



AustralAsian Centre
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS & HEALTH

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

FINAL REPORT

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For the AustralAsian Centre
For Human Rights & Health

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1. Introduction

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.

2. The National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse

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

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

3. Background and context

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

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

4. Project aims and objectives

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

The objectives of the project are to:

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

To support the evaluation of the project, a Theory of Change was developed by Effective Change in partnership with ACHRH (see: Appendix 1).

5. Project activities, engagement and results

To support the development of an emerging evidence-base on dowry abuse in Australia and to help prevent dowry abuse in Australia by working with communities, the following project activities were undertaken.

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

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

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

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

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

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

An article on 'The health impacts of Dowry Abuse on South Asian Communities in Australia' authored by Adjunct Professor Dr Manjula O'Connor will be published in the Medical Journal of Australia (MJA), drawing on the results of the survey.

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

A **thematic analysis of the focus groups** has been written in preparation for future journal articles (see: Appendix 2). The thematic analysis found the drivers of dowry abuse raised by participants included:

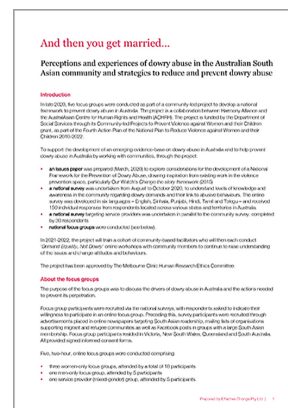
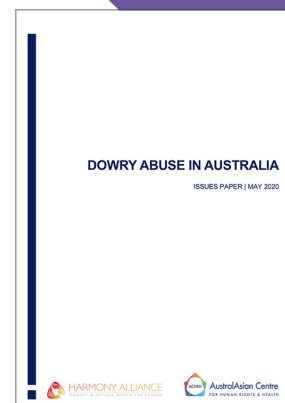
- gender inequality
- distortion of culture
- cultural norms
- family and community pressures.

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

Factors contributing to the prevention of dowry abuse included:

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

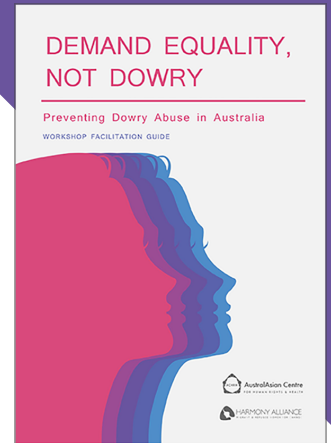
Education – both broad community education and tailored education programs for community cohorts and for service providers – was seen as the key approach to prevent dowry abuse before it occurs.



5.4 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' community workshops

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

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



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

Delivery of 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' community workshops

A total of **32 online community workshops were delivered** by seven community facilitators, reaching **more than 250 people**.

Feedback from the community workshop participants show that:

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

5.5 Focus Group with the 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' facilitators

A focus group was conducted with the facilitators of the 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' workshops and was attended by six of the seven facilitators (see: Appendix 3 for the Trainer focus group report). The purpose of the focus group was to collect their reflections on the conduct and the impact of the workshops for the evaluation. All facilitators were very satisfied with the workshop resources and the training and support provided by ACHRH and Harmony Alliance. They highlighted the authenticity of the case scenarios, the simplicity of the language and how well they worked in engaging participants in the discussion of relatable and familiar examples of dowry abuse. The facilitators had some minor challenges in facilitating the workshops, but nothing that they could not respond. Overall, they provided very positive feedback on the workshops, participant engagement and the valuable discussions generated in the workshops. There was common agreement that on-going education in the community was needed to address the issue.

6. Project impacts and outcomes

The following section presents a thematic analysis of impacts and outcomes of the project, arranged around the two overarching objectives of:

- Building the evidence base on dowry abuse
- Empowering the community to prevent dowry abuse.

The evaluation data is drawn from the focus groups undertaken throughout the project – with the community, with service providers and with the community facilitators of the workshops. The highlighted quotes throughout are from the participants in these discussions.

6.1 Building the evidence base on dowry abuse through community consultation

Theme 1: Understanding community perceptions and experiences of dowry abuse

Outcome	Supporting evidence from evaluation data
Participants were able to share their initial perceptions of dowry abuse and its prevalence in Australia.	At the beginning of the focus groups, all participants possessed a clear understanding of dowry abuse and were able to make the distinction between respectful dowry practice and dowry in an abusive context. All focus group participants agreed that 'dowry abuse' stemmed from the presence of 'demands', a 'sense of entitlement', 'greed' and the presence of power imbalances. All but two of the male focus group participants acknowledged that dowry abuse occurs in the Australian South Asian community. Those who were unconvinced about dowry abuse acknowledged that dowry-giving and abuses may continue to occur in India, though at a declining rate over the past 10-20 years due to the country's increasing prosperity and other socio-economic changes. However, they felt that dowry was not commonly practiced in Australia and were not personally aware of anyone experiencing dowry abuse. <i>"The demand is made, not only out of entitlement but is about power and greed, convenience and getting money in the most non-accountable way possible."</i>
Community members drew on their lived experience to highlight the coercive nature of dowry abuse	Community members provided examples where families had stated that they would not be asking for dowry when the couple were engaged, but changed, slowly at first, with demands escalating as the date of a large wedding approached. In such cases, families and the women involved, felt trapped, as it became more socially uncomfortable to cancel a large, well-publicised wedding, often with international family guests attending. <i>"My dad constantly said to me 'I'll give them anything they want, as long as they take care of my daughter.'"</i>
Community members highlighted the broad-reaching effects of dowry abuse on family members	Focus group participants recounted that abuse could be directed by families of the groom at the families of the bride, including relatives living in India. Focus group participants discussed examples of family members being subjected to financial demands amounting to extortion, as well as relatives in India being subjected to threats or intimidation. <i>"I don't think we understand the psychological aspect of how it affects not only the female, but the female's family or the other side's family."</i>

Theme 2: Understanding the nature of dowry abuse through professional experience

Service providers drew on their experiences to highlight how dowry abuse is often interlinked with other forms of violence	Service providers also reported personal experiences of encountering dowry abuse in their work. These discussions shed light on the ways in which dowry abuse is often accompanied by other forms of violence. For example, service providers highlighted that often, victim-survivors began with a disclosure of financial abuse, and as trust was established between the client and the service, this may be followed by disclosures about other forms of abuse including coercive control, family isolation, physical isolation, physical and sexual abuse. One service provider equated some dowry abuse cases they had seen to instances of human trafficking.
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Outcome	Supporting evidence from evaluation data
Service providers shed light on the barriers that currently exist in accessing help for women experiencing dowry abuse	Legal practitioners reported sometimes struggling to convince victim-survivors to take legal action against a perpetrator due to a range of complicating factors, including social stigma, their own family's (ie. the bride's parents) preference not to disclose the matter and/or fear of reprisals on their family in India. A further complicating factor for some victim-survivors was the experience of abuse from their family-in-law, often while living in the same household. In these circumstances, taking legal action not only against a partner, but an extended family, reportedly could be overwhelming for the victim-survivor, particularly if there were additional barriers, such as language, no independent income, separation from family overseas and/or migration status. <i>"Women stay in the relationship or don't want police involvement because no matter the amount of money, it's not worth the mental anguish, it's not worth it to pursue it."</i>
Service providers were able to highlight the various effects of dowry abuse on individuals	Focus group participants were also able to describe a range of impacts of dowry abuse experienced by the victim/survivors in addition to financial impacts. These included long-lasting emotional and psychological impacts such as depression, hypervigilance, fear of going out and experiencing an extreme sense of social stigma. Further impacts included ostracization or estrangement from their family or some members or branches of their family, as well as estrangement from community circles or faith communities. From direct and reported accounts of victim/survivor experiences, other significant impacts of dowry abuse included interruptions to women's studies, careers and economic independence and/or needing to relocate, including moving interstate to escape the perpetrator.
Theme 3: Identifying the drivers and reinforcing factors of dowry abuse	
Community members were able to collectively identify four key drivers of dowry abuse	Engaging the community to assist with identifying the unique drivers of dowry abuse was a key aim of this project and was achieved through conducting the national focus groups. It should be noted that the drivers of dowry abuse developed during the focus group discussions are consistent with those identified in the literature but provide some additional nuance around individual perceptions and experiences. The key drivers of dowry abuse were collectively identified as: • Gender inequality • Cultural norms • Distortion of custom • Family and community pressure These drivers, as identified by community members, are further outlined in Appendix 1. <i>"There is not a simple answer to very deeply rooted cultural problems that start at birth...men are preferred, men run the temples."</i>
'Silence around dowry abuse' was identified as a key reinforcing factor that supports the drivers of dowry abuse	The reinforcing factor most frequently raised during the focus groups was 'silence' about dowry abuse – including silence from families, the general community and faith communities. Participants from the three community focus groups recounted similar appeals from family and community members to maintain silence on abusive situations: 'Don't drag our dirty laundry outside, leave it in the family' 'Sweep it under the rug' and 'Don't make the community sound bad. We're good people...' On a community level, silence results in the issue being unacknowledged, unnamed, and therefore absent from a community-wide action agenda. Focus group participants concurred that community silence on dowry abuse protected perpetrators from accountability or scrutiny and whether intentional or not, enabled or supported dowry-related abuse. Lack of understanding of dowry abuse in mainstream services was partially attributed to the community silence around dowry abuse. Silence about dowry abuse makes this a taboo subject and women reported that they were fearful of telling their stories of dowry abuse. Fear of family and social isolation for speaking out about dowry abuse was even more pronounced for women whose families were overseas, and/or with visa insecurity and/or did not speak English as their first language. <i>"Women, not men, will be ostracised if their stories of dowry abuse are shared. The cost of speaking out can be to lose your family. Women pay a high cost for telling their stories."</i>

