



AustralAsian Centre
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS & HEALTH



**Effective
Change**



Evaluation of the SNEH Theatre Project

Prepared by Effective Change Pty Ltd
for AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health
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Photograph on page 5 shows the Sneh cast members at Gasworks Theatre

Photograph on page 28 shows members of the Sneh cast and Sneh Project Team members (not all present)



Effective Change Pty Ltd acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays respect to their Elders past, present and future.



EVALUATION



RESEARCH



CONSULTATION & FACILITATION



RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT



PLANNING



ORGANISATIONAL & SERVICE REVIEW

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Introduction

The AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH) received funding from the Victorian Government through the 'Supporting Multicultural and Faith Communities to Prevent Family Violence' Grant Program to undertake the Sneh Theatre Project. ACHRH worked in partnership with the Oorja Foundation.

Background

The project partners

Founded in 2012, ACHRH is a non-government organisation, working to enhance gender equality, gender-based empowerment, build safer families and grow resilient communities. It does this through research and education, project interventions and policy development. ACHRH has undertaken many projects working with South Asian communities and migrant communities generally. ACHRH was instrumental in campaigning for the legal recognition of dowry abuse as a form of family violence in Victoria.

The Oorja Foundation is a community based, not for profit organisation based in Melbourne's north. Oorja Foundation was formed in 2014 to respond to issues affecting the Indian migrant community in Melbourne. The foundation focuses on issues of domestic violence, inter-generational conflict, child safety, elder abuse and social isolation affecting the elderly.

Supporting Multicultural and Faith Communities to Prevent Family Violence

The Victorian Government's Supporting Multicultural and Faith Communities to Prevent Family Violence grant program provided multi-year funding (2021-2024) to organisations to 'build the capacity of multicultural and faith communities to address family violence and all forms of violence against women through innovative, culturally appropriate and tailored primary prevention and early intervention projects.'¹

The program uses 'Change the Story: A Shared Framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia'² as the knowledge base to guide the scope of prevention activity.

The objectives of the Program are to:

- deepen and expand primary prevention and early intervention activity with multicultural and faith communities
- continue to build and enhance the collective knowledge of successful primary prevention and

early intervention activity and intersectional practice

- strengthen the capacity of organisations working with multicultural and faith communities in primary prevention and early intervention activity
- improve the identification and response to victim survivors of violence by better joining primary prevention activity with early intervention activity in a wide range of settings.

Objectives of the Sneh Theatre Project

Working with the South Asian community, the objectives of the Sneh community participatory theatre project were to:

- through community focus groups: explore knowledge around gender norms, gender equality, coercive control, dowry abuse, early intervention and barriers to seeking help to inform the development of theatre works
- through community theatre workshops: develop theatre works that address the issues raised in focus groups
- present the theatre works and engage the community in dialogue
- create video and other resources for future use by and for the community.

The project also aimed to ensure the cultural authenticity of the project through its focus on:

- respectful engagement and valuing of community volunteers, team members and community organisations
- cultural input to the development process
- management of risk.

The project received ethics approval from the Melbourne Research Clinic Ethics Committee.

Background and context

All communities experience family violence and gender inequality in different ways. Culturally diverse and new and emerging communities have unique experiences of family violence and face differences often shaped by social attitudes and context, which create unique structural barriers to accessing the help that they need.³

What unique experiences of family violence is the project addressing?

While cultural and linguistic diversity is not an explicit indicator of disadvantage or risk, many people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may experience increased exposure to risk factors or heightened barriers to seeking support.⁴

The experience of family violence for Indian and South Asian women

The experience of family violence for Indian women, and for women on temporary visas more generally, has distinct characteristics that compound risk for women and children. These factors include social isolation, limited English proficiency, unemployment, trauma, gender roles, and traditional values and patriarchal beliefs. Further, the types of violence experienced by culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women differ to non-immigrant women, including multi-perpetrator family violence and abuse exacerbated by immigration policy, visa status and the stressors of the migration experience generally.⁵

‘Indian women reportedly make up the largest migrant group of callers to 1800RESPECT.’

www.sbs.com.au/indian-women-are-the-largest-migrant-group-in-australia-to-call-family-violence-helpline

Dowry abuse

Dowry and similar practices are observed in many cultures globally and involve the giving of money, property or other goods by one family to another during or any time after marriage. Dowry-related violence or dowry abuse occurs when a victim-survivor and/or their family are coerced into making further or larger gifts by another individual/s, typically in-laws, current or former spouses and fiancés and can be exacerbated by visa status. This coercion can involve:

- psychological, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse and harassment
- cultural and social isolation

- economic deprivation
- threats of cancelling visa sponsorship, marriage annulment or deportation.⁶

There are limited data related to the prevalence of, and responses to, dowry abuse in Australia. However, case studies and stories from victim-survivors that have been shared as a part of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence 2015–16 and the 2019 Senate inquiry into the practice of dowry and incidence of dowry abuse in Australia indicate that it is a major concern for some communities in Australia.^{7, 8}

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.⁹

The impacts of family violence

The impacts of family violence can be serious and long-lasting, affecting an individual’s physical and mental health, employment, education, relationships and financial and housing stability.¹⁰ The experience of, or exposure to family violence, can also have long-lasting impacts for children and young people, affecting their health, wellbeing, education and social and emotional development.¹¹

The impacts of family violence in the South Asian community should not be underestimated. In 2012–2015, Melbourne’s Indian community were alarmed by a series of murders and suicides.¹² More recently, in 2020, a cluster of suicides of South Asian women in one suburb in Melbourne added to the community’s concerns around family violence, the complex social issues and adverse impacts for the community.¹³

Barriers to help-seeking

Women in Australia who experience dowry abuse-related violence may face barriers to recognising the abuse and seeking help such as:

- feelings of shame and failure
- fear of retribution, cultural and social isolation
- language barriers or a lack of awareness of their rights in Australian society and where to get help.¹⁴

These barriers, combined with vulnerability of visa status and potential dependence on their sponsor, can increase vulnerability to family violence.

‘This is not a single factor issue. Indian migrant women often lack English skills, have no idea where to seek assistance or what support services may be available and so social isolation is a real challenge.

You couple that with what research has told us about the strong patriarchal belief system which still exists within the Indian subcontinent - the notion that a daughter is seen as a burden and when she is married off, she is then betrothed to the husband and his family - so there is no sense that the woman has an independent sense of identity.

Women who come here on temporary visas, may not have access to critical health and social services, such as Medicare and housing, meaning many feel pressured to stay in even violent relationships.’

