

AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health Inc

www.achrh.org



ACHRH
Empowering Communities

**December 2022
Newsletter**



**Manjula
O'Connor**

The 16 days of activism have just concluded. But our activism and fight against family domestic violence continues all year round. We at the AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health have been active for 10 years (yes, our birthdate is 12 September 2012!!).

Happy birthday to ACHRH!

December 10 is Human Rights Day, declared by the UN 74 years ago. Human rights are fundamental rights that are inalienable, inherent and applicable to all human beings. The right to be safe and healthy are clearly laid out. ACHRH upholds and promotes the rights.

We at the ACHRH use innovative means of promoting change. The tools for community-based education programs are combined with community based participatory research. The latest project is a community participatory theatre project called Sneh. A team of 18 volunteers is involved in producing the skits. Thanks to theatre director Namrata Sharma and team leader Marshie Perera Rajakumar.

And we are making a documentary about it with the help of film director Emma Macey Storch. Please read more about Sneh from our team member Shruti Malaviya in this newsletter.

The Federal Government Attorney General's Department recently held round table consultations on what the coercive control legislation should look like. I was invited to be part of it. Misidentification of victims as perpetrators by the police happens in a significant number of women. The coercive control legislation will help to correctly identify the perpetrators and protect the victims. I also spoke about coercive demands for cash and gifts from a new bride. ACHRH led the campaign against dowry abuse, and it has now become national. See the article printed in Sydney Morning Herald by Wendy Tuohey on 22/11/22.

Finally, we invite you to the end of the year Annual General Meeting on 15/12/22. It will be held at Scott's Church in the City, 6 30 pm. We have two exciting guests of honour:

Ms Viv Nguyen (Chair of Victorian Multicultural Commission). Viv will speak about the role of multicultural plurality versus ethno-specific tools in stopping family domestic violence.

Ms Mitu Bhowmick. (Director of Mind Blowing Films). Mitu will speak about the role of arts in stopping domestic violence.

We invite the readers of this newsletter to join us. Anyone who want to attend, please email org.achrh@gmail.com

Enjoy the festive season with your family and friends!

Dr Manjula Datta O'Connor, Adjunct Professor

Founding and Executive Director ACHRH

Vocalising conversations about violence against women with Sneh

By: Shruti Malaviya

On 12 November 2022, at ISKON Temple in Melbourne, Victoria, a community came together to have conversations. Those conversations are ones which are generally held in hushed tones by the South Asian community, the ones brought up in hesitation, in quiet whispers, away from the prying ears, or in a tight circle of women. Conversations which are met with shame, discredit and dismissal were instead met with understanding, engagement and respect. These are conversations about domestic and family violence, and its prevalence and dire consequences if not spoken about. The purpose of these conversations was to facilitate the self-awareness that all members of the community have a part to play in preventing violence. Whether you are a bystander, you know of someone who may not be acting like their usual self, or if you know someone experiencing violence, you can make a lasting impact. There is no such thing as too small an act for those who have experienced domestic violence in the past and those presently experiencing it.



About the Project

The Sneh Theatre Project (**Sneh**) was born in mid-2021. It arose from the AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health (**ACHRH**) seeing a need to engage community in these discussions. The need was triggered by the tragic deaths of numerous women as a result of violence in the Epping community during COVID-19 lockdowns. In South Asian cultures it's commonly thought that violence only occurs when someone hits you. Even then, a hit here and there is considered normal. The concepts of financial abuse, emotional abuse, gaslighting, slavery-like practice and isolation, among others, are not seen as vehicles for violence. This needs to change for the better and brighter futures of the women in our community.

The three *Skits* consisted of short theatre performances by Epping community members depicting scenarios based on real-life experiences involving subtle and overt acts of violence against women. The audience engaged in discussions following each skit to unwrap the harmful behaviours which have been normalised and explore how the community is complicit. And, importantly, what each person, as a part of this community, can do to change the narrative.



Skit One – Dowry expectations

The concept of dowry was traditionally introduced to equip women with their rightful inheritance upon marriage, as they would join another family. Ask anyone walking down the street and they will share their understanding of dowry to mean something else entirely: a payment made to the groom's side of the family by the bride at the time of marriage. It is a rife practice particularly among the South Asian diaspora, despite it now being an illegal practice.

The discussions on this topic addressed that brides and their families feel pressure to give into the dowry demands for the fear of how the community will speak of *them*. It was curious that no one questioned the boldness of a groom's family to

make such demands. In today's age where dowry is illegal, such demands are often made on the precipice of finalising the wedding ceremony. This burdens the bride to either give in (regardless of capacity to oblige) or to bear the shame and exile for calling off a wedding.

As a community, we can transform our responses to stories of cancelled weddings and dowry demands. We can shut down gossip, call out such behaviour, practices and provide support to those who are being exploited.

