

«Dowry is a Society Cancer»

This is the title of a short article written by Mrs. Usha Francis and published in the section "Indian Women in the News" of Newslink,⁽¹⁾ April 1978. "The war on dowry," she says, "is a national necessity, as essential as the war on hunger, poverty, illiteracy and growth of population. Social service volunteers have to take up the task of eradicating dowry. The masses should be educated to curb this social evil which is spreading like cancer, heading society toward decay. It is the root cause of the misery of millions. This dowry virus seems to be immune to social criticism, and the right type of vaccine is not used to prevent its onslaught... We call upon both men and women, young girls and boys, to participate in an anti-dowry drive to help the nation overcome this evil of "selling" girls at the time of marriage."

This forceful appeal by Mrs. Francis deserves support and adherence from all those who have experienced the evils of this firmly established institution but dare not denounce it. In the Arab countries, selling girls works

both ways. A girl in most cases has to "buy" the bridegroom through the money allotted her by her parents or the money she has earned or is planning to earn from her job or her profession. In other cases, the bridegroom buys the girl by paying a *mahr*, i.e. a sum of money he gives the parents in return for the girl or keeps in her name by a promissory note or bank deposit.

In both cases, marriage becomes a bargain, a business affair based on purely material interest. It is doomed to failure if the transaction fails, i.e. if, in one way or another, the money disappears or fails to satisfy the greed of the husband.

This tradition is very difficult to uproot as it requires a complete change in mentality and in character. Only by implanting in the young an attitude of honesty and the understanding that interested, selfish love is no love at all, can we hope to build a new and sane attitude toward marriage.

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