Theme 4: Best practice for preventing dowry abuse	
Outcome	Supporting evidence from evaluation data
Education is key for preventing dowry abuse	All participants supported a primary prevention approach of preventing dowry abuse before it occurs. 'Education' in a broad sense, was seen as the key primary prevention action, with a focus on community education and education for relevant institutions and service providers. Focus groups recommended education for South Asian communities, and education tailored for specific groups within the communities. It was suggested that community education needs to have a 'human rights approach' and include education about family violence, dowry abuse, the prevention of dowry abuse and human rights and legal information, to ensure communities understand the legal rights of victim/survivors and the legal ramifications for perpetrators of dowry abuse. <i>"Treat family violence as a pandemic and education as the vaccination."</i>
Legal approaches to addressing dowry abuse cannot exist in isolation	There was a range of views on taking a legal approach to the prevention of dowry abuse. Some felt that given that dowry has been outlawed in India for more than 50 years yet still continues there and in Australia, it was not the best approach to address what they considered to be 'such a deep-seated, cultural issue...even though women are a lot more empowered, there is still a severe disempowerment that comes from a family perspective.' Service providers taking part in the focus groups cautioned against adopting an education approach that exclusively focussed on legal issues. Others were highly supportive of legal approaches, and explicitly framing dowry abuse as a criminal action. Some felt that from a legal perspective, there should be more protections available for transnational cases, where women may be migrating to marry, but may enter the country on an insecure visa and be highly vulnerable to abuse and coercive control, with no access to Centrelink or Medicare, no understanding of available services, no English language skills, no support networks and no independence. <i>"Education that only focusses on legal issues to change behaviour, highlighting that dowry abuse is a crime – can result in two responses – those that absorb the message and those who go underground, and keep the practices hidden."</i>
Fore-fronting lived experience through digital campaigns and education	Participants felt that there was potential to deliver on-line campaigns and education and that 'social media is the way to engage and spread the message and educate young people, because most of them are on social media'. Most felt that the best approach would be to 'draw on survivors' stories, and tailor information in a way that is digestible for our community members, especially those who are not English literate.' A range of relatable stories could be examined from the points of view of survivors, fathers of the daughters who have experienced dowry abuse and their friends and family members. Participants also noted this approach would require sophisticated and careful social media management, and be aware of the potential risks, including protection of privacy, providing safety information, safe exit options, risks of controlling partners, trolling and racist abuse. <i>"I think we have to be quite nuanced in utilising survivor stories, lived experiences, to shift people's thinking, because that is quite powerful."</i>
Mainstream service providers require ongoing training in addressing and preventing dowry abuse	Focus group participants recognised that most service providers and professionals receive on-going professional development, and those working in or around family violence, generally receive some level of family violence training. It was felt that police, health professionals and financial counsellors in particular need training to be able to understand and recognise dowry abuse, as these professions often have the first encounter with a victim of dowry abuse. Focus group participants thought improved and consistent policing around dowry-related abuse could help both in preventing abuse ('delivering a message to perpetrators about the seriousness of their actions') and supporting women by recognising and validating their experience of abuse ('taking the issue and their experience seriously'). <i>"We need to steer the conversation away from racism, or a fear of appearing racist. We need to shift the focus to understanding dowry abuse as gender-based violence. Gender-based violence occurs across all cultures, societies, and demographics. Dowry abuse is just one way that this is occurring, it is a cultural expression of it. But it is violence against women. It doesn't happen to men. It is a hidden form of violence."</i>

6.2 Empowering the community to prevent dowry abuse

Theme 1: Engaging community leaders	
Outcome	Supporting evidence from evaluation data
Community leaders report increased confidence to develop strategies for increasing their community's awareness of dowry abuse.	Facilitators reported in the focus groups with the evaluator that the workshops that they had conducted had gone well, ultimately increasing their confidence and ability to deliver the community education workshops. <i>"I found the experience very fulfilling and felt confident and able to facilitate more workshops."</i>
Theme 2: Outcomes for community members	
Community members report an increased awareness and understanding of dowry abuse	This data indicates that 97% of workshop participants reported an increase in their understanding of dowry demands and abuse. This result is supported by comments collected from participants who reported substantial increases in their understanding of the workshop content as well as an interest to continue to build on this new knowledge. Several participants highlighted how the focus group discussions, paired with their personal experience altered their understanding of the prevalence of dowry abuse. <i>"I had thought dowry abuse was on the decline...I now believe that the face of dowry has changed. It's become more insidious and intangible. The seriousness of the matter has increased."</i>
Community members feel confident in their abilities to inform others of the negative effects of dowry abuse after attending the workshop.	99% of surveyed participants reported feeling confident in their abilities to inform others of the negative effects of dowry abuse after attending the workshop. This confidence was matched by participant's reported interest in continuing awareness raising activities. In addition, the data indicates that participants were able to re-consider some of their internally held assumptions around dowry and reported an increased willingness to engage in awareness raising activities around dowry abuse. <i>"Everyone felt so conditioned about dowry in our everyday life. Some participants realised that they are unconsciously getting prepared to give dowry to their girls, even in Australia. People are aware there is dowry in Australia. There is a strong feeling that we need to raise awareness of dowry in Australia. We need to make it a day-to-day discussion, otherwise we tend to forget. It is so conditioned in our lives. That's the conclusion our groups reached."</i>
Theme 3: Lessons learnt in effectively engaging community members	
Including evidence and data around dowry abuse is key to engaging community members	During the facilitator focus groups, there was a fair amount of discussion around the need to include evidence and data about dowry abuse in Australia to counter group discussion that might minimise, deny, or ignore the importance of dowry abuse. One facilitator described commencing the workshop with the survey results of this project, then asking participants if they or anyone they know has faced dowry abuse and whether they think that dowry abuse exists in Australia, and suggested that more research and statistics in the introductory part of the workshop would add more depth. <i>"[Data is needed to] reinforce that this is not just some random thing, in our heads, to reinforce the actual relatable basis of the material. To reinforce, what we're talking about is not imaginary."</i>
Using relevant case scenarios allowed for greater community member engagement	Facilitators reported that all the participants recognised and acknowledged the reality of dowry abuse occurring in present-day Australia within the South Asian community. Both facilitators and participants indicated that this was helped by the 'scenarios' presented to participants during the workshops. For example, 100% of workshop participants indicated that the case scenarios were realistic. <i>"All the cases were spot on. They are drawn from real-life from Dr Manjula. Short and sweet, the questions are really straightforward. The format of everyone reading a paragraph each keeps people engaged and awake. It's not a lecture. It's really about discussion."</i>

7. Discussion and conclusion

The National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse project was successful in achieving its aims of building the evidence base on the nature of dowry abuse and empowering the community to prevent it. These aims were achieved through engaging migrant and refugee community members with lived experience of dowry abuse across Australia through focus groups and workshops to assist them in identifying what dowry abuse is and linking this insight to their personal experiences. This engagement led to community members discussing how dowry abuse is perpetrated, the influence of culture in perpetuating its practice and how it is linked to other forms of violence as well as identifying barriers to reporting dowry abuse and understanding its impact on families.

