

***AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health Inc***

[www.achrh.org](http://www.achrh.org)



# ACHRRH

Empowering Communities

March 2024

Newsletter



Manjula  
O'Connor

## Every woman deserves to live a life free from fear and violence

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Author of *Daughters of Durga*

The tragic event, the murder of Chaitnaya Shweta Madhagani a migrant Indian woman from Point Cook Victoria and originally from Hyderabad, allegedly by her husband, is a sad, and a distressing event, But tragically that we hear about such murders almost once a weekly. This year about 14 women have already been killed. No race or colour is spared. It is a cultural problem of gender norms that perpetuate inequality, and power imbalance between the two genders.

We recognize the individual tragedy of Sweta 's death. She was not just a statistic or a headline; she was a human being with hopes, dreams, and aspirations, a loving mother, a worker, a neighbour, a friend. Her life was cut short in a senseless act of violence, leaving behind grieving loved ones and shattered communities.

The issue of gender-based violence is global, and cuts across all societies and social classes. Globally 1 in 3 women have suffered one episode of

abuse/violence from their intimate partner. Family violence murders continues to afflict societies worldwide.

A murder does not happen out of the blue. For a murder to occur there has to be a background of coercion, control, threats, fear, and previous attacks of physical violence over a prolonged period.

Beyond the individual tragedy, however, this incident also highlights broader systemic issues that contribute to gender-based violence. In many societies, including Australia, India, and others patriarchal norms and attitudes perpetuate unequal power dynamics between men and women. These dynamics often manifest in various forms of violence and discrimination against women, including domestic violence, honour killings, and dowry-related crimes.

It is essential we explore the broader implications of such incidents in our community, the cultural and societal factors contributing to them, and the urgent need for meaningful action to address this pressing issue.

I started work in this area in 2009. The silence on the issue of family domestic violence was profound. Any advocacy that occurred took place in absolute silence, with an air of secrecy. People were afraid to speak out. With our first community participatory theatre Ghughat in 2010-11, we raised awareness, opened up conversations. Overnight a large number of NGOs started working in this space within the Indian community. Everybody became an expert in domestic violence. It was good that a lot of people took leadership role, but what was not helpful was for people to declare themselves experts without training and knowledge, and when to refer the person to the experts. I saw examples of women delayed the right help for months, exposing them to dangerous situation.

While progress has been made in raising awareness and implementing legal frameworks to protect women's rights, incidents like the one involving Sweta's murder and other migrant women serve as stark reminders that much more needs to be done.

Over the years my team at our organisation the AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health have conducted about 10 big projects since 2012, each lasting 1-3 years. We have conducted about 500 workshops, appeared in countless media interviews and educational programs, educated the community into prevention and early intervention and help seeking. Our research is published in academic journals. Recently I wrote a book *Daughter of Durga* published by the esteemed Melbourne University Press. I will share some key findings that are particularly relevant to the Indian and the broader South Asian migrant community.

We find that emotional violence/abuse is one of the most common forms of DV described by our participants. Emotional violence is described as taking different forms, such as lack of control and

being dominated. We found that there is a generally accepted and reinforced inequality between Indian men and women, and lack of freedom in decision-making for women. The use of abusive language towards the woman, verbal threats, often threats of deportation and cancellation of immigration visas are common.

The big issue we find is that of the enforced silence. One woman said "*The silence kills. I used to listen to my husband, then my mother-in-law and now even my son. I'm listening for 3 generations.*"

We found social abuse is common as identified by participants, e.g.: "*Society abuse is the biggest abuse in India community. The fear of society never makes you change the things that are happening in your life.*"

Another big factor we discovered is sense of entitlement /abuse related to money. The control of the money that the woman earns, and the non-acceptance of a woman's financial independency leads to violence. In 2010 our research found that Dowry abuse was rife. Australian-Indian grooms place pressures on their new brides, wives, and their family, for instance: "*my son is in Australia, he has a PR, drives a BMW, you pay this much money to get your daughter there in Australia and your daughter will have to do this and this for my son.*"

Other additional challenges include language barriers, lack of awareness about available resources, and fear of deportation or retaliation from perpetrators, fear of societal rejection, stigma, shame of speaking out. These factors further isolate migrant women and inhibit their ability to seek help or support.

