



AustralAsian Centre
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS & HEALTH

Evaluation of the National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse Project

SUMMARY REPORT

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for the AustralAsian Centre
for Human Rights & Health

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1. Introduction

The *National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse* project is being evaluated by Effective Change. This report provides an interim summary of the project's process and outcomes to the end of 2021.

Dowry abuse is an under-recognised form of family violence. Driven by a combination of factors including gender inequality, patriarchal attitudes and gendered power dynamics within the family unit, dowry abuse is considered a complex form of violence due to the intersection of culture and gender.

2. The National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse

The National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse is a community-led project to develop a national framework to prevent dowry abuse in Australia. This three-year project is a collaboration between Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change and the AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH). The project is funded by the Department of Social Services through its Community-led Projects to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children grant, as part of the Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022. The project commenced in 2019 and will conclude in 2022.

This project recognises, that like other forms of violence against women, dowry abuse is preventable. By engaging with communities through education and awareness raising activities, the prevalence of dowry abuse in Australia can be reduced. Since commencement in 2019, a total of 39 workshops have been delivered and, through surveys and workshops, the project has reached 472 people from the South Asian community living across Australia.

3. Background and context

There is limited data on the incidence of dowry abuse in Australia, as it is a relatively recent phenomenon. Dowry abuse is not consistently recognised in the Australian context as a form of family violence, largely due to its culturally specific nature. While dowry giving is most commonly practised by communities from South Asia, dowry abuse forms part of a wider pattern of violence against women. Factors driving both dowry abuse and violence against women more broadly include patriarchal beliefs that commodify women and attitudes condoning violence in the community. However, while dowry abuse is driven by patriarchal beliefs, gendered power dynamics within the family unit play a specific role as extended family members, including mothers-in-law and occasionally fathers-in-law, may be involved in perpetrating this form of violence.

Research indicates that primary prevention is key to ending violence against women. Primary prevention is designed to stop violence before it begins, targeting the whole population including those already perpetrating or experiencing violence (Our Watch, 2015). It is increasingly recognised in the literature that successful interventions need to focus on primary prevention to end family violence (Hyman et al., 2000). Furthermore, if efforts are not concentrated on preventing violence, the cycle will continue (Gundersen, 2002).

4. Project aims and objectives

The overall aim of this project is to develop a national framework to prevent dowry abuse in Australia. The project is working with communities most affected by dowry abuse in Australia – in particular South Asian communities – to end this form of gender-based violence.

The objectives of the project are to:

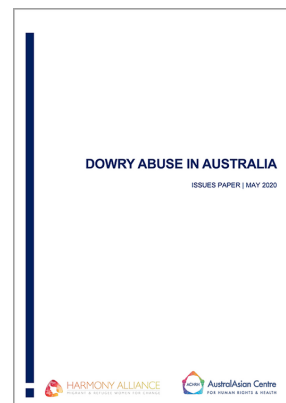
- Build capacity in the South Asian community to understand the drivers of dowry abuse using a primary prevention framework as the underlying concept
- Provide a pathway for structural change
- Prevent future risks of dowry abuse and associated family violence

5. Project activities, engagement and results

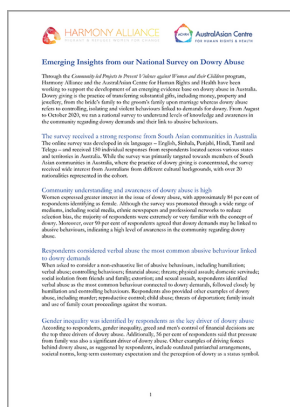
To support the development of an emerging evidence-base on dowry abuse in Australia and to help prevent dowry abuse in Australia by working with communities, the project activities and progress to the end of 2021 is provided below.

5.1 An issues paper was prepared and published (May, 2020) to explore considerations for the development of a National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse, drawing inspiration from existing work in the violence prevention space, particularly Our Watch's Change the story framework (2015)

5.2 A national survey was undertaken from August to October 2020, to understand levels of knowledge and awareness in the community regarding dowry demands and their link to abusive behaviours. The survey, developed in six languages – English, Sinhala, Punjabi, Hindi, Tamil and Telegu – received **150 individual responses** from respondents located across Australia. A national survey targeting service providers was also undertaken, completed by **30 respondents**.



An Emerging Insights paper was prepared, reporting on key findings from the national survey (October, 2020). Key findings included:



Gender inequality was identified by respondents as the key driver of dowry abuse. According to the respondents, gender inequality, greed and men's control of financial decisions are the top three drivers of dowry abuse. More than half of respondents (56%) identified pressure from family as a significant driver of dowry abuse. Other driving forces behind dowry abuse reported by respondents included outdated patriarchal arrangements, societal norms, long-term customary expectation and the perception of dowry as a status symbol.

