

## **Afghanistan: Shia Clerics Ban Marriage Payments**

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Some women in Helmand say decision will reduce respect for them.

Shia Muslim scholars in Helmand have ruled against the traditional payment of a “bride price”, a view that has also been supported by some Sunni clerics in the southern province.

The prohibition has proved unpopular amongst some Shia women, who say that if a marriage is not sealed by a financial transaction, brides will lose the respect of their in-laws and the wider community.

Although Helmand’s residents are mostly Sunni Muslims, there are an estimated 40,000 Shia in the province.

Among this community, the bride price ranges between 2,000 and 30,000 US dollars, whereas in other parts of Afghanistan, the payment is made in livestock.

Raising the cash imposes a heavy burden on families, and young men who want to avoid the real risk of remaining single are prepared to travel abroad to earn the money. Often travelling to Iran, these illegal migrants are vulnerable to imprisonment, deportation, injury and worse.

Shokria, a high school student in Helmand’s main town Lashkar Gah, said the size of the bride price would determine the value her future husband’s family would place on her. Lack of payment would raise questions about her virginity.

“If a family doesn’t get a bride price for their daughter, people will think the girl had poor morals and was a burden to her father,” Shokria said. “Paying a bride price protects a girl from such accusations. If my father doesn’t obtain a price for me, I won’t be prepared to get married.”

However, Qasem Ali Jafari, who chairs the Shia religious council in Helmand, disagreed with those who believed marriage payment determined a woman’s worth.

“If they think a woman’s value is in money, they are wrong,” he said. “Money does not reflect the value of women. A woman gains value through love and friendship, and the value of a husband and a wife comes only from love and trust.”

Jafari said the council believed the custom went against Islamic precepts, and predicted that the ban would ultimately win public support.

“We gathered all the religious scholars and tribal elders together and came to a decision that will benefit the public,” he said. “We made the decision because the cost of living has increased. People have been spending a lot of money, and it’s become a competition, with thousands of people invited to some weddings. The public will therefore welcome our decision.”

He said enforcing the ban would be easy, because it counted as a religious ruling.

“It also benefits the public, so they will put it into practice and support the decision themselves,” he added, noting that the council would be meeting every six months to discuss the decision and people’s response to it.

Some Sunni religious scholars in Helmand, like Maulavi Abdorrahim, agree that the practice went entirely against Islam.

“Receiving money for one’s daughter from her husband is like eating the flesh from dead bodies,” Abdorrahim said. “It is unlawful to use such money to buy food, to spend it or to do business with it.”

Abdorrahim said a woman’s value could not be quantified in cash.

“Are those girls who think the bride price enhances their value aware that many men have to kill, rob, smuggle and engage in other illegal activities to pay it?” he asked. “Have they thought about how they are going to live if their husband is in debt?”

In what was seen as an attempt to win popular support, the Sunni Taleban issued an edict in 2010 restricting the maximum bride-price in the Tagab district of Kapisa province, north of Kabul. (See **Taleban Try Hearts-and-Minds Tactics**.)

But others say the council has chosen to ignore practical issues.

Karima, a student at the Malalay high school in Lashkar Gah, said some families needed the payment in order to set their daughters up in married life. Sometimes the money was used to buy home appliances and thus it counted as part of the dowry of household goods which a bride is expected to bring when, as tradition dictates, she sets up home with the groom's family.

"There are people on the [Shia] religious council who are well-off and who don't need money in return for their daughters," she said. "They can give their daughters all the items they need once they are married. But my father has nothing, and he can't afford to provide me with the things I will need in my future life."

Shakila, a housewife, said the ban might encourage men to marry more than one woman and then treat them unfairly.

"If paying a bride price is forbidden, every man will marry two women because there will be no need for him to have money. And if a man has two or three wives, there will be big problems in the family," she said, adding, "I would never let my husband get married again. If he insisted, I would leave."

But those who face paying the bride price seem happier about the decision.

Abdolhaq, 28, said his life had been dogged by the pressure of trying to raise the sums required.

"My father-in-law asked me for 20,000 dollars," he said. "I tried to raise the sum for a full five years. I went to Iran, where my friends and I were imprisoned for a year for having no passports. We then returned home and I did get married. But I still owe people for the bride price."

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