Social worker and anti-domestic violence campaigner,
Jatinder Kaur

www.sbs.com.au/why-did-seven-women-from-one-area-of-melbourne-die-by-suicide-within-months-of-each-other

Primary prevention

The risk of family violence is higher in societies with rigid gender norms and roles, unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women, and cultural approval of (or weak sanctions against) violence against women.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ It is increasingly recognised in the literature that successful interventions need to focus on primary prevention to end family violence. Furthermore, if efforts are not concentrated on preventing violence, the cycle will continue.¹⁷

When migrant women leave their homeland, families and friends to come to Australia, they can be socially isolated, on a temporary visa and/or dependent on their sponsor and therefore vulnerable to family violence. Despite this, there are few opportunities for migrant women to learn about the new cultural system that they are in, the available avenues for help, and to develop an understanding of the social norms and principles of gender equality as practiced in Australia.

The Sneh Theatre project aims to address this gap through engaging the community in dialogue about issues around family violence and gender equality, developing strategies to prevent family violence occurring in the first place and providing information to the community about their rights under Australian law and access to support services that can assist.

In addition to the barriers to help seeking faced by victim-survivors, there is the additional barrier of lack of knowledge and understanding of the cultural nuances from support services and agencies. This lack of knowledge can lead to failure to recognise family violence, minimise complaints and misidentification of perpetrators.

About Sneh

Sneh, a Hindi term meaning ‘affection’, is a community theatre project. The project builds on ACHRH’s community work focusing on the prevention of family violence, and specifically on ACHRH’s 2016 community theatre project, Natak Vihar.

Project development process

Project aim and target group

The aim of the Sneh Theatre project was to raise awareness of family violence and enhance help-seeking and early intervention amongst people from the Indian and broader South Asian community in Melbourne.

Methodology

The Sneh project was developed using the creative methodology of community participatory theatre. Theatre has long been used to depict religious texts in India and is a highly acceptable methodology for the community. In community participatory theatre, community volunteer actors act out scenarios to concretise what can be abstract concepts.¹⁸

Theatre provides the platform to explore the community’s understanding of issues such as:

- identifying coercive control as an expression of family violence
- challenging silence around family violence and the stigma surrounding speaking out

and to raise awareness and knowledge around:

- help-seeking and how to navigate the system
- why early help seeking is better than delaying it
- how families can support positive mental health and enhance resilience.
- laws around family violence and dowry abuse.

Audience members are not passive observers in community participatory theatre. Rather, they are invited to actively participate, commenting via a facilitator to critically analyse the theatrical scenarios presented and discuss the underlying driving forces of various situations. Sneh was delivered in English and Hindi, with bilingual cultural experts and volunteer actors, enabling discussions, often bi-lingual, to take place in a culturally safe and positive manner.

‘Sneh Theatre utilises cultural strengths to find culturally responsive solutions.’

<https://www.achrh.org/sneh-theatre/>

Recruitment of participants

Community participants for Sneh were recruited from the Indian and South Asian community through:

- ACHRH networks
- Oorja Foundation networks
- faith communities
- personal networks of project team members.

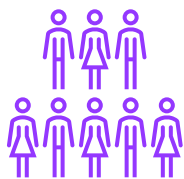
Volunteer participants were involved in the following activities.

Project activities

The key project activities included:

- **Focus groups** with members of the community to identify knowledge of family violence and related issues, and gaps in their knowledge. Results from the focus groups provided material for exploration in the community theatre workshops.
- **Community participatory theatre workshops.** Through the workshops, a volunteer theatre ensemble was created. Volunteer community participants were involved in developing and creating working scenarios based on community and participants’ stories.
- **Community participatory theatre performances** to raise awareness around family violence, help seeking, and gender norms and gender equality.
- **Video recording documenting the project and its development.** The final 34-minute documentary will premiere at the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne. It is likely to be screened at multiple international film festivals and may reach other outlets. In addition, a range of short videos have been created for future community use.

Sneh Theatre Project – At a glance



9 members on the **project team** who participated in 17 project meetings, community workshops and performances between October 2021 and December 2023



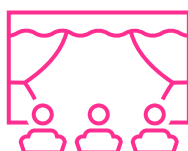
2 focus groups with **26 Indian community members** to explore understandings around gender norms, gender equality and family and domestic violence



16 volunteer community members formed the Sneh cast



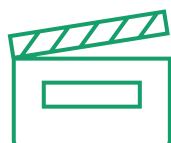
5 community workshops were held to explore the focus group themes arising from the focus groups and from cast members and develop three skits for the theatre performances



7 community performances between May 2022 and September 2023 in partnership with the Oorja Foundation, the Sikh Charity Club, the Hare Krishna (ISKON) Temple, VicWise an international student organisation and the University of New South Wales



210 audience members attended the community performances of Sneh



One 34-minute documentary film on the creation and performance of Sneh and short videos for on-going community training and facilitation. The film 'Finding Affection' premiered at the 2024 Indian Film Festival of Melbourne

About the evaluation

Purpose and approach

The purpose of the evaluation was:

- to provide accountability to project funders
- to collect evidence on the efficacy of the community participatory approach
- to contribute to process improvements as the project was being implemented.

The evaluation essentially applied a participatory approach, working directly with the project team throughout the project and exploring both the process and outcomes of the project. Information collection tools were developed based on the recommended approaches of the DFFH Evaluation Plan for program recipients.

Methods

The evaluation employed a mixed methods approach, as outlined below.

Observation

The evaluator was present to observe:

- the two community focus groups
- four of the five, full-day community theatre workshops
- six of the seven community performances.

Observations focused on factors such as the level of engagement of participants in activities, group interactions, audience engagement in discussions, the topics raised for discussion and audience reactions.

Participants in the focus groups were asked whether they learned anything new in the two-hour discussion.

Pre- and post-workshop survey

The 14 volunteer actors/participants in the theatre workshop program completed a pre-workshop survey and a follow-up survey at workshop 4 (based on the DFFH sample survey, with some adaptations) comprising questions about:

- attitudes to gender equality and family violence
- identifying family violence related behaviours.

These questions were the same in both surveys, so that changes in attitude could be compared.