In my psychiatric practice I have seen hundreds of victim-survivors of family violence as patients. I saw dowry abuse described by patients first in 2008. We know of one murder in Australia for "insufficient cash" paid by her father during the six

years of her marriage, during, before and after. That was Deepshikha Godara. I can reveal that her father worked with us tirelessly in 2014-15 to get the laws against dowry abuse in Victoria. We were successful, now we are poised to make it a national law. Our campaign against dowry abuse has helped the service providers, police, the courts, the politicians, and the victims. A number of universities and school students have written projects, doing PhD, master's thesis etc. Prior to our campaign there was no recognition of dowry violence. Now the victims know that they can speak about it, and they will be heard.

Next steps, what do we need to do to stop senseless killings of women. Addressing gender-based violence requires a multifaceted approach that addresses its root causes while providing comprehensive support to survivors. This includes:

**Legislative and policy reforms:** Governments must enact and enforce laws that criminalize coercive control, demands for dowry, theft of her wages or her jewellery for personal gain. Additionally, policies should be implemented to protect the rights of migrant women and provide them with free access to legal and support services irrespective of owning a property, or savings in the bank.

**Education and awareness:** we conduct regular workshops of "Mutual Relational Respect" that educate about patriarchal attitudes and promote gender equality., early help seeking and by-stander approach. Happily, Victorian government is doing this work in schools as well. We need such workshops for new migrants funded by the government.

**Support services:** special refuges that are culturally nuanced are needed.

**Training for professionals:** Law enforcement officials, healthcare providers, and other professionals should receive training on identifying

and responding to gender-based violence. This includes understanding the unique challenges faced by migrant women and ensuring that services are provided in a non-discriminatory and culturally competent manner.

**Community engagement:** More funding to engage communities in efforts to prevent gender-based violence is essential. Education in economic empowerment programs should be accessible, culturally sensitive, and tailored to the specific needs of migrant women and other marginalized groups. This includes working with religious and community leaders to challenge harmful norms and promote gender equality, as well as empowering grassroots organizations to provide support and advocacy for survivors.

Ultimately, addressing gender-based violence requires a collective effort from governments, civil society organizations, communities, and individuals. It's not enough to simply condemn individual acts of violence; we must also work to dismantle the structures and systems that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination.

As we reflect on this heartbreaking incident, let us honour the memory of the woman who lost her life and reaffirm our commitment to building a world where such tragedies are no longer a reality. The time for action is now.

## The alleged murder of Chaithanya 'Swetha' Madhagani and the crisis of male violence

[An article by Olivia Cleal – Women's Agenda](#)

*(click above to read the article online)*

The body of Chaithanya “Swetha” Madhagani was discovered in a rubbish bin outside of Geelong over the weekend. She was allegedly murdered by her husband.

Madhagani is being remembered by those who knew her as a “lovely person” and “empathetic woman”. She worked as a food safety compliance regulatory expert and was a mother to a three-year-old boy. She lived with her family, including her husband, and was involved a tight-knit Indian community in Geelong.

On Saturday, her body was discovered in a wheelie bin on an isolated road in Buckley, west of Geelong. At the time, Victoria police released a statement saying detectives are “treating the death as suspicious”.

Authorities said Madhagani and the suspected perpetrator were believed to be “known to one another” and the “offender may have flown overseas”.

It later came to light that Madhagani’s husband, Ashok Raj Varikuppala reportedly flew from Australia to India with her three-year-old son. It is understood Varikuppala gave the boy to Madhagani’s parents in India.

As the alleged suspect is overseas, police are not currently investigating the alleged crime; to do so, Australia’s Attorney General, Mark Dreyfus, will have to issue an international arrest warrant under the Extradition Act, which can take 45-60 days.