Skit Two – Money, money, money

Another common dynamic is seeing men bearing the burden of financial responsibility and management in families and excluding women from such decisions. This does a disservice to men by adding unnecessary burden and impacting their relationship with money, parents, and their own partner and children.



The audience in attendance explored what a home would look like if partners were equally involved in financial decision making and working out their priorities. They explored the impact of their children growing up seeing conflict between parents in relation to money, and how the limiting gender norms can be harmful to cognitive and value development.

Skit Three – The right to feel safe

One of the most dangerous narratives we see play out in our community is encouraging women to return to abusive and violent partners and homes to avoid being shamed and exiled from the community. There was a respectful discussion about the importance of second chances versus when it is necessary to prioritise wellbeing, and safety, and break away.



However, it cannot be overstated that safety of the individual is paramount, above all else.

Whilst suggestions to try and make a relationship work may be paved with good intentions, it's vital to be conscious that you do not know the full extent of an individual's situation. Suggestions to go back to an abusive partner or family can have exceptionally detrimental effects. They can, and have in the past, result in preventable death.

The Sneh Team

The enormity of the Project would not have been possible without a team. Among the village of people, the following people played an instrumental role in bringing Sneh to life: Marshie Rajakumar, Project Manager; Namrata Ravi, Theatre Director;

and Emma Macey-Storch, Film Director. On behalf of the Sneh team, special thanks all the participants who shared their personal stories of courage, bravery, strength and resilience, inspiring everyone in the room.

Shruti Malaviya is a qualified lawyer, a creative, a writer, and a volunteer who is passionate about the primary prevention of domestic and family violence. She facilitated the discussion at ISKON Temple and feels empowered to help eradicate the stigma and normalise engaging in these discussions within the community.



Freedom

A poem by Nandita Chakraborty

Freedom

When night falls, the house is quiet, the children asleep now.

She is alone on her sofa; her dinner plate lays untouched, eyes tired with tears, but her heart continues to weep.

Today he nearly choked her, but he was not thoroughly inebriated; he let go of her when he heard her scream their daughter's name.

The bruises were nearly purple now, but tomorrow's sun would reflect a different colour and story; she would have to take the blame.

She would have called his parents, but then the same story, they will blame his alcohol.

Relatives will tell her to be strong, and she will be itching to yell back. 'Don't tell me to stay strong, and don't say anything at all!

Yesterday it was her parent's fault for not doing enough for their wedding; her education has only taught her to eat, and he could have done better-marrying someone else with better money.

The day after tomorrow would have been the same, and the day after, then the week later, a month later and still after twenty years after she stuck through, not because she wanted to, not because of her being weak, or being a mother but she thought he is a father, he might change.

Just then, a speck of dust glowed at the first ray of the sun that peaked through the curtain; she watched it for a long time, the particles dancing busily.

She saw it all; she felt tinner than that particle as if invisible to the naked eye, invisible to him, his family; she was his in his gilded cage, invisible to many.

A splash of cold water on her face made the past surface cloudy as if back when they first met when he first screamed at her for a trivial thing when he demanded cash for the wedding.

Why did love mis-guide her so much that she forgot to speak to her intuitions?

Is it because she thought love conquers all situations?

If she only heard herself talking herself out of the wedding, today she would have another tale-telling.

She looked into the mirror, her reflection smiling back at her; nothing yet; this was not the end of her but only the beginning.

Her suitcase already packed, her children were ready to go, and they had a new life waiting outside that door.

Today was not yesterday; tomorrow is not the next twenty years of waiting in speculation ... her freedom nor his changing.



Bionote

Nandita Chakraborty is an Australian Indian Writer. Originally from Kolkata, India, she moved to Australia in 2000. She is also known as the Accidental Writer because she not only survived a horrific rock-climbing accident which led to her permanent cognitive impairment but her career in writing is often an accidental metaphor.

The Mighty Nanos and the Sparks of Light

A poem by Shweta Mishra "shawryaa"

I am not an eagle,

I am no elephant,

nor am I the king of any jungle;

I am just a firefly,



and I have fire within.

I am not the mighty shark,
nor the royal crocodile,
nor am I the rhino with a unique horn;

I am just an ordinary earthworm,
useful for soil and life on earth.

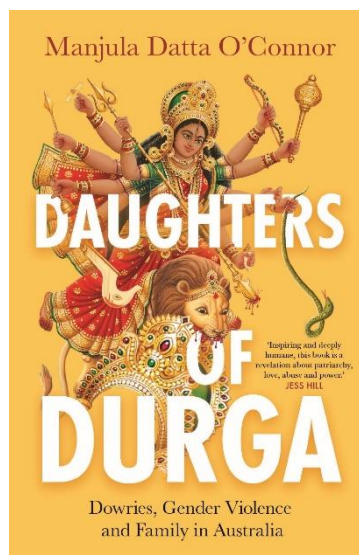
Nothing is meaningless on this planet.