Post-performance survey

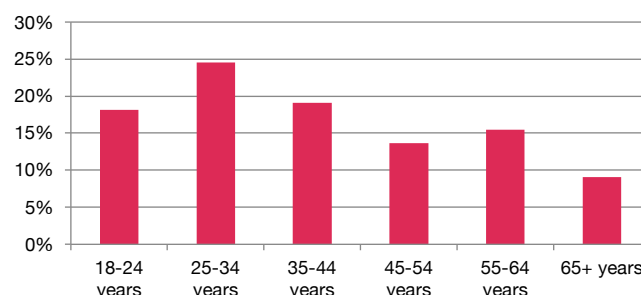
Audience members were surveyed after each performance. As part of the introduction and housekeeping, audience members were advised that they would be asked to complete the survey. The survey was voluntary. Paper copies were available, and it could be accessed online, but this was not always supported by the internet access in the venues. If audience members required assistance, project team members were able to translate the survey questions.

Not all audience members completed surveys, however a total of 130 surveys were received. The demographics of the survey respondents included:

- 66% female
- 33% male
- 1% other.

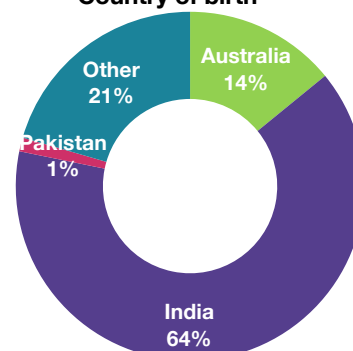
Audiences included members ranging 18 years of age to over 65 years. The largest age group (25%) was people in the 25-34 years age range and the smallest group (9%) was people over 65 years.

Age of audience members



As the graph below shows, two-thirds of audience members were born in India and 14% were born in Australia. Other countries of birth included Cambodia, Nepal, Malaysia and China.

Country of birth



Evaluation findings

This section of the report presents the evaluation findings, structured around the key focus areas of the evaluation:

- Preparation:**
 - exploring knowledge around gender norms, gender equality and unmet needs, through community focus groups, to inform the development of theatre workshops and community performances
- Development:**
 - address the issues raised in focus groups around gender norms, equality, coercive control, dowry abuse, and early intervention through workshop to develop and script theatre works
- Performance and community engagement:**
 - present the theatre works and engage the community in dialogue
- Creating resources:**
 - create resources for future use by the community

The report then discusses the factors contributing to the success of the project, with a particular focus on how the importance of community ownership in delivering a culturally authentic, innovative and engaging project.

Preparation

Preparatory focus groups

In preparation for the community theatre workshops, two, two-hour online focus groups were conducted in 2021 with members of the South Asian community:

- one, women-only group of 13 women
- one mixed male and female group of 13 participants.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather qualitative data around knowledge and understanding (and gaps in knowledge and understanding) around family violence and gender equality themes and to generate material for exploration in the community theatre workshops.

The issues discussed in the focus groups included but were not limited to:

- knowledge and understanding of family violence
- drivers of family violence, including gender inequality and gender stereotypes
- where and how victim-survivors can seek help
- the potential impacts of not seeking help, and barriers to help-seeking.

Outcomes

The focus group discussions were observed by the evaluator, audio and video recorded, transcribed and analysed. The analysis identified that:

- all participants had a general understanding of family violence, and an appreciation that it extended beyond physical violence to including emotional, controlling and abusive behaviours
- not all participants understood the breadth of 'family violence' – that it could include financial, dowry or visa abuse, stalking, technical abuse, threats to disclose personal information in order to control someone, or that it could be perpetrated by any family member to another family member (i.e. from an in-law to an adult, from a child to a parent, or between siblings)
- only 25% of participants in one group understood that there is a law against rape in marriage
- not all participants were aware that in 2019 the Victorian Government legislated for dowry abuse to be an example of family violence in the Family Violence Protection Act 2008
- most participants were aware of dowry abuse, and provided examples observed from family

members, friends or in their networks of abuses relating to dowry, often complicated with threats relating to visas, education and/or care of children.

The following comments show the spectrum of understanding around family violence.

'Family violence is anything that involves control or fear – does not matter the relation or who you are, it can include relationships with your parents, kids etc.'

'Earlier there was a lot of violence as women weren't working but now things are getting better, girls have more rights... There is less difference in status. When girls were not earning, their mothers-in-law also abused them. Now they earn, so there is less fighting between husband and wife, less physical abuse on women.'

'When men hurt the self-respect of women that is also family violence.'

'Dowry abuse is when some sort of money or financial things from the girl's side of the family is sought, and there is harassment or threats upon not getting it.'

In terms of help-seeking:

- participants were aware that issues could be raised with their GP and that police could be called to family violence incidents, when 'things get really bad' i.e. when there was physical violence, fighting in front of children, or when 'someone doesn't feel safe in their house'
- participants working in community services were well aware of the range of services available including 1800Respect, the Orange Door, Safe Steps
- most participants were aware that multiple organisations could assist, but were not aware of the full range, or when to contact which agency
- participants also nominated friends, family, neighbours, counsellors, organisations such as the Oorja Foundation and community faith leaders
- a common theme in the discussion was that participants felt that many South Asian women were unaware of how to access support, particularly younger women, recently arrived women and/or those who were socially isolated.

Participants reported the following possible consequences of not seeking help:

- stress, depression and mental health issues
- likelihood that the issues will not be resolved, will continue and likely will escalate
- negative impacts for children, including problem-behaviours such as school refusal, substance abuse and/or social withdrawal
- potential for catastrophic outcomes for the victim-survivor, including suicide or murder.

Common themes in the discussions around help-seeking were:

- the perceived stigma associated with seeking help
- the potential for seeking help to 'shame' the family (both in Australia and in India)
- reluctance to seek help and not seeking help until the situation was very dangerous
- reluctance to seek legal advice or assistance
- family and social pressure on the woman to acquiesce and endure the situation for the sake of preserving the family
- anecdotes of women who had left violent relationships but had to return reasons such as lack of financial independence, for the children, unable to access appropriate support.

'In Australia, one of my friends was being abused. When she spoke to her parents, she was told to adjust...We have help but we don't try to reach out. We keep adjusting till it becomes life threatening or it becomes physical. We only act when we believe things are out of control. Why can't we act before when we start to see the signs?'

'Girls don't seek help because of social shame and if she is not earning. She thinks if I separate - How will I support myself and kids? The girls who are earning tolerate only up to a limit. The girls who are not earning, perhaps they can't even reach for help till the end.'

'We should not wait for something extreme to happen. I come across cases where women knew that things were wrong, but they didn't seek help because they were working on making it better.'

'I have couple of friends who don't want to take help because they have been taught not to disrespect their husbands by taking help.'

'In the society we've grown up in, it's hard to unlearn that 'Chup raho' (keep mum) culture. Here, this society tells you to speak up. In our society we teach ladies to keep quiet...it's very important to understand these underlying issues.'