32% of respondents had either experienced dowry abuse or know someone who had.

Respondents considered verbal abuse the most common abusive behaviour linked to dowry demands. When asked to consider a non-exhaustive list of abusive behaviours, respondents identified verbal abuse as the most common behaviour connected to dowry demands, followed closely by humiliation and controlling behaviours.

5.3 Five national, online focus groups were conducted in late 2020. Focus group participants were recruited via the national surveys. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the survey findings in depth and to discuss the drivers of dowry abuse in Australia and the actions needed to prevent its perpetration. The focus groups included three women-only groups, one men-only group and one service provider group and were attended by a total of 28 people.

A **thematic analysis of the focus groups** has been written in preparation for future journal articles. The thematic analysis found the drivers of dowry abuse raised by participants included:

- gender inequality
- cultural norms
- distortion of culture
- family and community pressures.

Silence from the community and pressure to maintain silence about abuse situations was identified as the key factor passively supporting dowry abuse.

Factors contributing to the prevention of dowry abuse included:

- access to education, employment and economic independence for women and girls
- generational change in attitudes

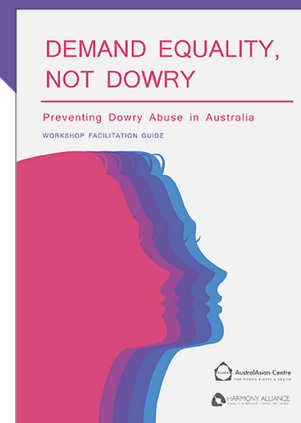
Education – both broad community education and tailored education programs for community cohorts and for service providers – was seen as the key approach to prevent dowry abuse before it occurs.



5.4 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' community workshops

Community members interested in organising and facilitating community-based workshops were recruited from the focus group participants. **14 interested community members participated in one of two Facilitator Training sessions** delivered by Adjunct Professor Manjula O'Connor.

The project partners developed training materials for the Workshop Facilitators. These included a **Facilitation Guide** for the community facilitators and a **Workshop Slide Deck**. The Facilitation Guide provides facilitators with contextual information about dowry abuse, why the project is being undertaken and what a primary prevention approach involves. It also provides facilitators with an outline of the workshop structure to follow, questions and answers and instructions for online delivery. The workshop session commences with project context and background information. The workshops centre discussion around three hypothetical scenarios exploring dowry abuse situations, compiled from a range of real world experiences. The Slide Deck presents these scenarios.



Seven people who completed the facilitator training delivered 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' workshops.

Delivery of 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' community workshops

To date, **32 online community workshops have been delivered** by seven community facilitators, reaching **more than 250 people**. Further workshops will be delivered in 2022.

Feedback from the 2021 community workshop participants show that:

- 91% felt that the scenarios discussed in the workshop were realistic
- 98% felt that the workshop increased their understanding of dowry demands and abuse
- 88% felt very confident and 12% somewhat confident to inform others about the negative effect of dowry abuse after attending the workshop
- 98% found the discussion with other participants valuable in developing their understanding of dowry demands and abuse
- 94% would recommend the workshop to someone they know.

Five community facilitators participated in a focus group to reflect on their experiences. They reported that they enjoyed facilitating the groups, felt well-supported in their roles and that the workshop material worked well. Further, they reported that participants enjoyed the discussions, were engaged with the topic and found the hypothetical scenarios to be realistic.

5.5 In other outcomes of the project, an article on '**The health impacts of Dowry Abuse on South Asian Communities in Australia**' authored by Adjunct Professor Dr Manjula O'Connor has been published in the Medical Journal of Australia (MJA), drawing on the survey results and other findings of the project.

6. Next steps

- In 2022, the project will continue to deliver community workshops.
- A final evaluation report will be delivered in late 2022.
- The final stage of the project will be to develop the National Primary Prevention of Dowry Abuse Framework.
- The project will conclude in September 2022.

7. Overall reflections in 2021

Despite all of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated and varied public health restrictions during 2020 and 2021, the project has delivered on each activity and managed to reach community members across Australia. A total of **39 workshops** have been delivered and, through surveys and workshops, the project has reached **472 people** from the South Asian community living across Australia. In some ways, the versatility of online delivery has assisted the project in achieving that reach. Further, the amount of original and secondary research conducted is significantly addressing the gaps in knowledge and understanding around dowry abuse in Australia, developing sound strategies for primary prevention of dowry abuse and actively engaging and working with the community in this process.