This project explored how gender inequality is a driver of dowry abuse and found that while the four 'gendered drivers' outlined in Change the Story are useful, a more nuanced understanding of intersecting drivers and reinforcing factors of dowry abuse is needed. Such an understanding will inform the development of primary prevention initiatives that are tailored and effective for preventing dowry abuse. Project participants drew on lived experience to identify meaningful prevention activities for addressing the drivers and reinforcing factors of dowry abuse. Each prevention activity identified aligns with one or more 'proven and promising' prevention techniques outlined in Change the Story.

The alignment of the prevention techniques informed by migrant and refugee community members with Change the Story demonstrates how the National Framework prevention techniques can be tailored to specific communities and types of violence. This project's approach of using the socio-ecological model contributed to the outcomes aligning well with the evidence-based, 'promising techniques' outlined in Change the Story, supporting the efficacy of this model in building prevention infrastructure. Similarly, this project demonstrates that community-led primary prevention that is informed by lived experience is essential when producing effective primary prevention strategies. This project is an exemplar for building tailored, culturally appropriate and effective primary prevention infrastructure through forming a lived-experience informed evidence-base for the drivers of violence.

National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse – Theory of Change

Appendix 1

OBJECTIVES:

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

PROBLEM STATEMENT	INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES
The context for dowry abuse is supported by the cultural gender bias in favour of grooms and his family above that of the bride and her family, based on patriarchal and patrilocal attitudes, strengthened by the power of Australian residency and giving rise to a sense of entitlement in grooms. There are gaps in knowledge about the incidence and prevalence of dowry abuse in Australia. There are no tailored primary prevention initiatives in place in Australia which aim to stop dowry abuse before it starts. Little is known about service providers' understanding of dowry abuse and how best to respond.	DSS funding for community led projects to prevent violence against women and their children Project team AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH) and Harmony Alliance expertise and knowledge Community knowledge and experience Health professionals, GPs, DV service providers, Police / Justice system expertise and experience Evaluation expertise and knowledge	Desktop research on dowry abuse in Australia Design and implementation of survey on experience, knowledge and attitude measures (in English and five (5) community languages) Knowledge gathering from community stakeholders to inform the primary prevention framework and explore knowledge and gaps Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data Development of intervention training materials for community facilitators Training of community facilitators Ongoing support and mentoring of community facilitators Recruitment of community workshop participants Evaluation using an action learning/improvement methodology	Issues paper on dowry abuse in Australia to inform the conduct and design of the project Conduct of survey Survey analysis and key findings paper Intervention training materials developed, informed by stakeholder knowledge and experience, and existing empirical evidence and theory – Facilitation Guide and Slide Deck Cohort of trained and supported community facilitators in VIC, NSW and QLD developed Materials for community workshops (in English and five (5) community languages) – Flyer, Slide Deck and Fact Sheet Community workshops delivered by community trainers Evaluation report including analysis of focus groups, facilitator training and community workshops	SHORT TERM Build capacity in the South Asian community to understand the drivers of dowry abuse using a primary prevention framework as the underlying concept
				MEDIUM TERM Provide a pathway for structural change
				LONG TERM Prevent future risks of dowry abuse and associated family violence

ASSUMPTIONS:

Barrier: More women than men; younger women more than older women willing to change and participate in facilitator training and community workshops

Enabler: More women will take part and become empowered to resist dowry giving by parents



And then you get married...

Perceptions and experiences of dowry abuse in the Australian South Asian community and strategies to reduce and prevent dowry abuse

Introduction

In late 2020, five focus groups were conducted as part of a community-led project to develop a national framework to prevent dowry abuse in Australia. The project is a collaboration between Harmony Alliance and the AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH). The project is funded by the Department of Social Services through its Community-led Projects to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children grant, as part of the Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022.

To support the development of an emerging evidence-base on dowry abuse in Australia and to help prevent dowry abuse in Australia by working with communities, through the project:

- **an issues paper** was prepared (March, 2020) to explore considerations for the development of a National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse, drawing inspiration from existing work in the violence prevention space, particularly Our Watch's *Change the story framework* (2015)
- **a national survey** was undertaken from August to October 2020, to understand levels of knowledge and awareness in the community regarding dowry demands and their link to abusive behaviours. The online survey was developed in six languages – English, Sinhala, Punjabi, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu – and received 150 individual responses from respondents located across various states and territories in Australia.
- **a national survey** targeting service providers was undertaken in parallel to the community survey, completed by 30 respondents
- **national focus groups** were conducted (see below).

In 2021-2022, the project will train a cohort of community-based facilitators who will then each conduct 'Demand Equality, Not Dowry' online workshops with community members to continue to raise understanding of the issues and change attitudes and behaviours.

The project has been approved by The Melbourne Clinic Human Research Ethics Committee.

About the focus groups

The purpose of the focus groups was to discuss the drivers of dowry abuse in Australia and the actions needed to prevent its perpetration.

Focus group participants were recruited via the national surveys, with respondents asked to indicate their willingness to participate in an online focus group. Preceding this, survey participants were recruited through advertisements placed in online newspapers targeting South Asian readership, mailing lists of organisations supporting migrant and refugee communities as well as Facebook posts in groups with a large South Asian membership. Focus group participants resided in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. All provided signed informed consent forms.

Five, two-hour, online focus groups were conducted comprising:

- three women-only focus groups, attended by a total of 18 participants
- one men-only focus group, attended by 5 participants
- one service provider (mixed-gender) group, attended by 5 participants.

Conversations were recorded and transcribed. A trained counsellor was present during the focus groups. After the focus groups, there was an opportunity for participants to debrief and access support services if required. The discussions were audio taped and transcribed to inform the development of interventions to prevent dowry abuse, such as the delivery of education programs for community groups and professionals. In recognition of the time and effort spent, each participant received a gift voucher.

The topics and issues explored in the focus groups were structured around a four-level social-ecological model, where factors at one level influence factors at another level. This model considers the complex interplay between individual, family, cultural and societal levels. Importantly, 'culture' was introduced in this model replacing the more commonly used level of 'community' to facilitate discussion on the role of 'culture' in the perpetuation of dowry abuse.

The key focus group questions for each level were:

- Society: What do you think needs to happen on a broader social level to prevent, or better respond to dowry abuse?
- Culture: How can 'culture' be harnessed to prevent dowry abuse?
- Family: How widespread is the experience of dowry abuse for families living in Australia? What needs to happen on a family level to prevent or change this situation?
- Individual: How can we empower women so that they are less likely to experience dowry abuse, and if they are experiencing dowry abuse, they are supported and can protect themselves?

Structure of this paper

This paper provides the analysis of five focus group conversations. It is structured in the following sections:

- Community perceptions of dowry abuse
- Experiences and direct observation of dowry abuse
- Effects of dowry abuse
- What are the drivers of dowry abuse?
- What factors reinforce or passively support dowry abuse?
- What factors contribute to preventing dowry abuse and/or enabling change?
- What actions need to be taken to prevent dowry abuse in the future?

Community perceptions of dowry abuse

The characteristics that distinguish 'dowry abuse' from dowry, or gift-giving to newly married couples include:

- demands for dowry gifts
- a sense of entitlement to gifts of dowry
- excessive demands (house deposit, house purchase, business establishment costs, car)
- demands for gifts which extend over time, or in fact, never cease
- demands for gifts for extended family members

Members of all focus groups agreed that the key distinction between dowry and an abusive dowry context, were demands and a sense of entitlement for exorbitant gifts, including cash, from the family of the groom to the family of the bride.