While the primary purpose of the focus groups was to gather information from the community, it was also an opportunity for incidental information sharing. At the end of each focus group, participants were asked whether they had learned anything new from the discussion. Eighty-five per cent (85%) of participants (22/26 participants) reported learning something new through the facilitator's contributions, the group discussions and listening to the stories of their peers, with examples including:

- different types of family violence, harms caused
- barriers to seeking help
- support services for victim-survivors, such as the 1800 RESPECT helpline
- emergency accommodation for victim-survivors
- dowry abuse as an issue in Australia and legal protections in Victoria.

Issues for further exploration

Issues identified for further exploration in the theatre workshops and performances included the impacts of not seeking help, the gendered drivers of violence against women, the experience of dowry abuse and the impacts of migration and threats around visa status.

Process observations

Both focus groups were attended and observed by all members of the project team including the evaluator. The project team debrief discussions agreed that:

- the focus groups had generated meaningful and authentic stories and scenarios that could be developed in the theatre workshops
- participants actively engaged in the discussions, with all members participating for the two hours.

The discussions were sometimes tri-lingual, in Hindi and Punjabi, with English translations provided by project team members. This provided the opportunity for all members of the groups to share their views.

Participants provided spontaneous positive feedback at the close of the discussions. Some participants indicated their wish to participate in the project and to attend the community participatory workshops.

Sneh Theatre development process

Community participatory theatre workshops

Following the focus group discussions, a series of five community participatory theatre workshops were conducted. The purpose of the theatre workshops was multi-layered, including to:

- build a theatre community ensemble from a group of community volunteer participants
- explore the themes around early intervention and primary prevention of family violence
- develop and create working scenarios from the community and participant stories.

Participant recruitment

Community participants were recruited through multiple channels. The opportunity to participate in the program was promoted through ACHRH and the Oorja Foundation websites and networks, to focus group participants and through the networks of project team members. A total of 19 community members registered for the project and attended the first workshop.

In accordance with ethical requirements, only people over the age 18 were able to participate. Those registering their interest were provided with information about the project, including the themes to be explored and were required to provide their informed consent to participate. Participants were advised that they were not required to share personal stories and that they could withdraw at any time.

Recalling that the workshops were held in 2022 during the pandemic, there were some changes in numbers due to illness and other circumstances. The group settled to a group of 16 community members, comprising 12 women and 4 men ranging in ages from early 20s to over 65 years of age. All but one of the participants were of South Asian background.

The project was officially launched by the Honorable Lily D'Ambrosio, Minister for Climate Action and Member of Parliament for the electorate of Mill Park and Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny, MP.

Workshops and process

Five community participatory workshops were held between April and May 2022.

The workshop program began with Dr Manjula Datta O'Connor introducing Sneh theatre project's aims in taking a primary prevention approach to family violence through developing scenarios exploring issues that would resonate with the community, encourage community conversations and engage the community in developing solutions.

Workshops were held at the Epping Memorial Community Hall - a large hall with a stage. The workshops were facilitated by the Sneh theatre director, Namrata Sharma. Project team members also attended the workshops, to assist with various tasks, participate in some activities and to support the group. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, and the potential that the issues would have personal relevance for some participants, a counsellor and the project lead, Dr Manjula Datta O'Connor, were available to debrief participants if the themes under discussion raised any issues for them.



Workshops ran for up to five hours. The initial workshops focused on introducing participants to each other and creating a trusting and comfortable group environment. Some participants had prior community theatre experience, but the majority did not. In the early workshops, the theatre director took group members through a range of physical, vocal and communication activities to build confidence and group trust. The director also took participants through theatre exercises, designed to introduce participants to the world of performance, and particularly the physical challenges of performing.

Participants, led by the theatre director developed working scenarios from their workshop improvisations, that built on the broad themes identified by the community focus groups of:

- dowry abuse
- family dynamics
- migration issues and vulnerabilities
- impacts of not seeking help
- gendered drivers of violence

Several short theatrical skits were developed, with input from participants. As the ideas coalesced, the

skits were scripted by theatre director, with input from the participants and the project team. The skits were refined over several weeks with four skits finalised in preparation for the performances. In addition to the in-person workshops, the director facilitated multiple online rehearsals with the participants involved in each of the skits. Each skit was designed with minimal reliance on scenery and props, so that they could be flexibly performed in a range of community venues.



The workshops and rehearsals were also filmed by the film crew to document the journey of the Sneh theatre project, and to produce a range of long and short videos as future resources for the community.



Process observations

The evaluator attended four of the five workshops and observed that the development process was:

- highly participatory and engaged all participants
- often bi- and multi-lingual
- focused on forming a trusting and tight-knit theatre ensemble
- gave all participants the opportunity to take on roles that they were comfortable with, whilst also providing a challenge.



Care was taken of the participants, given that the material was both sensitive and challenging, and that the process was physically and mentally demanding. Each workshop included one-hour lunch break to provide a rest and opportunity to decompress. Lunches were catered for by an Indian catering company. On days of cultural significance, appropriate sweets and foods were provided. When time allowed, the workshop day often concluded with a Bollywood dance session, led by the project coordinator, so that participants could 'shake off' the heavy issues they may have been exploring through the session. Debriefing was available if needed, and this option was accessed by participants.

Changes in participants' knowledge and attitude

As part of the evaluation, the community volunteer actors were surveyed at the beginning and the end of the workshop series. Participants completed a pre-workshop survey and a follow-up survey at workshop 4, with the same questions so that changes in attitude could be compared. The surveys comprised questions about:

- attitudes to gender equality and family violence
- identifying family violence related behaviours.

With a very small sample size, of a group of participants with an obvious interest in the prevention of family violence, the attitudinal results showed minimal change overall, as most participants commenced the activity with an understanding of family violence. More than 70% of the pre-workshop respondents strongly disagreed with the majority of statements relating to gender inequality. For example, in the pre-workshop survey, 79% of respondents disagreed with the statement '*If a woman earns more than her male partner, it is not good for the relationship*'.

In order to compare like with like, the surveys of the 14 participants who attended all five workshops were compared. Table 1 below shows some of the notable changes in attitude. Similarly, the pre-workshop survey results show that most of the participant group (79% or more) could identify family violence related behaviours. Noteworthy changes presented in Table 2 include a 22% increase in participants recognising that being violent in front of children, and one partner making all the big family decisions alone, constituted family violence behaviours.

