

Opposed but Not Resistant

What Youth Attitudes on Dowry Actually Tell Us

A Primary Survey on Dowry Attitudes Among Indian Youth

There is a version of the dowry story that Indian society has largely agreed to tell itself. Dowry is wrong. It is illegal. Educated young people oppose it. The 1961 Prohibition Act exists. And yet, somewhere between that collective agreement and the actual moment of a wedding negotiation, the story changes.

This survey did not set out to prove that young people support dowry. Most of them do not. What it set out to examine was something harder to pin down: what does opposition to dowry actually look like when it is held alongside family pressure, social conformity, regional custom and economic logic? The answer, drawn from 77 respondents across 14 states, is uncomfortable. Indian youth are morally opposed to dowry. They are not, in any organised sense, resisting it.

Where Youth Actually Stand

The survey used a structured 24-question instrument, with 20 questions across five analytical dimensions: moral position and normative belief, legal awareness and institutional faith, economic rationalisation, social pressure and family mediation, and harm recognition and responsibility distance. Responses were coded on a 1-5 scale and aggregated into an Overall Dowry Orientation Score ranging from 5 to 20, where higher scores reflect stronger anti-dowry orientation.

The societal average came out at 15.36. On the spectrum this research constructed, that places Indian youth in the Moral Opposition zone, one category short of Active Resistance. It is, on the face of it, an encouraging number. But the devil is in where that number sits, and in what it conceals.

Spectrum Zone	Score Range	Societal Average
Dowry Acceptance (Low Resistance)	5 to 8	15.36
Normative Compliance (Moderate Resistance)	9 to 11	
Moral Opposition (High Resistance)	12 to 15	
Active Resistance (Maximum Resistance)	16 to 20	

Table 1: Dowry Orientation Spectrum with societal mean (n=77)

The score sits at the lower boundary of its zone, closer to Normative Compliance than to Active Resistance. It signals a generation that knows what it thinks, but is not yet sure what it will do.

The Moral Position is Solid. The Institutional Faith is Not.

On questions of belief, respondents were largely unambiguous. Nearly 73 percent agreed or strongly agreed that dowry is morally wrong even when both families consent. Over 80 percent said marriages without dowry are definitely possible. Around 55 percent strongly disagreed that dowry helps make a marriage successful.

These are not ambivalent numbers. The moral architecture is there. What collapses is the trust that law and institutions can translate that architecture into reality.

84.2 percent of respondents knew about the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961. That is a high awareness figure, genuinely higher than what surveys of this kind usually turn up. But only 19.5 percent considered the law somewhat effective, and fewer than 1 percent called it very effective. Over 62 percent rated it as ineffective or strongly ineffective. More strikingly, 55.9 percent believed that even if laws were stricter, they could not practically be enforced within families.

This matters enormously for policy. A population that knows the law exists but does not believe it can do anything is not a population that will use it. The gap between legal awareness and institutional faith is not a communication problem. It is a credibility problem. Young people have watched enough to know that Section 498A gets invoked, FIRs get filed, and family negotiations still happen behind closed doors.

Economic Logic Persists Underneath the Moral Position

One of the more analytically interesting findings concerns economic rationalisation. The survey asked respondents whether dowry is helpful in establishing a new household. Only about 7 percent agreed or strongly agreed. When asked whether a couple's financial stability is at risk without dowry, over 70 percent said definitely not.

On the surface, this is strong rejection of the economic case for dowry. But when asked whether the amount of dowry in a marriage is influenced by the education, physical appearance and social standing of both the bride and groom, 75.4 percent agreed or strongly agreed. That is a different kind of answer. It is not saying dowry is economically useful. It is saying that dowry functions as a market. The groom's government job, his caste ranking, his education, his family's social standing: these are understood as variables that determine a price. That understanding is almost universally shared.

In Bihar, this logic has been codified so openly that newspapers have published what they call a dowry rate list. An IAS officer commands between one and three crore rupees. An IPS officer, 80 lakh to two crore. A government peon, five lakh. The list is shocking not because it exists, but because it is reported as a piece of background information rather than a scandal. Youth in the survey understand this market. They oppose it morally. They do not know how to exit it.

Social Pressure Carries the Mechanism

If legal institutions are distrusted and economic logic is acknowledged, what actually makes dowry happen? The survey points consistently to social pressure and community mediation as the dominant mechanism.