The Attorney General is yet to publicly comment on the case.

### Tarang Chawla’s response

Domestic violence activist Tarang Chawla has called out the problem of “race-baiting” in discussions around the alleged murder of Chaithanya “Swetha” Madhagani.

Chawla, the co-founder of Not One More Niki, has been a vocal activist in the family, domestic and sexual violence space since his sister, Nikita Chawla, was murdered by her husband in 2015.

After posting on his Instagram about Madhagani’s alleged murder on Saturday, Tarang Chawla received a comment from Dean Wells, a former reality TV personality, who has more than 85,000 followers on Instagram.

“Sounds like a cultural thing,” Wells wrote. “Wonder why he fled back to India?”

Chawla responded to the comment by posting an Instagram reel, explaining that men’s violence and attitudes to women are the problem.

“So is this a cultural problem as Dean suggests? Absolutely... It is a cultural problem,” Chawla said.

“But when I talk about culture, I’m not talking about race and ethnicity, I’m talking about ‘culture’. I’m talking about the beliefs, the values, the norms, the traditions and the stereotypes.

“The things that are passed down from one generation to the other. The things that we absorb and learn through popular culture, through social media, through the world around us.”

In Australia, 14 women have had their lives stolen from male violence in 2024, according to Destroy the Joint’s Counting Dead Women.

Last week, the alleged murderer of Samantha Murphy, 22-year-old Patrick Orren Stephenson, a white Australian man, was arrested by police.

“Men killing women is not a problem of one geography or another, or one race and ethnicity or another,” Chawla said.

“It’s a universal problem. It’s happening everywhere.

“This isn’t a problem of certain ethnicities or another. This is a problem of men’s entitlement and attitudes

towards women. That’s a cultural problem.”

**If you or someone you know is experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, domestic, family or sexual violence, call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732, text 0458 737 732 or visit 1800RESPECT.org.au for online chat and video call services.**

**If you are concerned about your behaviour or use of violence, you can contact the Men’s Referral Service on 1300 766 491 or visit <http://www.ntv.org.au>.**

**Feeling worried or no good? No shame, no judgement, safe place to yarn. Speak to a 13YARN Crisis Supporter, call 13 92 76. This service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**

**What to do if you suffer  
dowry abuse?  
Help is available and  
you are not alone.**

**1800 737 732**





Please join the online Workshop from **DomminusNissi** to help you to grow in Love, Joy and Peace - **Mutual Relational Respect (MRR)**! This will be an interactive session exploring the importance of building healthy relationships based on **mutual respect**. This workshop is designed to help you enhance your communication skills, set boundaries, and foster positive connections in both personal and professional settings. Don't miss out on this opportunity to learn valuable strategies for cultivating **respectful relationships**. Register now and take the first step towards creating meaningful connections!

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/domminusnissi-mutual-relational-respect-mrr-online-workshop-tickets-842656246517>



ACHRH

Bismi@DomminusNissi  
LOVE JOY PEACE

## Online Workshop – Zoom

Boosting your understanding of family violence, gender equality, social and cultural norms, adherence to the law and mental health care.

 Wednesday  
**20 March 2024**

 [bispalatty@domminusnissi.org](mailto:bispalatty@domminusnissi.org)