Table 1:

Strongly disagree with statement:	Pre-workshop survey	Follow-up survey
In the workplace, men generally make more capable bosses than women	57%	93%
Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community	79%	93%
Men should take control in relationships and be the head of the household	79%	93%
Domestic violence is a private matter to be handled in the family	86%	100%

Table 2:

From the behaviours listed, select the ones you think are family violence	Pre-workshop survey	Follow-up survey
Repeated text messaging, phone calls or emails	79%	93%
A man having sex with his wife without her consent	86%	100%
Being violent in front of children	64%	86%
One partner makes all the 'big' family decisions by themselves	57%	79%



Participant satisfaction

Workshop participants were also asked in the survey about their satisfaction with the workshop process. They reported that they very satisfied with:

- the venue (81%)
- feeling safe (to participate) 80%
- feeling that everyone's contribution was valued (81%)
- feeling supported if upset (88%)
- food and drink (93%)
- social aspects, working with new people (94%).

Performances and community engagement

Community performances

Sneh Theatre was performed seven times between 2022 and 2023 at the following range of community venues.

Date	Venue
2022	
28 May	Epping Memorial Hall Epping
12 Nov	Hare Krishna Melbourne (ISKCON) Temple Albert Park
12 August	UNSW Sydney ¹ Sydney
2023	
18 July	Dosa Hut Function Hall ² Melbourne CBD
30 July	Newbury Community Centre ³ Craigieburn
20 August	Dianella Community Centre ⁴ Tarneit
10 Sept	Gasworks Theatre Albert Park

Notes:

¹ This performance was funded by UNSW Sydney and ACHRH.

² Organised in partnership with VicWise – a non-government organisation that champions the employability and career development of international students and graduates. The performance was targeted at international students.

³ Organised in partnership with the Oorja Foundation.

⁴ Organised in partnership with the Sikh Charity Club Inc.

Performances were advertised by community partners, through various community networks and on social media. In total approximately **210** people attended the performances, with average audiences of around 30 – 35 people.

Project team members also attended the performances, and three performances were filmed by the film crew (Epping, ISKCON Temple and Gasworks Theatre).

The format for each performance involved:

- a welcome and introduction from Dr Manjula Datta O'Connor or project team member
- a warning that the performance would be dealing with issues relating to family violence and advice that counsellors were available if needed
- introductions to each skit
- performance of the three skits – one focusing on the issue of dowry abuse; one on the intersections

between the pressures faced by migrants in Australia and family violence, and the benefits of help seeking and one highlighting the impacts that family violence can have on women and children.

- a facilitated discussion with the audience about the issues raised after each skit, and an invitation to audience members for their thoughts on how the scenario could have played out differently – What other options did the characters in the skits have? When and how should they seek help? What were the issues underlying the situations? What changes could families make in the short and long term to avoid attitudes, such as male entitlement?
- audience members were asked to complete a short 'reaction survey' for the evaluation after the performance
- after each performance, catering was provided so that audience members could continue the conversations, debrief the discussions, meet the volunteer actors and project team members
- at each performance, the ACHRH distributed flyers with information and help line advice contact numbers.





Engaging the community in dialogue

Process observations

The evaluator attended all performances except the performance in Sydney. Audiences readily engaged in discussions, after viewing each skit and contributed their views about the issues raised, such as:

- the experience of dowry abuse
- challenges and pressures of migration experiences
- the impacts of financial pressures
- the impacts of addictions, including gambling and alcohol
- the impacts of exposure to family violence on children
- barriers and reluctance to seeking help.

Discussions were often animated, and audience members from young adults to seniors, men and women, participated. Discussions were gently guided by Dr Manjula Datta O'Connor and team members, and

at appropriate points, included clear references to research and evidence, steps to take when help is needed and the roles and contact numbers for police and family violence support services. Discussions were often in community languages, including Hindi and Punjabi, with project team members providing English translations. The formal discussions usually lasted for around 30-40 minutes, and often continued during post-performance refreshments.

Through the medium of theatre, the community could engage in discussions about the experiences of fictional characters and families – which meant that the discussions were neither personally revealing nor were they remote and academic. They enabled genuine engagement in the issues and reflection on the content. Opportunities to suggest alternative solutions also ensured that community members were empowered with information around help-seeking.

Reinforcing the discussions, printed information about family violence and support services was distributed at each performance. Representatives from community organisations and service providers also attended performances and could connect with community members. As well as representatives from ACHRH and the Oorja Foundation, at various performances there were representatives from:

- The Orange Door
- Victoria Police
- In-Touch Multicultural Services
- community legal centres.

Results

After performances, audience members were asked to complete a short survey. The survey explored participants':

- knowledge of family violence and family violence services
- impacts of viewing Sneh on knowledge
- levels of confidence around speaking out and speaking up.

The following table shows that respondents reported high **levels of awareness** of family violence services (87%) and recognition of dowry abuse as a form of family violence in Victoria (88%). However, there were still significant levels of respondents who were:

- not sure about which service can help people experiencing family violence (11%)
- not aware of dowry abuse as a form of family violence (8%).

Knowledge item	Yes	No	Maybe
Do you know which services can help people experiencing family violence?	87%	3%	11%
Are you aware that dowry abuse is recognised as a form of family violence in Victoria?	88%	8%	4%

As a result of viewing Sneh:

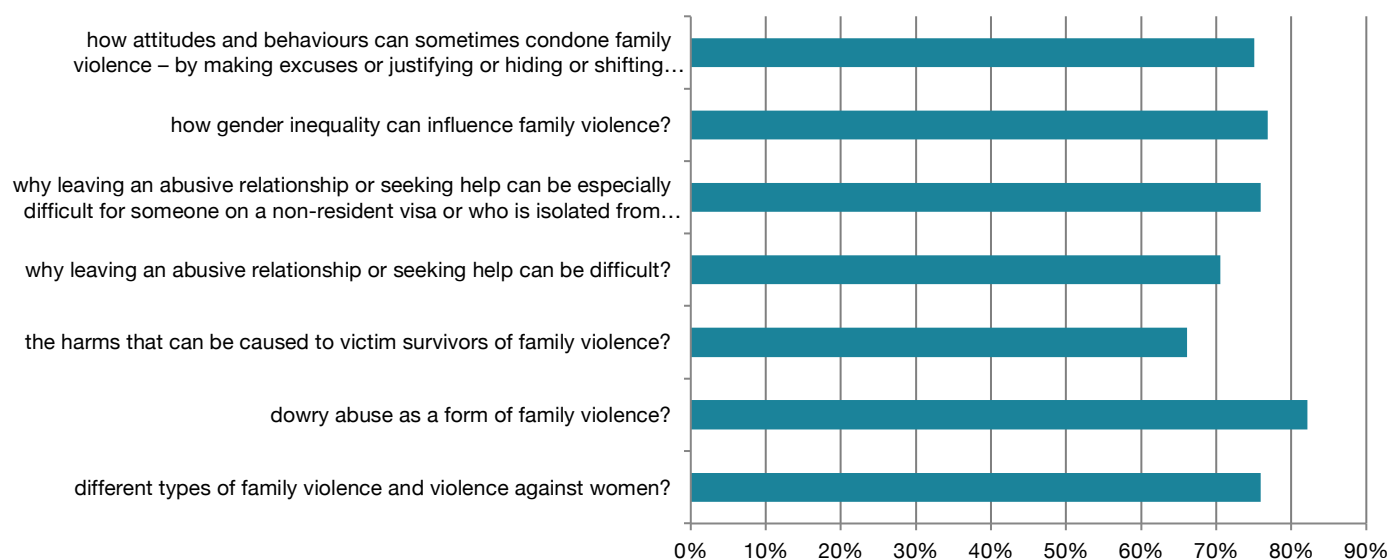
- **94%** of respondents (n=119) reported that it 'increased or deepened their understanding about family violence'
- most respondents who did not increase their understanding 'already had a good understanding of family violence'
- only one respondent 'did not think that family violence is an issue for our community' and another 'did not think that the performance presented a fair picture of family violence.'

Respondents were also asked if viewing Sneh increased their knowledge about a range of family violence related topics. The results in Graph 1 below show that respondents increased their knowledge on all topics, ranging from 66% for increasing knowledge about the harms that can be caused to victim-survivors of family violence, to 82% increasing their knowledge about dowry abuse as a form of family violence.

Respondents reported that they also learned about:

- the impacts of family violence on children
- how racism in the workplace impacts family dynamics
- avenues for accessing support.

Graph 1: Did the SNEH performances and conversations, increase or deepen your understanding of:



Speaking up and speaking out

Respondents were asked how important it was for the community to:

- speak about gender equality
- speak up against family violence

and, personally, how confident they felt to do so.

Gender equality

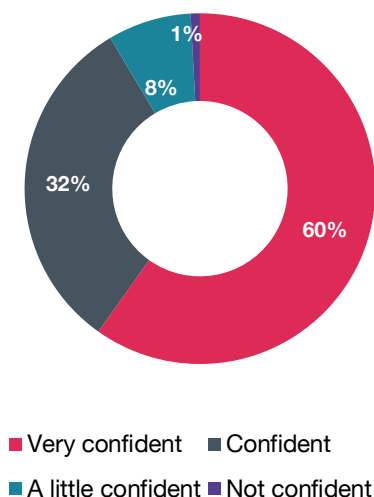
The vast majority of respondents felt that it was important for the community to speak about gender equality:

- **95%** of respondents felt that it was very important for the community to speak about gender equality
- 4% of respondents felt it was somewhat important, and
- 1% felt it was not important.

On a personal level, as shown in Graph 2:

- most respondents were very confident (60%) or confident (32%) to speak about gender equality in their social network
- however, 9% were only a little confident (8%) or not confident (1%).

Graph 2: On a personal level, to what extent do you feel confident to speak about gender equality in your social network?



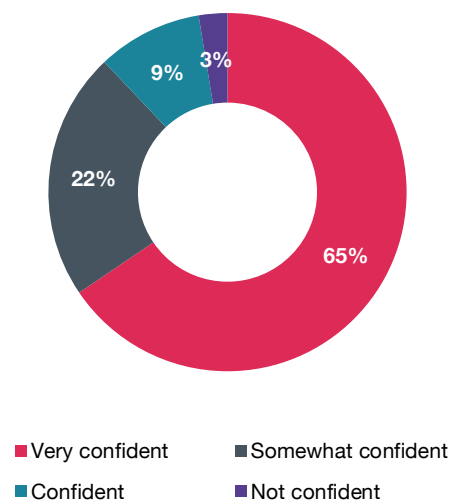
Family violence

98% of respondents felt it was 'very important for the community to speak up against all forms of family violence'. Only 2% of respondents felt it was 'somewhat important'.

As Graph 3 shows, on a personal level respondents reported a high level of confidence in speaking up against family violence, with:

- 65% of respondents 'very confident' and 22% confident to speak up against family violence
- 9% were only 'somewhat confident'
- 3% were not confident to speak up against family violence.

On a personal level, to what extent do you feel confident to speak up against family violence in your social network?



Similarly:

- 89% of respondents felt confident to tell a friend or family member about family violence services such as 1800RESPECT if needed
- 9% might be confident
- 2% were not confident to tell someone about family violence services if needed.

Messages taken by the community from Sneh

Survey respondents were asked about the most important message they would take away from the performance of Sneh. Responses spanned a range of topics, as the following selection demonstrates:

- The need for community action:

‘Community is very passionate about this issue.’

‘Family violence is destructive to all involved. It is our responsibility as the younger generation to be the change.’

‘Speak up and support. Bring down the wall.’

- The many different forms of family violence:

‘That Family Violence can take many forms and is a social issue we need to address, whether for ourselves or someone else in the community.’

‘There are many forms of domestic violence.’

‘Abuse is not always physical.’

‘Domestic violence comes in different forms and effects people differently. Both the victims and the abusers.’

- Awareness of underlying issues:

‘Respect is paramount regardless of the gender.’

‘The interrelation between racism, violence, culture, family, social pressures and gender.’

- The challenges and importance of seeking help:

‘I was really affected by the audience members who shared their experience of not getting community support when they were in difficulty.’

‘Whilst having a strong understanding of family violence, being aware of how to assist those from other cultures is very important, as it may be more difficult for the victim to leave an abusive relationship.’

‘Family violence is SO prominent in every society and even educated well earning people can be victims. It is very difficult to take the big step or even talk about it, but it is very important to accept help & support.’

- The need to develop awareness of avenues of legal and service support:

‘Became more aware of the Victorian laws for family violence.’

‘The availability of support for domestic abuse in Australia, the community’s role in prevention of the same.’

‘As a woman, I am in every way deserving to live my life and do what’s best for me.’

Survey respondent

General feedback

Notwithstanding the occasional comment calling for recognition of male victims of violence, or critical of the production, the sentiment of most comments was overwhelmingly positive.

‘There should be more theatre performances. It was amazing.’

‘Excellent production and discussions.’

‘This is a great initiative. Many, many more are needed to even make a dent in the societal mindsets and prejudices.’