'The demand is made, not out of entitlement but is about power and greed, convenience and getting money in the most non-accountable way possible.' (Male participant)

'Dowry in my head, a dowry isn't a gift. It is societal pressure, it's an obligation that's placed on the family of the bride. And if you don't succumb to that obligation or that pressure, your life is miserable.' (Female participant)

Experiences and direct observation of dowry abuse

Focus group participants related numerous examples of personal experience of dowry abuse, family members' experience of dowry abuse and direct involvement with dowry abuse in the capacity as a service provider, legal practitioner, medical practitioner, community leader or faith leader.

The range of directly experienced and observed dowry abuse examples disclosed included:

- physical abuse inflicted because the male 'did not believe that the dowry offered was enough' with the woman only finding safety after escaping interstate
- exorbitant demands for cash or goods equivalent to the life savings of the families of the brides –including demands to pay for a house, house deposit, business establishment costs
- demands for payment of international student fees
- demands for gifts, including gold jewellery and expensive consumer goods for the extended family, including family members in India
- false claims made against women of stealing jewellery
- victim/survivors remaining in abusive relationships or choosing not to pursue legal options
- visa-related abuses, such as withdrawing sponsorship and also abuse directed at the woman, even as the sponsor of a spousal visa.

Participants also provided examples where families had stated that they would not be asking for dowry when the couple were engaged, but changed, slowly at first, with demands escalating as the date of a large wedding approached. In such cases, families and the women involved, felt trapped, as it became more socially uncomfortable to cancel a large, well-publicised wedding, often with international family guests attending.

'My dad constantly said to me 'I'll give them anything they want, as long as they take care of my daughter.' (Female participant)

All bar two of the male focus group participants acknowledged that dowry abuse occurs in the Australian South Asian community. Those who were unconvinced about dowry abuse acknowledged that dowry-giving and abuses may continue to occur in India, though at a declining rate over the past 10-20 years due to the country's increasing prosperity and other socio-economic changes. However, they felt that dowry was not commonly practiced in Australia and were not personally aware of anyone experiencing dowry abuse.

Other men participating in the focus group however raised instances of dowry abuse of which they had direct knowledge and/or involvement through their professional or community roles.

'I had thought dowry abuse was on the decline...I now believe that the face of dowry has changed. It's become more insidious and intangible. The seriousness of the matter has increased.' (Male participant)

Service providers reported that from their experience, often the first disclosure made by a victim/survivor related to financial abuse, and as trust and understanding was established between the client and the service, this may be followed by disclosures about other forms of abuse including coercive control, family isolation, physical isolation, physical and sexual abuse. One service provider equated some dowry abuse cases they had seen to instances of human trafficking.

Legal practitioners reported sometimes struggling to convince victim/survivors to take legal action against a perpetrator due to a range of complicating factors, including social stigma, their own family's (i.e. the bride's parents) preference not to disclose the matter and/or fear of reprisals on their family in India. A further complicating factor for some victim/survivors was the experience of abuse from their family-in-law, often while living in the same household. In these circumstances, taking legal action not only against a partner, but an extended family, reportedly could be overwhelming for the victim/survivor, particularly if there were additional barriers, such as language, no independent income, separation from family overseas and/or migration status.

'Women stay in the relationship or don't want police involvement because no matter the amount of money, it's not worth the mental anguish, it's not worth it to pursue it.' (Female participant)

Effects of dowry abuse

Focus group participants described a range of impacts of dowry abuse experienced by the victim/survivors in addition to financial impacts. These included long-lasting emotional and psychological impacts such as depression, hypervigilance, fear of going out and experiencing an extreme sense of social stigma. Further impacts included ostracisation or estrangement from their family or some members or branches of their family, as well as estrangement from community circles or faith communities. From direct and reported accounts of victim/survivor experiences, other significant impacts of dowry abuse included interruptions to women's studies, careers and economic independence and/or needing to relocate, including moving interstate to escape the perpetrator.

The practice of dowry is essentially a family custom. In abusive situations, participants recounted that abuse could be directed by families of the groom at the families of the bride, including relatives living in India. Focus group participants discussed instances of family members subjected to financial demands amounting to extortion, included as respondents on intervention orders and/or relatives in India being subjected to threats or intimidation.

'I don't think we understand the psychological aspect of how it affects not only the female, but the female's family or the other side's family.' (Female participant)

What are the drivers of dowry abuse?

Discussions in relation to dowry abuse raised a complex and inter-connected set of cultural, social and economic factors which can be described as the ‘drivers’ of dowry abuse. Contemporary opportunities – for migration, wealth, education – are increasingly included in dowry payments and add further complexity to older customs. Importantly though, participants emphasised that:

- dowry abuse is not an inevitable outcome of the practice of dowry
- the practice of dowry is not universal in the Australian South Asian community
- the practice of dowry is outlawed in India, though still widely practiced.

The factors that drive dowry abuse or create the conditions in which dowry abuse can occur, raised in the focus group discussions are presented below. These issues are consistent with those identified in the literature but provide some additional nuance around individual perceptions and experiences.

Gender inequality	Indian culture was described and acknowledged by focus group participants as a ‘male preference culture.’ This phenomenon is well-documented, largely ascribed to the cultural tradition for the male child seen as a bread-winner and care-giver for parents as they age. After marriage, a female child is regarded as part of her husband's household and is generally expected to take care of her in-laws, but not her parents. A boy is therefore viewed as an asset, whereas a girl is viewed as a liability because in addition to not caring for aged parents, in terms of traditional customs, dowry will need to be paid when she marries. Focus group participants reported that while social changes are occurring in India and Australia, these sentiments remain deeply entrenched. The celebration of the birth of a boy, but not a girl, was provided as an example of this, with one participant sharing customary saying about the birth of a child such as <i>‘Boys brought gold onto the earth, girls ruined the sun’</i> and the tradition of families sharing sweets when a boy is born. [see: Pink Laidoo Project example of a grassroots campaign to counter this tradition] The preferencing of boys from birth continues throughout their childhood and adulthood. Participants provided a range of small, but collectively overwhelming examples of differential and preferential treatment of boys. As adults, preferential treatment of sons can continue. This creates a challenging family dynamic after marriage, particularly if the son's parents live in the same household. On a whole-of-society level, focus group participants described a lack of equality in the culture <i>‘to begin with’</i> and an imbalance in power structures, with men disproportionately holding power. <i>‘There is not a simple answer to very deeply rooted cultural problems that start at birth...men are preferred, men run the temples.’</i> (Female participant) Observations of the impacts of gender inequality in terms of the practice of dowry included: ▪ a sense that dowry benefits the male, and males wish to protect that privilege ▪ key community institutions, including faith-based groups, are skewed to patriarchal power structures – male-dominated churches, temples, gurdwaras and mosques which interpret religious scriptures, provide spiritual guidance to their congregations and officiate at weddings and other ceremonies, and consciously or otherwise, reinforce male privilege ▪ attempts to challenge dowry practices can also be seen as a challenge to male power structures and subject to patriarchal backlash ▪ rigid gender roles and expectations were seen as having negative impacts on women and men. While women had less power in decisions around their marriage, participants observed that women carried the <i>‘burden’</i> of protecting the family honour, which could extend to include family pressure to remain in an abusive marriage.
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	Rigid gender roles were also seen to impose disadvantages on men, with <i>'very strong pressure on boys to earn money and look after their parents'</i> and pressures on ensuring their <i>'marriageability ranking'</i> .
Cultural norms	Cultural norms and expectations - intrinsically linked to, and reinforcing of, gender inequality - were seen as a further driver of dowry abuse. Participants indicated that, while they live in Australia, and may be second or third generation, they are guided by <i>'cultural norms and expectations still attached to their country of origin'</i>: - children born in Australia are well-educated, but still have the mindset and attachment that <i>'this is our culture'</i> <i>'children have no power to challenge parents, wives have no power to challenge husbands...'</i> - women are controlled by their husbands – <i>'And then when they come to this country, they're controlled by their husbands, saying I need this money, I need to pay for this. You ask your parents to send me this money.'</i> - the cultural stigma around divorce prevents women from leaving an abusive marriage because <i>'the woman is 'scared of backlash, her family is scared of backlash'</i> - some suggested that dowry and abusive practices are perpetuated by parents because <i>'they copied it'</i> and therefore their daughters should do the same.
Distortion of custom	Numerous participants highlighted that abusive dowry practices are a distortion of the traditional practice of dowry: <i>'The real, or original meaning of dowry was to give protection to the woman. Its purpose has been distorted. It was not intended to show off how rich a family may be. It is not a cultural thing to give dowry, but it has become so, because the community has let it.'</i> <i>'Historically parents gave land to the son and dowry to the daughter for her to settle into her new home. While some things have changed, the thinking hasn't.'</i> <i>'Dowry originally was an antemortem inheritance, meant for the bride. It was intended for her use only but could be shared if she wanted.'</i>
Family and community pressure	Combined family and community pressures were also seen as drivers of dowry abuse. Family pressure was described as <i>'overwhelming'</i> in some cases, including either through the demands for dowry gifts made by families or through exerting pressure on their daughters to enter into or stay in marriages, despite abusive demands from the groom or his family for money and gifts. Many participants described the excessive and escalating demands for dowry, either from the groom or his family, as simply <i>'greedy'</i> and possibly reflective of the growing consumerism and rise of middle classes in modern India. With this increasing focus on wealth, dowry was seen as changing over time – <i>'It has become a competition to give the same or better as someone else because – 'what will people say?' Parents want to be seen as very generous parents.'</i> Concerns about how the family would be judged by their extended family, their faith community or the wider community on the basis of what they provided as dowry were raised by multiple participants as driving the sense of competition. While family demands from the groom side were seen as driven by greed, on the other side, families of the bride may be motivated to succumb to demands due to fear of judgement about their generosity, or lack of generosity, from their community. Focus group participants reported that pressures on families to accede to dowry demands could be further increased and complicated: - if the dowry demands were also tied to applications for temporary or permanent visas in Australia, which may have other implications for the family, such as opportunities for parents or siblings to migrate - if there were fears for the safety of family members living in India.