You search for meaning outside....

It's within.

This is a web link where people can find out more and order Dr O'Connor's book!

[Daughters of Durga, Manjula Datta O'Connor — Melbourne University Publishing \(mup.com.au\)](http://mup.com.au)



'This is not spoken about': Gold, cars, property demanded in cases of dowry abuse

By: Wendy Tuohy

November 20, 2022 — 6.29pm

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/this-is-not-spoken-about-gold-cars-property-demanded-in-cases-of-dowry-abuse-20221118-p5bzh8.html>

Gold, cash, property, cars and women's salaries are being demanded by the families of some grooms in the South Asian-Australian community, despite dowries being banned in India.

Demands for gifts "were continuous and abusive, including instances of sexual extortion", research on Australia's community of Indian and South Asian people has found. The median cost of weddings was between \$12,000 and \$80,000, and the value of the dowry paid by the victims was between \$42,000 and \$195,000.



Psychiatrist Manjula O'Connor says she has treated "hundreds" of women who suffered dowry abuse.

This was in addition to tuition fees and visa processing fees paid by the women, who often came to Australia from India and lacked access to legal redress if, for example, sponsorship of their visa was withdrawn after dowry was provided, or threats were made to ensure the maintenance of visa support.

The research, titled *Dowry Abuse and South Asian Populations in Australia*, was carried out by the City of Parramatta and Western Sydney University with Settlement Services International and the Indian Crisis & Support Agency.



Lead researcher Tinashe Dune treats victims of dowry abuse as a clinical psychologist and said the women often have complex post-traumatic stress disorders due to long-term,

entrenched forms of abuse. But it often flies under the radar, as Victoria is the only state that has made dowry abuse a family violence offence.

“We’re talking about consistent and over time demands of jewellery worth \$100,000, paying someone’s travel and medical school fees, international study fees, cars, houses – all of a woman’s salary going completely to her partner’s family,” she said.

Melbourne psychiatrist Professor Manjula O’Connor said she had treated hundreds of women suffering serious mental health issues after being victims of dowry abuse in Australia.

In one recent case, a woman had been sent back to India by her husband and told to have an abortion after he learnt she was pregnant. He demanded a large sum of money for her to return to Australia.

“She got to India, where she got a call from his father in a nearby village to say if you give me 10 million rupees (about \$183,000) my son will sponsor you back again – because he had withdrawn the sponsorship in the meantime,” O’Connor, a dowry abuse expert, said.

“She had already aborted the baby and was suffering from so much grief and distress. She then got a letter from the Department of Home Affairs saying if she wished to return to Melbourne, she had 25 days; she returned in an extreme state of distress, anxiety and depression and with post-traumatic stress symptoms.”

The woman, who was no longer with the man, had been supported by friends and O’Connor reported to the Australian Federal Police that she had been the victim of [“exit human trafficking”](#) and dowry abuse. She is still hoping to remain in Australia.

O’Connor said that since May 2022, she had supported six or seven victims of dowry extortion and reported the cases to the Department of Home Affairs.

The study said more than 15 per cent of South Asian women born in Australia and overseas who reported domestic and family violence were also affected by dowry abuse. But under federal

law, there are no mechanisms to address dowry abuse. “The Family Law Act (1975) does not enable victims of dowry abuse to recover the dowry provided by the victim or her family in the event of divorce proceedings,” it said.

Kittu Randhawa, founder of the Sydney-based [Indian Crisis & Support Agency](#), said dowry abuse can happen before or at the time of marriage, or after it, and is often facilitated during the immigration process.

“When a citizen goes overseas to get married and bring their partner here, they are first on a visitor visa, and when they’re in that situation of being dependent, that’s when [abuse] escalates, coercion happens and demands increase,” she said.

Women are vulnerable if they need to go offshore to finalise immigration, and their partner demands money to not cancel the process. “Some of the amounts I have heard are even surprising to me. We’ve seen everything from \$20,000 to \$90,000 and even up to the millions,” she said.

Ela Stewart, of [InTouch](#) Multicultural Service Against Family Violence, said the organisation had supported clients whose family members were threatened with violence if money was not handed over.

“It has been tricky for women to know where to go. There really isn’t a lot of specialist knowledge about this,” she said.

A 2018 Senate inquiry into dowry abuse heard it had resulted in [violence, extortion and a spate of suicides](#) and murders. The standing committee on legal and constitutional affairs recommended new national laws identifying the “pernicious” practice as a form of domestic violence.



Under Australian law, there are currently no mechanisms to address dowry abuse.

Sydney woman Sita*, who has been supported by Randhawa's organisation, said her whole family remained distressed by the dowry abuse she had experienced.