‘It is an incredible initiative to create awareness.’

‘Thank you very much for raising awareness and having conversations on violence particularly towards women. Hopefully this will get people in general to self-reflect and look for ways to improve themselves and be a better example for family and community.’

There were also suggestions provided by some respondents about other target groups and scenarios to explore.

‘I would like to more discussion related to educating our elders who are very difficult to reach.’

‘How being queer has an impact on family and domestic violence for kids.’

‘More on Elder abuse please.’

Resource development

Video recording

The project plan specified the creation of approximately four one-minute videos and one 12-minute video. It was envisaged that these resources could be used in a variety of ways, such as part of community training sessions, workshops with mainstream service providers, community forums and activities and conference presentations.

The film director was engaged from the start of the Sneh project and was part of the project team. This enabled the technical aspects around filming – such as light, space, access, acoustics – to be considered from the outset. The film crew filmed workshops, the dress rehearsal and performances at Epping, ISKCON Temple and Gasworks Theatre.



In January 2023, the documentary team presented an assembly cut of the documentary to the project team and ACHRH for feedback and to discuss the cuts required to bring the content down to the final 12-minute film that has been commissioned. It became obvious to the group that there was more depth and potential in the film than had been anticipated, including the potential for the film to reach a wider audience. For this potential to be fully realised further funding would be required to extend the length of the film and fund the professional editing and post-production treatment.

Key project team members investigated options to secure additional funding to realise this ambition. This was achieved through:

- additional funding from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), through an Expression of Interest opportunity for organisations funded under the Supporting Multicultural and Faith Communities to Prevent Family Violence program to extend their project work
- the Australian Indian Medical Graduates Association
- ACHRH.

This additional funding has enabled the initial short video to be significantly extended to a 34-minute documentary and enhanced through:

- the inclusion of the behind-the-scenes creative development
- discussions with the community actors exploring their motivations and commitment to the project
- interviews with Dr Manjula Datta O'Connor and the theatre director
- audience reactions to the plays
- editing, sound design, graphic design and all components of professional film post-production.

This has allowed the film to explore the complex themes around primary prevention and early intervention in greater depth, and importantly, to ground and contextualise the content in discussions with the community, for the community.

In addition, the film crew has also taken high quality photographs which can be used in presentations, promotions, reporting and other resources.



Film update

While the outcome of the funding extension is outside the scope of this evaluation, it is important to record that the film, titled 'Finding Affection', has been completed. It is yet to be screened publicly but will premiere in August 2024 in the documentary section of the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne.

'Finding Affection' tells the captivating story of 30 volunteers from Naarm (Melbourne) as they attempt to use the transformative medium of participatory theatre to inspire audiences to challenge family violence in their community.'

'Finding Affection' trailer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZT-OhOLhr7I>

'Finding Affection' will be formally launched at a future screening date and invitations will be extended to funders, government ministers, community leaders, project participants, relevant service providers and policy officers.

The project team is also pursuing discussions for the film to be screened on free to air television, delivering a national audience. There is also potential for the film to be selected for national and international film festivals.

Sneh resource package

The final package of Sneh project resources will include the 'Finding Affection' film, a digital activity booklet, and online-videos for extended learning and discussion.

The educational resources will be tailored to multicultural and faith communities to assist them when screening the film. The companion guides for the film will give a wide range of community organisations the confidence to access and share the resources.

It is anticipated that service providers from sectors such as the specialist family violence sector, community legal sector, primary health and local government will engage with the resources for internal staff training, to inform and support practitioners' work with communities, and their community engagement activities.

Impact and reach

Capturing the Sneh performances on film and creating a documentary, with accompanying resources, enables the work of the Sneh Theatre project to reach a far wider audience. The 'Finding Affection' trailer has already been viewed hundreds of times in 10 days and social media posts are being widely shared. The social media engagement and the film screening audience will undoubtedly be greater in number than the performance audiences.

Beyond numbers engaged, the film allows the project work to be sustained well beyond the project timelines. It is a resource that is likely to be shared widely by community groups, faith communities, tertiary institutions and schools at their own convenience. It is also likely to reach beyond Victoria, and even beyond Australia to an international audience.



Key factors in the success of Sneh theatre

Sneh is a clear example of a successful community-owned, community driven, community developed project, delivered by the community for the community. Multiple factors contributed to this success.

Community-owned and driven

Fundamental to the success of Sneh, is the fact that the project is community-owned and community driven. The project seeks to address issues around prevention of family violence and education of the community that ACHRH has been working on, and advocating for, for more than a decade. Together with the Oorja Foundation, ACHRH has in-depth knowledge of the factors driving family violence in the community and the barriers experienced by victim-survivors to seeking help. While there are common elements to the drivers of family violence across all communities, such as gender inequality and men's control of decision-making, the project partners bring their knowledge of how this can be manifested in South Asian communities. They know and understand:

- the role traditional beliefs, cultural practices and family dynamics can play in contributing to family violence and coercive control in the community
- the impacts of the migration experience in intensifying vulnerability to family violence, such as visa exploitation, through factors such as extreme social isolation and family pressures
- the ways in which traditional gift-giving in marriage, specifically the gift of dowry, can be distorted to become excessive, extravagant and abusive demands on a woman and her family
- how family and community pressures can perpetuate dowry abuse
- the reluctance of the community to speak out about dowry abuse for fear of bringing shame on the community, and the reluctance of individuals to speak out, for fear of family and social isolation and patriarchal backlash.
- how the experience of family violence in the community can be missed or misinterpreted by mainstream agencies and Anglo practitioners.

The South Asian community has witnessed the catastrophic impacts of family violence in the community, through murder and suicide. The incidence of family violence in the community is known to be high, but also likely under-reported. Motivating the Sneh team was the desire to develop a culturally-informed and community-driven response to family violence in the community and contributing to its prevention.

Bi-cultural and bi-lingual expertise

While ACHRH is a small organisation, it is supported by a dedicated group of bi-cultural and bi-lingual project workers. This team of women from the South Asian community represent some of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the South Asian region. They mostly hold other full or part-time jobs and contributed their time on weekends and out of hours to work on the Sneh project on a casual basis.

They not only bring to the project their bi-cultural and bi-lingual skills and their family and community networks, but also collectively contribute their wide array of professional skills such as:

- project management
- social media and communication
- family violence sector
- counselling
- community theatre
- community development
- law
- accounting
- academic research.

At the same time, project team members also acquired skills and knowledge through training provided by the team members on family violence. Most team members also voluntarily undertook Safe and Equal's Family Violence Foundations online training.