What factors reinforce or passively support dowry abuse?

A range of factors were identified by participants which reinforce or passively support dowry abuse. Of these, the factor most frequently raised was 'silence' about dowry abuse - from families, from the community, from faith communities. Participants from the three community focus groups recounted similar appeals from family and community members to maintain silence on abusive situations: *'Don't drag our dirty laundry outside, leave it in the family'* *'Sweep it under the rug'* and *'Don't make the community sound bad. We're good people...'* Collective silence around dowry abuse, motivated by a desire to not bring shame on the family / the faith community / the broader South Asian community, was observed to have myriad and far-reaching consequences. On a community level, silence results in the issue being unacknowledged, unnamed, and therefore absent from a community-wide action agenda. As one participant remarked *'You've got to name it to know what you're doing. If you don't name it, how do you measure it? How do you prevent it?'* Focus group participants concurred that community silence on dowry abuse protected perpetrators from accountability or scrutiny and whether intentional or not, enabled or supported dowry-related abuse. Whilst dowry abuse is recognised as a form of family violence under Victorian and West Australian legislation, focus group participants felt that the illegality of dowry abuse is not well known in the community, including by potential and actual perpetrators, partly because the issue is not aired in the community.

The greatest impacts of collective silence however are experienced by victim-survivors. Silence about dowry abuse makes this a taboo subject and women reported that they were fearful of telling their stories of dowry abuse. Participants reported that:

- women fear isolation from their families and the community if they speak out
- women fear that their in-law family and their birth family *'will hate them'*
- women fear community and online retribution
- women *'don't want to be pitied - they want to share their stories, but need a platform to do so'*
- women who have left abusive marriages *'feel guilt and shame'*.

Fear of family and social isolation for speaking out about dowry abuse was even more pronounced for women whose families were overseas, and/or with visa insecurity and/or did not speak English as their first language. The absence of Indian voices in the '#MeToo' movement, in Bollywood actors, was highlighted by participants as demonstration of the strong cultural forces silencing women from speaking out.

'Women, not men, will be ostracised if their stories of dowry abuse are shared.'

'The cost of speaking out can be to lose your family'

'Women pay a high cost for telling their stories' (Female participants)

For victim-survivors, community and family silence is a further barrier to help-seeking and, in failing to validate their experience of abuse, is also a major contributor to psychological harm. Young women participating in the focus groups described experiencing a sense of shock, after being brought up and educated in Australia, with a strong sense of gender equality fostered by their parents, to find themselves living through an abusive dowry experience when they married. Until they had personally experienced it, some participants did not think dowry demands or dowry abuse would have been possible in Australia and were not really aware of community members' experiences, unless it was a close family member.

'My parents raised me up to be, like... women and men are equal, women's empowerment, feminism, all of that. And then you get married. And it's like, the complete opposite of what they've instilled in you your entire life.' (Female participant)

A range of additional factors which reinforce or passively support dowry abuse are outlined in the following table, with most either caused or reinforced by the silence around dowry abuse. These include factors ranging from actions at the individual, family and community levels.

Factors reinforcing or passively supporting dowry abuse

Men's lack of willingness to engage on the subject of family violence

- Some female participants reported a lack of engagement by men and particularly male community leaders, on the subject of abuse and family violence. These women observed that (in a general sense) some of the reasons that men did not want to engage in the discourse around family violence were that they felt offended, they felt they were being treated as perpetrators and they believed that family violence was 'a women's issue'.

Fear of patriarchal backlash

- Linked to women's fears of disclosure were concerns about male backlash – on a family level or broader community – with women being publicly and privately ostracised for 'bringing shame' on the family.

'Family honour is at risk if she speaks up too much. Yeah. Somehow, it's always women who carry the family's honour.' (Female, participant)

Families over-riding or ignoring brides challenging dowry practices

Focus group participants raised a range of scenarios where families overrode or ignored their daughters' wishes to refuse dowry demands. These included:

- instances where parents were concerned their daughter would be abused if they did not comply with dowry demands
- instances where parents did not want to give dowry, but felt pressured by community expectations and wanted to avoid their family being viewed negatively and to save 'face'
- instances where parents wanted to be viewed as generous parents by the community and their new family-in-law.

Faith communities' silence on dowry abuse

While faith communities were not seen as 'driving' dowry abuse, their perceived silence on issues around dowry, dowry abuse and family violence, was seen as a missed opportunity to influence community attitudes and provide leadership. As key religious roles, governing bodies and committees were male-dominated groups, there was also observations that men in these roles were:

- less likely to acknowledge or recognise the issues – just as men in the broader community were less likely to acknowledge dowry abuse
- concerned about avoiding patriarchal backlash or compromising community donations
- not well-placed to be providing counsel to couples or particularly women living in abusive relationships
- less likely to encourage female decision-making or participation.

Cultural norms not keeping pace with social change / resistance to change

Some focus group participants pointed out that dowry traditions have existed for centuries, and while cultural norms can shift, *'time is required for generational change in attitudes'*. Other participants were less convinced and reported that *'only selective norms change'*.

'While some cultural norms change with an Australian upbringing, such as education and careers for women, everything reverts to traditional norms when you get married.' (Female, participant)

Participants also highlighted the limited knowledge, understanding or recognition of dowry abuse broadly across service systems, with the exception of culturally specific services. Multicultural or culturally specific services were reported as having a greater awareness of dowry, dowry abuse and cultural issues, but at the same time were limited in their capacity to respond or intervene. Lack of understanding of dowry abuse in mainstream services was partially attributed to the community silence around dowry abuse. Anecdotal evidence was provided by focus group participants of dealing with staff from family violence helplines, police, family violence services, medical and mental health professionals, financial counsellors and legal services who lacked knowledge or professional expertise around responding to dowry abuse. For victim/survivors, the consequences of the service system's lack of knowledge about dowry abuse as an expression of family violence were extensive. They

included a lack of assistance when it was most needed, intensification of social and psychological isolation, lack of validation and being unable to leave, or having to return, to a perpetrator of violence.

'...Even when searching for a psychologist or a psychiatrist, any mental health expert, it's almost like I don't have an option but to find someone Indian because if not they don't even believe the amount of money or transactions asked for. I don't think they would know how to treat a mental illness because they can't relate to the social norms, unfortunately.' (Female, focus group participant)

What factors contribute to preventing dowry abuse and/or enabling change?