 <https://domminusnissi.org>

 Time  
**8.00 pm - 10.00pm**

 Melbourne, Australia

 Speaker by:  
**DR MANJULA O'CONNOR**

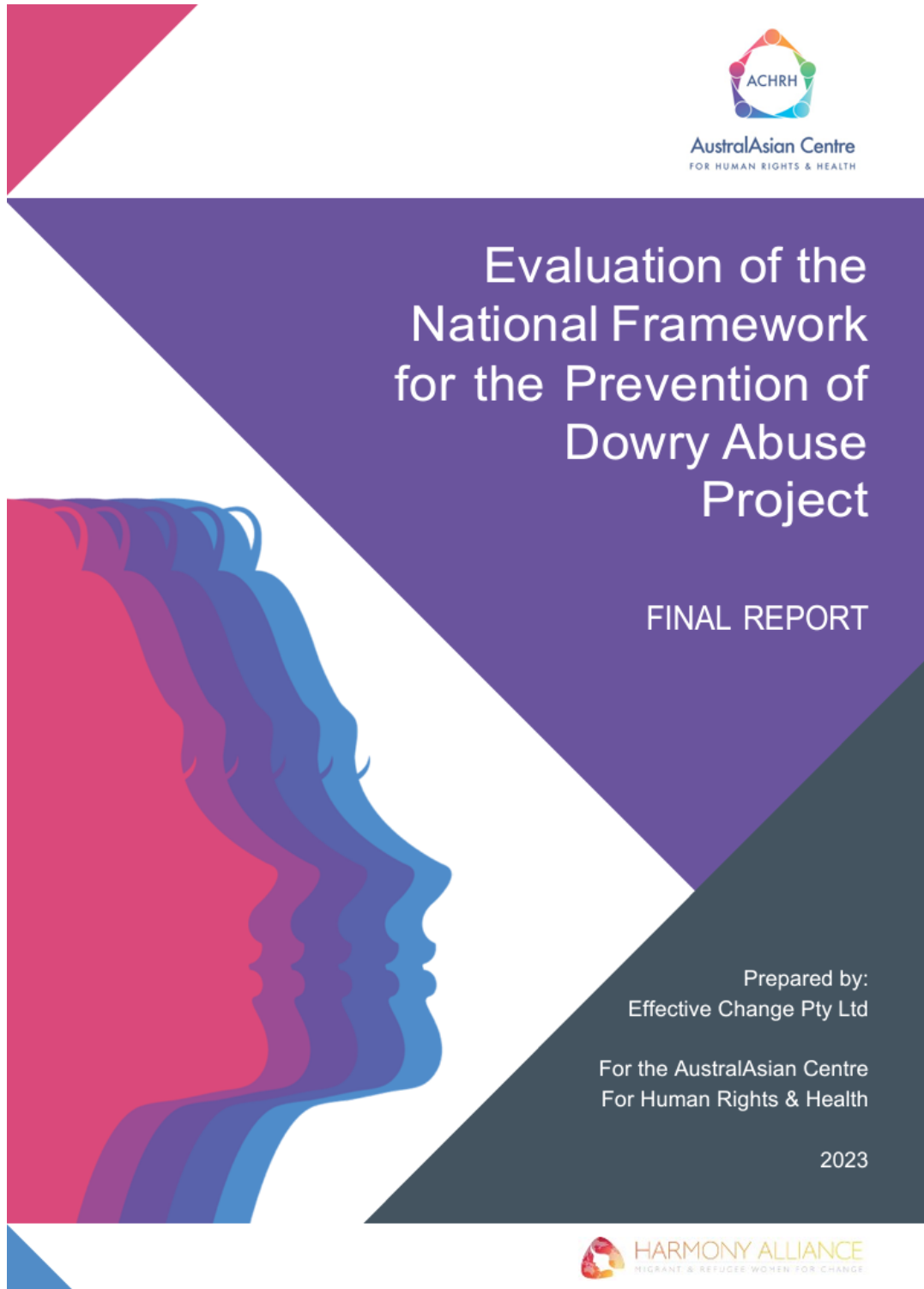


**Dowry abuse** is an under-recognised form of family violence. Driven by a combination of factors including gender inequality, patriarchal attitudes and gendered power dynamics within the family unit, dowry abuse is considered a complex form of violence due to the intersection of culture and gender.

This report provides the final evaluation of the National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse project, undertaken by Effective Change.

Click here to read more:

[https://www.achrh.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2023-Final\\_Dowry-Abuse-Report.pdf](https://www.achrh.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2023-Final_Dowry-Abuse-Report.pdf)



## ACHRH AGM

Report by Gauri Kapoor

**ACHRH's Annual General Meeting (AGM)** brought together a diverse group of people under one roof.

People from various fields including doctors, academics, filmmakers and non-government organisation leaders were present at the Scots Church to hear presentations about ACHRH's achievements over the past year and to hear a keynote speech by Clare Waterman (Victoria Police). Also on the AGM Agenda was the election of ACHRH Board Members.