The project provided team members with extensive experience in community event development, delivery, management and coordination. Team tasks were distributed amongst the members, so that team members had responsibilities for separate functions.

Of the community, by the community, for the community

The Sneh theatre project was explicitly designed to deliver a family violence prevention project, by and for the South Asian community. This is evident in the project's multi-layered approach, its community participatory methodology and emphasis on authentic cultural input including:

- recruiting informed, consenting and motivated community members, to participate in the focus group research and the theatre ensemble
- being informed by the community about their priorities, knowledge and information gaps
- providing safe opportunities for community members to share their stories through the focus groups and theatre workshops, in their first language if wished, to ensure that the theatre pieces developed were based on scenarios that were realistic and recognisable to the community
- the respectful engagement and valuing of the volunteer actors, including creating a trusting, supportive environment to explore challenging themes, ensuring that workshops provided opportunities to have fun, decompress and debrief if needed and participants were provided with gift vouchers in recognition of their contributions
- community volunteer actors working with a community theatre director to develop theatrical skits that authentically represented South Asian culture through dance, song, dress and language.

Drawing on the project partners and team members' networks, performances of *Sneh* were taken to the community – in Melbourne's north, south and the city centre – centres with significant South Asian and migrant populations. As discussed earlier in this report, the performances sparked community discussions, assisted by the medium of theatre, allowing the community to engage in discussions about the experiences of fictional characters and families.

Management of risks

ACHRH recognises that people drawn to participate in a family violence-related project may have direct or indirect experience of family violence. For this reason, the project engaged a bi-lingual Indian counsellor who was present for every workshop session and during the performance (in addition to Dr Manjula Datta O'Connor) in the event anyone was triggered by the issues raised. Participants were introduced to the counsellor and advised of her role, which was to provide informal support or debriefing if any participants required this. Her services were called on by participants, who needed debriefing.

Audiences were provided with a trigger warning before performances, and under-age audience members were required to be accompanied by an adult. Audience members could also debrief with a bi-cultural, bi-lingual counsellor attending the performance if needed. Community flyers about family violence support services including telephone counselling were also distributed at performances.

To mitigate the 'heaviness' of the themes explored in the workshops and the performances, there was an emphasis on lightening the atmosphere through activities such as:

- Bollywood dance sessions, led by the Project Coordinator to allow everyone to decompress and have some fun
- communal sharing of South Asian refreshments, as a further chance to chat and reflect.

Effective and innovative methods

'It became obvious to me as the director of the *Sneh* documentary that *Sneh* was much more than a theatre project. It is part community healing project, part theatre work, part community and leadership development as well as an exploration of how theatre can help community understand the issues driving this violence, help them discover and articulate community-led solutions and find new ways to heal and lead change.'

Emma Macey-Storch
'Finding Affection' Director

As the film director's comment above demonstrates, *Sneh* was more complex than 'just' a community theatre project. It contained multiple layers, developing individuals into strong and informed community advocates and enabling participants to form strongly bonded groups, including women and men, and spanning the generations. In addition to the care taken to look after members, this was assisted by the three-year funding which enabled the long-term bonds to form. It is likely that outside of the project, participants will continue to informally advocate, influence and inform their own family and friendship networks.

Commitment to the project vision

The project team's perseverance in securing funds to produce a professional documentary is illustrative of their commitment to the project. Project members recognised the potential of the assembly cut to show the South Asian community's strengths, complexities, challenges and commitment to the prevention of family violence, but to do so, it would need to be of sufficient length and quality. They were greatly assisted by the additional funding opportunity made available by the DFFH, but also needed to pursue other funds to make up the shortfall.

Conclusion

The Sneh theatre project, funded by the Victorian Government, aimed to 'raise awareness of family violence and enhance help-seeking and early intervention amongst people from the Indian and broader South Asian community in Melbourne.'

To achieve its aim, this community-owned project used a community participatory theatre methodology, with volunteer actors developing and acting out scenarios, followed by facilitated discussions with audience members to reflect on the issues presented in the scenes and ways the fictional characters could potentially change the outcomes.

The project required considerable development work before the public performances including:

- the formation of a project team to coordinate and undertake the wide range of project activities
- the conduct of community focus groups to research and explore the community's knowledge and gaps in knowledge around gender norms, forms of family violence, including dowry abuse and barriers that victim-survivors may experience to seeking help
- community theatre workshops with volunteer actors to develop theatre works addressing the issues raised in focus groups.

After months of development and preparation, Sneh theatre was first performed in May 2022. The seventh and final performance was delivered in September 2023 at the Gasworks Theatre in Albert Park.

Performances were attended by around 210 people. Post-performance surveys demonstrate an increase in knowledge and understanding around family violence and a clear agreement in the need for the community to speak up against all forms of family violence.

All activities were observed and participated in by the evaluator, and the level of community engagement and community commitment to contribute to the prevention of family violence was evident throughout.

Activities were also filmed throughout, initially with the aim of creating short video resources. As the potential of the film to become an important document of the community process became apparent, additional funding was secured for this purpose. The final, 34-minute documentary is about to premiere in August 2024 at the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne.

Assisted by the three-year funding, the project outcomes reach beyond the completion and delivery of project outcomes. The influence of the Sneh theatre project is likely to reverberate over time through:

- the skillful and dedicated project team members who managed and coordinated this complex project, overcoming any of the event management challenges they were presented with and worked tirelessly to safely engage the community in important but difficult conversations around family violence
- the ensemble of volunteer actors, who spent their weekends and nights developing and rehearsing the scenarios, and grew in confidence with every performance
- the audience members who saw the performances, engaged in discussions and developing solutions and left with a deeper understanding of the issues and knowledge about where and how to seek help
- the partnerships formed between community organisations and groups with ACHRH.

At the time of writing, the full impact of the 'Finding Affection' documentary is not known, but there is hope that it will continue to find broader audiences, including through presentation on free to air television.

While that outcome is not yet known, the documentary now provides ACHRH with an excellent resource which can be used in multiple settings, from community forums, to training for service providers, to discussions with government and policy officers.

This innovative and effective project essentially addresses most of the 'implications for prevention' to support the improved understanding and attitudes held by people born in Non-Main English Speaking Countries identified in the recently released 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)¹⁹, in particular the recommendations to:

'Engage whole communities and leverage cultural strengths to address domestic violence, including interventions aimed at changing attitudes through community campaigns...'

'Adopt a participatory approach and invite community members to partner in designing and delivering prevention initiatives...'²⁰



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