Focus group participants considered two key factors - on a broad and general level - as supporting positive changes to the practice of dowry and limiting the potential for dowry-related abuse (not only in Australia, but also in countries of origin and across the South Asian diaspora). These were:

- Access to education, employment and economic independence for South Asian women and girls (in their countries of origin, in Australia and across the diaspora) which were seen as key to empowering women. As one participant observed:

'When dowry originated and girls were not educated, dowry provided them with some safety. Today's equivalent is education and capacity to earn.'

- Generational change in attitudes, which focus group participants felt was happening, with the older generation more likely to maintain 'traditions' around dowry, and younger generations more willing to change these practices.

In addition to the general and broad-brush observations above, focus group participants also noted a range of actions – small and large – taken by individuals, families, communities and at a broader social level that supported positive change. Some examples of these actions offered by participants included:

At a family level:

- Mothers described how they were raising their – young and older - sons and daughters with a focus on gender equality. For those with adult children, this included examples such as explicitly discussing the practice of dowry and explaining why they would not participate in this or supporting their children in relationships with partners outside their community.
- Some focus group participants described the support they had received from their parents, particularly fathers, whilst living through or recovering from an experience of dowry abuse.

At a community level:

- The Hare Krishna temple provided examples of classes and training for the community, for young people, and specifically for engaged couples, which addresses challenging issues around abuse, dowry and dowry abuse, arranged marriages and family violence, as well as discussing and reinforcing positive behaviours.

At a society-wide level:

- The inclusion of dowry abuse in state-based family violence legislation in Victoria and Western Australia was seen as a key initiative for change, although it was felt that further education about this was required for the community, police, the legal sector and service providers.
- Two recently released short films - *Migrant Bride* and *Aussie Victim*¹ were discussed as examples of a broader strategy for enhancing understanding of dowry abuse. The films were made for the NSW Police Force and are intended both for a police and a community audience. By taking a narrative approach, they allow the opportunity to follow some of the nuanced ways the story of a happily engaged couple and their families subtly turns to coercive control and escalating demands for dowry.

¹ Produced and directed by Pankaj Upadhyay and Taufeeq Ahmed Sheikh along with a voluntary cast and crew. The films premiered in Sydney in October 2020.

- The sustained advocacy of multiple community organisations, particularly multicultural and women's community organisations within communities and to government is a significant contributor preventing dowry abuse. The partner organisations for this project - Harmony Alliance and ACHRH – are two prominent examples of these organisations. This work has also been supported by many mainstream community organisations.

In addition to the examples above, participants highlighted the advocacy actions taken by individuals, in Australia and overseas, which often had cascading and compounding impacts for individuals, families and at a community level. Some examples of these included:

- A community drop-in centre for South Asian women, run by a young woman to provide support to women, particularly if isolated from their family or community. This is one example of a community initiative, which is outside the formal service system and run without government funding or support.
- Various facebook groups set up for South Asian women to connect and share their stories, such as Brown Girls Rising, established by a young woman disowned by her family after she formed a relationship with a man outside of the Sikh community and Kaur Voices, a website which aims to 'start a movement mirroring the original #MeToo initiative' for the Sikh and Panjabi communities.
- The work of a core group of South Asian women who have been advocating for change – within faith-based communities and across the wider community over many years. Their actions included advocacy and participation in multiple government committees and initiatives, providing submissions to inquiries, providing training to various groups and providing commentary on television and mainstream media on key issues. Within faith-based settings, advocates, for example continue to seek greater representation and involvement of women in management committees.

'The Pink Ladoo Project' founded by UK based lawyer Raj Khaira, is one example of an initiative taken by an individual to *'inspire and encourage South Asian families to focus on changing one tradition in particular - the custom of only celebrating the birth of a child by distributing sweets within the community if that child is a boy...'* The Pink Ladoo project operates in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US.

An article published in The Guardian newspaper outlines Khaira's motivation for starting this project:

'When Raj Khaira's brother was born, ladoos, a popular celebratory Indian sweet, were sprinkled among the community like confetti. When her sister came along, the extended family cried. Which is why Khaira launched the Pink Ladoo project in 2015 to mark the International Day of the Girl Child.

The idea is simple: hand out pink ladoos when a daughter is born as a counterpoint to the golden sweets distributed at the birth of a son.

"The pink ladoo is a symbol of protest against gender bias, one that you can make sense of immediately," says Khaira. "The birth announcement is the first tradition to be skewed towards the male child, and the pink ladoos hope to change that. Diaspora communities tend to hold on to customs stubbornly, and we want them to analyse the gender bias in them. The response to the campaign both offline and on social media has been phenomenal...Most interestingly, the staff at the hospitals have given us great feedback, saying the disappointment of bearing a daughter is a larger issue than most people realise."

Pankti Mehta Kadakia in The Guardian, 12 Oct 2016

The Pink Ladoo website (pinkladoo.org) states that 'We want parents to open the conversation on gender-equality and take a stand against sexism at the earliest opportunity in their daughters' lives, so we inspire and encourage South Asian families to distribute Pink Ladoo when a girl is born. By encouraging families to celebrate girls' births by distributing Pink Ladoo (or any other sweet) to their families and friends we ensure:

- those families open the conversation on gender equality at the earliest point in their daughters' lives;
- that the topic of gender-equality enters the homes of everyone receiving those sweets; and
- that members of the South Asian community are actively participating in the creation of new traditions and customs that value women.

For us, it's not just a Pink Ladoo, it's the symbol of a protest against South Asian gender-biased customs.'

What actions need to be taken to prevent dowry abuse?

Focus group participants were asked for their ideas on actions which could be taken to prevent dowry abuse in the future. Participants supported a primary prevention approach of preventing dowry abuse before it occurs. 'Education' in a broad sense, was seen as the key primary prevention action, to be focused on community education and education for relevant institutions and service providers.

'Treat family violence as a pandemic and education as the vaccination.' (Female, participant)

Community education

Focus groups recommended education for South Asian communities, and education tailored for specific groups within the communities. At its broadest level, it was suggested that community education needs to have a 'human rights approach' and include education about:

- family violence
- dowry abuse and prevention of dowry abuse
- human rights and legal information, to ensure communities understand the legal rights of victim/survivors and the legal ramifications for perpetrators of dowry abuse.

Service providers cautioned that *'Education that only focusses on legal issues to change behaviour, highlighting that dowry abuse is a crime – can result in two responses – those that absorb the message and those who go underground, and keep the practices hidden.'*

In general, focus groups recommended segmenting and targeting groups within the broader South Asian community and providing education tailored to the needs of the different demographic groups, rather than a 'one-size fits all' approach. The table below sets out some target groups and topics or education focus suggested for each group.

Target Group	Focus of education:
Women and girls	▪ To educate girls and women before marriage ▪ To provide information on dowry abuse and women's legal rights, especially in relation to transgressions of state-based family violence legislation ▪ To improve health literacy, especially for newly arrived women, such as understanding the role of public hospitals and general practitioners, and how and when to access these services
Couples and their families	▪ Pre-marital education/counselling for couples, and potentially their parents, covering topics including arranged marriages, dowry pressure, unacceptability of dowry abuse and family violence
Men	▪ Training, facilitation to assist men understand and develop emotional intelligence, understand women's rights (similar to <i>The Man Cave</i> training provided by Jesuit Social Services) ▪ education for men as 'fathers or future fathers'
Parents	▪ Parenting classes, potentially provided through temples, gurdwaras
South Asian tertiary and secondary students	▪ Provide health promotion, primary prevention training ▪ Family violence education and awareness-raising ▪ Health and legal literacy
Boys specifically	▪ Acknowledge conflicts between cultural norms and rights ▪ Education to be led by a South Asian male facilitator who can relate to cultural and community norms

'There is no point in educating girls if you don't also educate boys about their responsibilities and obligations and respectful relationships, how to treat women and how to interact' (Female, participant)

Many participants highlighted the potential for the faith community leaders to support gender equality and the equal valuing of women and men and to denounce gender inequality. Difficult topics such as dowry, dowry-related abuse and family violence could be addressed in sermons, enabling messages to reach whole families. Age-appropriate messaging could also be delivered in groups for children, young people and young couples. The need for faith communities to address complex, contemporary issues such as family violence and mental health was acknowledged by several faith-based representatives. They acknowledged that faith communities had a role in shifting the thinking of parents from *'looking at children as your 'investment' for the future and viewing both sons and daughters as having responsibilities for parents as they age. This equalising works for males and females, as the pressure on boys to earn money to look after their parents is very strong.'*

The range of community education needs and audiences is underscored by a comment from a service provider about wanting rights-based education for *'young Indian women who have responded to marriage proposals from an Indian-Australian citizens...so many women have not had education around their reproductive health, sexual health, psychological wellbeing – they have no health literacy. So when we talk about dowry abuse, no one in their immediate family or their school has ever talked to them about how to navigate a relationship.'*

Participants also expressed doubts – for example, that parents would attend parenting classes, and that *'the community doesn't want to talk about dowry and dowry abuse, and therefore doesn't want to think about prevention strategies.'* Others indicated that education alone would take a generation or more to see change on a community-wide level.

