattern that marriage payments tend to depress girls' educational investment (Makino, 2022). This decrease in investment has the potential to reduce the accumulation of human capital and increase the risk of reproduction of poverty between generations (Choudhary & Singh, 2024). These findings show how indigenous practices can have implications for the next generation's loss of opportunities for decent education and health.

Qualitative results show that barlake is not only an economic transaction, but also a means of reproducing power relations in households. Women are often seen as burdens when the value of the barlake paid is high, while men face social pressure to prove status through the amount of barlake. This is consistent with

research by Srivastava et al. (2024) which shows that dowry demand is associated with low women's power in household decision-making as well as an increased risk of gender-based violence. In addition, Shrestha et al. (2024) assert that entrenched cultural norms can strengthen the legitimacy of discriminatory practices against women. The findings of this study confirm that barlake widens the gender gap and has the potential to trigger domestic conflicts.

Although the majority of respondents still consider barlake as a condition for the legality of traditional marriage, there are striking differences in views between generations. The older generation considers barlake as a symbol of honor and cultural identity, while the younger generation is more critical of its economic impact. This dynamic is in line with Musyaffa's (2024) study which shows that the dowry tradition in Southeast Asia has undergone a transformation in meaning due to modernization pressures. In Timor Leste, the sustainability of barlake will be largely determined by the extent to which communities are able to negotiate new, simpler forms while retaining their symbolic meaning. UNDP (2024) also recommends a community-based approach in addressing customary practices that have the potential to exacerbate household economic vulnerability.

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature by providing empirical evidence from the context of Timor Leste that is still rarely studied, thus complementing the dowry study that has been dominant in the South Asian context. In practical terms, this study shows the importance of policy interventions at two levels: first, mitigating the economic impact through productive asset protection programs, financial literacy, and educational assistance; Second, cultural reform through community dialogue by involving indigenous leaders and the younger generation to develop more adaptive barlake practices.

However, this study has limitations on a relatively small sample size ( $n=80$  for quantitative;  $n=10$  for qualitative), so generalization of results is limited. In addition, the cross-cut design only allows for correlation analysis, not causality. Further research with longitudinal data and wider geographic coverage is needed to more comprehensively understand the long-term impact of barlake on family well-being and social dynamics in Timor Leste.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study shows that the practice of dowry or barlake in Timor-Leste has complex socio-economic implications for family welfare. Quantitative analysis proves that dowry spending significantly increases the burden of household debt, reduces allocations for children's education and health, and decreases the capacity of families to maintain economic sustainability. The qualitative findings confirm that this practice not only creates financial pressure, but also reinforces unequal power relations in the household, gives rise to gender conflicts, and limits women's autonomy. Thus, dowry doubles as a cultural symbol as well as a factor that hinders the family's well-being in the long run.

Although the majority of people still view dowry as a customary obligation that guarantees the legitimacy of marriage, this study shows that there are intergenerational dynamics that open up space for traditional reform. The

younger generation is more critical of its economic impact and encourages the simplification of practices without losing its symbolic value. Theoretically, the study enriches the discourse on cultural, economic, and gender interconnectedness in developing societies, while practically recommending the need for integrative policies that combine community dialogue, social protection programs, and family economic empowerment. With this approach, it is hoped that the negative burden of dowry can be minimized without ignoring the inherent cultural values in Timor-Leste society.

### ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research should adopt a longitudinal and cross-regional comparative approach to better understand the long-term socio-economic and gendered impacts of dowry practices in developing societies, particularly within the Pacific and Southeast Asian contexts. Expanding the study beyond Dili to rural and cross-border communities in Timor-Leste could reveal how cultural adaptation, modernization, and migration influence the transformation of *barlake*. Additionally, integrating participatory action research and economic modeling could help identify sustainable mechanisms for balancing tradition with economic welfare. Investigating the roles of women's empowerment initiatives, customary law reforms, and intergenerational perceptions would also enrich theoretical discourse and inform culturally sensitive policy interventions that promote both equity and cultural preservation.

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