Over 80 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that most dowry transactions happen because of pressure from relatives and the community. Nearly 80 percent agreed that parents feel social pressure to give dowry. About half said that dowry pressure increases with the number of daughters in a family.

Survey Question	Agree / Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree / Strongly Disagree (%)
Most dowry transactions happen due to community pressure	68.8	9.1
Parents feel social pressure to give dowry	80.6	~3
Dowry is morally wrong even if both families agree	72.8	~10
Dowry can lead to domestic violence or suicide	86.9	~4
I would neither give nor take dowry under any circumstance	79.2 (personal position)	9.1

Table 2: Selected attitudinal responses, survey respondents (n=77)

The question that perhaps best captures the central tension of this research is the one that asked respondents to describe their own position on dowry in their marriage. 79.2 percent said they would neither give nor take dowry under any circumstances. 9.1 percent said they would resist dowry but that family pressure may influence the outcome. And 9.1 percent said they would accept or give dowry if the family expected it.

That 79.2 percent figure sounds like a mandate. But it is a stated intention, not a tested one. The 9 percent who honestly said family pressure may influence them are almost certainly not the only ones for whom that is true. The social science literature on this is unambiguous: intention-behaviour gaps in sensitive social norms are large, systematic and predictable. The gap between what respondents say they will do at 22 and what they do at 28, when a specific match is on the table and parents are involved, is exactly where dowry survives.

Does Geography or Tradition Make a Difference?

Two sub-group comparisons from this survey are worth sitting with. Urban respondents scored 15.66 on the orientation spectrum, against 14.07 for non-urban respondents. That 1.59-point gap is meaningful. It does not mean urban youth are immune to dowry pressure, but it does suggest that geography correlates with the strength of anti-dowry orientation in ways that future targeted intervention should take seriously.

The second comparison is between respondents who reported being influenced by cultural customs and traditions and those who did not. The influenced group scored 15.08; the uninfluenced group, 16.01. Again, a gap that matters. Tradition does not determine attitudes, but it shapes the floor from which attitudes rise. Respondents who reported stronger cultural influence were more likely to show ambivalence across the economic rationalisation and social pressure dimensions specifically.

The state-level distribution of respondents in this survey was heavily weighted towards Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and West Bengal. These are not states where dowry is a marginal practice. They are states where the pattern is structurally embedded, where regional customs in Rajasthan tie dowry to patrilineal property preservation and where Bihar's rate lists make economic negotiation explicit. The findings should be read with that geographic weight in mind.

What This Means in Practice

The overall picture this survey draws is of a generation that has genuinely absorbed the moral argument against dowry. That is real progress, and it should not be dismissed. A society where 73 percent of young people call dowry morally wrong, even when both families agree, is different from one where that number is 30 percent.

But moral progress has not translated into structural resistance. The average score of 15.36 places youth at the boundary of Moral Opposition. They know it is wrong. They believe it leads to violence. They think marriages without dowry are entirely possible. And then they say that community pressure is what makes it happen, that laws cannot be enforced within families, and that the groom's job and status still shapes how much is asked.

That is not contradiction. That is a coherent description of how entrenched social norms survive moral critique. The norm moves underground. It gets framed as voluntary, as tradition, as the bride's right to her inheritance share, as a gift rather than a demand. Youth see through these reframings at the level of principle. At the level of practice, they remain embedded in the same family structures and social networks that enforce the norm.

Policy that takes this survey seriously would not invest primarily in awareness campaigns. Awareness is high. What is low is institutional credibility and the social infrastructure to support refusal. Young people who want to refuse dowry need to know that doing so will not cost them a marriage, isolate their parents or mark their family as difficult. That requires community-level norm change that legal enforcement alone cannot produce.

The question this research leaves open is how to close the distance between what this generation believes and what it will actually do when the moment arrives. That distance is where the next decade of dowry deaths will be decided.

Note on Methodology

This survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire of 24 questions (4 background, 20 dimension-based) targeting youth respondents across India. Responses were collected across 14 states with 77 valid entries. 85.7 percent of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25. Responses were coded on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, aggregated into five analytical dimensions and then into an Overall Dowry Orientation Score (adjusted 5 to 20 scale). Reverse coding was applied where necessary. The survey does not claim statistical representativeness and should be read as exploratory attitudinal research.