Ensuring that community education is successful and reaches people 'where they are' requires delivery in settings such as settlement services, higher education, TAFEs, businesses and, as discussed, faith-based communities. The Mutual Relational Respect training provided by ACHRH was suggested as an example of this type of education program, with a primary prevention focus, taken out and delivered in a range of community, education and workplace settings.

Digital campaigns and education

Participants felt that there was potential to deliver on-line campaigns and education and that *'social media is the way to engage and spread the message and educate young people, because most of them are on social media'*. Most felt that the best approach would be to *'draw on survivors' stories, and tailor information in a way that is digestible for our community members, especially those who are not English literate.'* A range of relatable stories could be examined from the points of view of survivors, fathers of the daughters who have experienced dowry abuse and their friends and family members.

'I think we have to be quite nuanced in utilising survivor stories, lived experiences, to shift people's thinking, because that is quite powerful.' (Female participant)

To reach the target groups would require using the platforms which are popular with the community, such as FaceBook or WhatsApp groups, or tapping into existing groups. However, it would also require sophisticated and careful social media management, including:

- regular engagement
- development and curation of content
- attentive moderation and facilitation
- management of toxic and anti-social responses.

A social media or digital campaign would need to be carefully delivered and be aware of the potential risks, including protection of privacy, providing safety information, safe exit options, risks of controlling partners, trolling, racist abuse and so on. If delivered through a private group platform, there is also the need to be aware of mental health needs and rule/boundary setting for the group.

Cultural initiatives

Others took a longer-term view, supporting cultural initiatives such as literature, film-making, visual and performative arts, addressing the issues around gender inequality, family violence and dowry-related abuse. One focus group member observed that they were only aware of one memoir, by journalist Sushi Das, written by an Indian Australian woman '*out of approximately 350,000 Indian Australian women*'. Creative, cultural endeavours were seen to potentially provide multiple benefits, including sharing stories, providing role models, validating experiences, assisting with healing, challenging stereotypes and so on. On the other hand, the role of popular culture, in particular Bollywood films and popular music, was noted as often reinforcing destructive stereotypes and cultural norms and attitudes.

Service system specific suggestions

Education and training for service providers and professionals

Community and service provider participants felt that 'education' for those working in a range of service systems was needed to assist in preventing dowry abuse and/or improving responses when it occurs. The range of organisations, service providers and professionals to target for education and training included:

- police
- financial counsellors
- family violence practitioners
- general practitioners and primary health professionals, including maternal and child health nurses
- mental health practitioners
- secondary schools with high concentration of South Asian students
- TAFEs and tertiary institutions
- settlement services
- community legal services, including women's legal services which were generally seen as having a better understanding of dowry abuse than generalist community legal services.

Education/training content

Focus group participants recognised that most service providers and professionals receive on-going professional development, and those working in or around family violence, generally receive some level of family violence training. In Victoria, for example, there is a significant family violence training agenda being rolled out. However, dowry abuse receives very little or no specific attention in this training. Focus group participants emphasised the following as key issues which need to be incorporated in family violence training to ensure that dowry abuse is adequately addressed:

- understanding the context for dowry and dowry abuse
- the intersectional issues of dowry abuse and what makes dowry abuse a unique and distinct form of abuse
- understanding the practice of dowry abuse
- recognising what dowry abuse 'looks like' and in particular the subtle signs of abuse which are often missed
- understanding the prevalence of dowry abuse in CALD communities
- understanding the links between dowry abuse and coercive control
- financial abuse within context of dowry abuse
- developing appropriate responses to dowry abuse.

It was felt that police, health professionals and financial counsellors in particular need training to be able to understand and recognise dowry abuse, as these professions often have the first encounter with a victim of dowry abuse. In addition to being trained to recognise the often subtle signs of dowry abuse, training for these groups should also cover supporting and referring victim survivors in culturally sensitive ways. Participants also stressed the importance of communicating the criminal nature of dowry abuse in the relevant jurisdictions (Victoria and Western Australia) where dowry abuse is a nominated expression of family violence under relevant family violence legislation. A Victoria Police focus group participant reported that dowry abuse is referred to in

training as ‘dowry crime’ to remind police trainees that it is a crime. Focus group participants thought improved and consistent policing around dowry-related abuse could help both in preventing abuse (*‘delivering a message to perpetrators about the seriousness of their actions’*) and supporting women by recognising and validating their experience of abuse (*‘taking the issue and their experience seriously’*).

While research on the prevalence and incidence of dowry abuse in Australia is limited, participants recommended the importance of evidence-based content, and suggested that the survey results of National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse project could be included in new training material.

In addition to training

Service provider focus group participants recommended that *‘multiple, integrated strategies’* were required to prevent dowry abuse and *‘service system responses needed to be more than a legal framework’*. In addition to training, they recommended the need for other strategies such as social media messaging and ‘local champions’ to campaign against dowry abuse.

‘Behaviours don’t just change by telling people about the law. Education has to be integrated. Information alone doesn’t change behaviour. People have to actually be invested.’

The short films - *Migrant Bride* and *Aussie Victim*² - made for the NSW Police Force are examples of a broader approach for enhancing understanding of dowry abuse.

Service providers also highlighted the need to *‘steer the conversation away from racism, or a fear of appearing racist. We need to shift the focus more towards understanding dowry abuse as gender-based violence. Gender-based violence occurs across all cultures, societies and demographics. Dowry abuse is just one way that this is occurring, it is a cultural expression of it. But, it is violence against women. It doesn’t happen to men. It is a hidden form of violence.’*

Legal approaches

There was a range of views on taking a legal approach to the prevention of dowry abuse. Some felt that given that dowry has been outlawed in India for more than 50 years yet still continues there and in Australia, it was not the best approach to address what they considered to be *‘such a deep-seated, cultural issue...even though women are a lot more empowered, there is still a severe disempowerment that comes from a family perspective.’* Others were highly supportive of legal approaches, and particularly explicitly framing dowry abuse as a criminal action. Some also felt that from a legal perspective, there should be more protections available for transnational cases, where women may be migrating to marry, but may enter the country on an insecure visa and be highly vulnerable to abuse and coercive control, with no access to Centrelink or Medicare, no understanding of available services, no English language skills, no support networks and no independence.

² Produced and directed by Pankaj Upadhyay and Taufeeq Ahmed Sheikh along with a voluntary cast and crew. The films premiered in Sydney in October 2020.

Feedback from focus group with facilitators of the 'Preventing Dowry Abuse in Australia' workshops

Introduction and purpose

Effective Change conducted an online focus group with the facilitators of the Preventing Dowry Abuse in Australia workshops on 17 November, 2021, as part of the evaluation of the project.

The purpose of the focus group was to gather feedback from the facilitators about:

- the facilitator training and the workshop resources
- recruiting participants
- their perceptions of the workshops, and how participants reacted
- what worked well and any challenges
- whether they felt supported in their roles as facilitators
- suggestions for the future.