She was betrothed in her teens and her fiance came to Australia to marry her, at which time her family was required to pay \$20,000 for her sister-in-law's wedding and pay for improvements to her in-laws' family home. Sita had to give him gold worth \$2500.

"He started openly cheating on me when I was six months' pregnant, and there was so much mental abuse," she said. "My dad paid \$120,000 for a house deposit, and my mother had to give her gold and my sister's gold to him, now that's all gone," said Sita, who became pregnant when she was 18.

"I didn't know where to turn," she said.

She is raising the child alone and the house is soon to be sold, with her ex-husband retaining 40 per cent of its value.

"This is not spoken about in our community, I want people to know and tell people to be very careful."

The study's recommendations included that federal and state governments adopt a consistent definition of dowry abuse, commit resources and training to help identify and respond to it, and reform the Family Law Act to provide recovery pathways for victims.

***Sita is not her real name.**

If you or anyone you know needs support, you can contact the National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service on [1800RESPECT](tel:1800RESPECT) (1800 737 732), [Lifeline](tel:131114) 131 114, or [Beyond Blue](tel:1300224636) 1300 224 636.

USEFUL LINKS - AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

[Australian Citizenship test resource booklet](#)

[Australian Values – *Life in Australia* booklet](#)

[Beginning a Life in Australia booklet](#)

[Domestic/family violence and your visa](#)

[Adult Migrant English Program \(AMEP\)](#)

[Australian centre to Counter Child Exploitation](#)

[eSafety Commissioner – be safe online](#)

CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITY:

[Australia's 2023-24 Migration Program](#)

Questions for consideration:

What is the ideal size and composition of the 2023-24 permanent Migration Program? And why?

How can we improve our migration planning process so Australia remains attractive to prospective migrants in against the backdrop of widespread workforce shortages and aging populations across migrant-receiving countries?

HIMILO



Himilo Community Connect is a community organisation located in Heidelberg West. It has been helping Australian-Somali job seekers achieve better employment outcomes.

The organisation is now expanding its services to assist migrants from all backgrounds in getting international qualifications recognised.

If you have a problem with qualification recognition or need help preparing cover letters / resumes and want to access free courses / employment support, please contact Barathan Vidhyapathy at Himilo - Email: Barathan.Vidhyapathy@himilo.org.au

or visit www.himilo.org.au

Donations to ACHRH are now tax deductible!

Thank you for considering a gift to ACHRH, which will support our work to create happy and healthier communities; did you know that donations to ACHRH over \$2 can now be claimed as a tax deduction?

Since 2012, ACHRH has delivered a range of programs which tackle issues affecting migrant communities in Australia. If you would like to be a part of making tangible impacts for at risk communities, please contact Kate Grimme on 0400 032 821 or email info@achrh.org We will be pleased to provide you with more information on how you can make a financial contribution and to share details on the programs and projects we run.

Blueprint for Reform - Removing Barriers to safety for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence who are on temporary visas.

Temporary visa holders experiencing family violence in Australia face multiple barriers to accessing safety, support, and justice. These barriers can cause women to remain in situations that are harmful and dangerous.

The National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence - of which ACHRH is a member - calls on the Australian Government to adopt recommendations in four key areas.

[Read and download the 'Blueprint for Reform' here.](#)

Introducing Blogathon in partnership with UNSW.

As part of 16 Days of Activism against gender violence

Dowry and exit trafficking

Read about what is exit trafficking and how dowry abuse is linked to it. And yes, there are solutions and support for victim survivors from various sources. Reach out to the Australian Federal police and Department of Home Affairs.

Read more at this link: <https://16daysblogathon.blog/>

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

- **POLICE IN EMERGENCY -- 000**
- **YOUR GP -- they will refer you to the right place.**
- **NATIONAL DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE COUNSELLING SERVICE
1800 RESPECT**
- **INTOUCH MULTICULTURAL CENTER AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE –
1800 755 988**
- **Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre, phone
24 Hour statewide line 1800 015 188**
- **MEN'S 24-HOUR REFERRAL SERVICE
1800 065 973 (FREE CALL VICTORIA ONLY)**
- **WOMEN'S INFORMATION & REFERRAL AGENCY (WIRE)
03 9348 9416
inforequests@wire.org.au**

WHY GET HELP?

- ❖ Domestic Violence damages our culture
- ❖ Domestic violence breaks our homes
- ❖ Domestic Violence causes:
 - Anxiety,
 - Depression,
 - Suicide,
 - Homicide in women, men and children

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- ❖ Support those who may be victims
- ❖ Encourage victims to seek help and become survivors
- ❖ Encourage perpetrators to seek help
- ❖ DO NOT BE SILENT ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

*Say No to Family Domestic
Violence*