Dr Manjula O'Connor delivered a thorough overview of work completed at ACHRH under her leadership. She spoke about how ACHRH has led a relentless ten-year advocacy campaign to address dowry related abuse across Australia. Dr O'Connor also highlighted the development of ACHRH's Sneh Theatre project and ACHRH's Mutual Relational Respect (MRR) project which have reached

thousands of people to date. Clare Keating (Effective Change) evaluated the primary prevention impact of both Sneh and MRR. She presented at the AGM a detailed explanation of how Sneh is creating dialogue around difficult issues in South Asian community groups. The speech by Clare Waterman provided an interesting insight into why Victoria Police is shifting its approach to family violence.

Another exciting project is the ACHRH's Sneh Documentary led by Director Emma Macey. Please read her interesting piece in this newsletter. It is expected that we will be ready for launching it in August / September 2024.

Sneha Sathpathy Mahajan, Sanmeet Bhatia and Varun Saigal were formally elected to the Board of ACHRH. Sneha brings with her extensive project management skills. Sanmeet has an impressive background in strategic planning and Varun is a

### 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 effecting 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](mailto: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.



highly experienced accountant.

Each of the following people have completed ten years on the Board of ACHRH. They were all re-elected to serve another three-year term.

Professor Ian Howie (ACHRH Chair), Dr Manjula O'Connor (ACHRH Executive Director), Gauri Kapoor (ACHRH Secretary), Dr Jonathan Harrison (ACHRH Co-Founder), Viv Prasad (ACHRH Co-Founder), Molina Asthana (ACHRH Legal Adviser), Kate Grimme (ACHRH Fund-Raising Coordinator)

The Board of ACHRH looks forward to convening a Strategy Meeting in May 2024. ACHRH's last Strategy Meeting was held in 2019. A lot has changed in the so-called 'post-covid period'. It is clear ACHRH must be adaptive to the new environment we find ourselves in.



*L-R Dr Manjula O'Connor; Professor Ian Howie (ACHRH Chair); Clare Waterman (Victoria Police); Clare Keating (Evaluator - Effective Change Pty Ltd)*

## Sneh Documentary Update

Emma Macey-Storch

Writer: Director: Producer

*Some Kind of Squirrel Productions*

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Hi to everyone at ACHRH,

The team behind the SNEH documentary wishes you all a wonderful New Year and a 2024 full of powerful and continued advocacy.

We just wanted to share with you an update as to where the film is at.

At the end of last year, we did a total of 6 extra filming days. This provided wonderful new material that takes the film to the next level.

We had a great day with Dr Manjula at her home, where we built a short introductory narrative outlining some of the homicide cases experienced by the South Asian community in recent years and the lady/force behind the SNEH project.

Additional filming has also included a wonderful segment with the men of the group discussing their perspective on the violence portrayed in their skits. This led to a very moving revelation from Chris that he was in fact a victim of violence as a child.

The multi-camera coverage of the final event at the Gasworks has also been invaluable, providing much deeper and focused coverage of the audience responses to the Skits.



We captured people crying, moved by the performances.

This provides some really great cutaways for the main film but more importantly is going to be essential for the 3 x SKITS/education pack materials that has recently received funding.

We were also absolutely delighted to be able to include some of the AGM in the last filming during 16 days of activism, which not only provided a moving tribute to those lost for the opening title sequence but was a brilliant way to include the many supporters who rarely get seen.

### NEXT STEPS

We are well on track for delivery of the film and education resources by May/June 2024 and cannot wait to show you all on the big screen.

Very shortly we are moving into sound design, music production and grade.

Thank you for trusting us with this work. We feel grateful to be able to tell this story for you.

Thank you Dr Manjula for her guidance and working closely with us on this.

Photos taken during the filming of Sneh Documentary



## 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*