Participation and experience

Six facilitators participated in the focus group. Most facilitators were located in Victoria. Two were located in NSW. Collectively, the facilitators had run 22 online workshops across Victoria, NSW and South Australia. The majority of workshop participants were female, but there were some mixed groups with a minority of men. Participants' ages ranged from 18 – 70+ years.

Recruitment

Facilitators reported that it was *'not too difficult to recruit participants.'* Most recruited through their networks of family and friends. Their feedback around the recruitment process was that:

- the payment of \$50 was a good incentive, really helpful to many participants and to bring in some participants who might not participate otherwise
- others were motivated by their professional interest and roles, eg. in community services
- some participants were not interested in the \$50 vouchers – two trainers advised they had participants who were *'so happy that the topic was being discussed, they did not want to accept the gift voucher and preferred to donate it back to the project.'*
- one trainer who runs an existing Facebook group for South Asian women was able to very successfully recruit through this platform.

One facilitator reported challenges recruiting participants from the Sri Lankan community because there is a feeling in the community that *'we don't give dowry – that is an Indian custom'*. However, after changing the wording to 'The Wedding Gift', a term recognised by the community, around ten people, registered for a workshop.

Facilitators had some difficulties, rather than challenges, recruiting participants, such as:

- recruitment and scheduling workshops was easier during lockdowns (in Victoria), and more difficult when lockdowns were lifted, because *'everyone wanted to go out.'*
- recruiting through a community organisation when there was a change of leadership

- awkwardness and stigma around the topic of dowry abuse, especially with males, with some responses from men such as ‘we have nothing to do with this’
- ask people to give up their free time to discuss this difficult subject.

Workshop material

All facilitators found the workshop material (facilitators’ guide, powerpoint presentation) to be very helpful and that the case scenarios were realistic, resonated with participants and that the material ‘worked’ and generated really good discussions.

‘All the material was so real, this really happens. The case scenarios were very short, but they are registered with the groups.’

‘All the cases were spot on. They are drawn from real-life from Dr Manjula. Short and sweet, the questions are really straightforward. The format of everyone reading a paragraph each keeps people engaged and awake. It’s not a lecture. It’s really about discussion.’

‘The participants sent messages saying they liked how simple they were, but also relatable.’

‘Some of the participants in the group had lived experience of dowry, not necessarily abuse, but dowry system. They are aware of how embedded it is in our system, culture and practice, and how our parents are so prepared to provide dowry.’

Some further feedback about the material included:

- scenario 4 didn’t generate as much discussion as the other scenarios, but also ran out of time at that point
- some groups focussed on different issues, often depending on the gender and age group, eg. ‘what would the community say’ reactions came through with middle-aged women, some younger women discussed their right to dowry, and mixed gender groups sometimes focused on who would share in the property given through dowry
- the character names were changed for the Sri Lankan community
- adding a trigger warning at the start of the group and providing links to appropriate helplines and support agencies.

There was a fair amount of discussion with the facilitators around the need to include evidence and data about dowry abuse in Australia to counter group discussion that might minimise, deny or ignore the importance of dowry abuse. The following points were made:

- the importance of the results from the Harmony Alliance and ACHRH survey, as there is limited information available in Australia – *‘we need to have statistics on whatever is possible to be able to share, to talk about it as abuse, to make sure it’s known that people are really suffering as a result. If possible, we need more - the number of dowry abuse cases reported to police, to the Orange Door...’*
- one facilitator described commencing the workshop with the survey results, then asking participants if they or anyone they know has faced dowry abuse and whether they think that dowry abuse exists in Australia, so that she was clear on the views of the group

- adding more statistics to the introductory part of the workshop would add more depth – and while data is limited possibly a comparison between what is happening here and what is happening in India could highlight how dowry still persists and also how it is changing
- possibly avoid statistics around suicide, as it can cause distress.

While it was noted that *‘some people don’t need the survey information, as they are already committed to the cause and know that it is happening’* the importance of the data was seen to *‘reinforce that this is not just some random thing, in our heads, to reinforce the actual relatable basis of the material. To reinforce, what we’re talking about is not imaginary.’*

All facilitators reported that all that participants recognised and acknowledged the reality of dowry abuse occurring in present-day Australia in the South Asian community. *‘Really genuine scenarios - 100% of participants all recognised the stories.’* (It should also be noted that 100% of respondents to the post-workshop surveys indicated that the case scenarios were realistic.)

What went well with the workshops? What was challenging?

The facilitators all felt that the workshops went well.

‘It was really wonderful to see this discussion around dowry demand. Seeing some people realise that unconsciously they are preparing for dowry. It was an awakening moment. Our responsibility is to give a better education to our girls, not to be thinking about dowry. We have to think about how we will tackle this in the future, as mothers, as daughters.’

‘I didn’t have any challenges. Everyone felt so conditioned about dowry in our everyday life. Some participants realised that they are unconsciously getting prepared to give dowry to their girls, even in Australia. People are aware there is dowry in Australia. There is a strong feeling that we need to raise awareness of dowry in Australia. We need to make it a day-to-day discussion, otherwise we tend to forget. It is so conditioned in our lives. That’s the conclusion our groups reached. They also get scared whether they are unconsciously promoting dowry.’

None of the facilitators experienced challenges that they were unable to deal with. Some examples of difficulties included:

- participant distress – all facilitators advised participants they did not need to share personal stories, but they sometimes did. Some participants chose not to turn their video on. Some facilitators spoke to participants after the workshop or were aware that participants later reached out to community leaders, friends or visited their GP or another support service.
- generating discussion with young people who were *‘a little quiet...A lot of the kids who have grown up here have only seen it in the movies, they are not so close to the concept, they haven’t lived it. They wanted to engage but didn’t know that much about it.’*
- recruiting like-minded friends and colleagues, who were already *‘very aware of the issues and converts’* and being unsure if they were reaching the people who would most benefit from the discussion, so that the discussion would actually *‘add value’* to the community
- dealing with ‘tricky’ questions, such as a scenario that may, or may not, be an example of dowry abuse – hard to know how to answer the question.

Participant experience and feedback

The facilitators received positive feedback from participants about the workshops:

'They loved sharing their stories, giving them time to listen to their stories – that was what was interesting.'

'They found it very interesting, they hadn't thought about dowry existing in that way.'

'Even though there were some concerns, people were able to talk about their experiences, unburden themselves. They had support people to reach out to someone if they needed.'

A key theme in the feedback about the participant experience was observing participants understand the subtleties around dowry and dowry abuse and the distinctions between voluntary gift-giving and dowry demands and expectations.

'Through the workshops, participants understood the distinction between dowry as a gift, and dowry as a demand. Parents started getting worried, 'Of course, we want to give something to our daughters when they are getting married'. But what we discussed was giving gifts without any pressure associated with it, no shame, no financial burden – that is a gift, that any parent can give. But if it is associated with extra financial burden, extra pressure, shame and all that, then it is abuse. In our culture, there is a culture of providing gifts from parents to daughters, we need to make the discussion about gift giving, and abuse.'

The feedback from the Sri Lankan community differed to the Indian community. It was reported that *'no one wants to deal with the word dowry...But we explored this through the workshops, and found that, yes, dowry does exist in the Sri Lankan community and some people told their stories about this. But to get people to participate, it was necessary to call it something other than dowry (The Wedding Gift).'* The Sri Lankan groups represent a very small sample of the community, so this feedback can only be seen as indicative and anecdotal. However, it is an interesting contrast to the Indian community which clearly recognised dowry and dowry abuse.

A facilitator reported one participant's suggestion to *'link with beauticians or hairdressers – especially where Indian women go for threading – we share our stories with them.* The participant suggested that it would be good to put support information at these locations. The facilitators also thought it would be useful to have a targeted workshop for hairdressers and beauticians, such as the DV-Alert *Recognise, Respond, Refer* courses, or a short workshop tailored for the South Asian community.

Facilitator experience and feedback

Facilitators:

- felt very supported in their roles by ACHR and Harmony Alliance through the facilitator training, observing initial workshops, providing technical help, follow up assistance ('very helpful', 'patient', 'wonderful')
- felt they could reach out to ACHR or Harmony Alliance if they needed anything

- found that Harmony Alliance was very helpful in providing the vouchers to participants
- felt the facilitator guide and workshop material was very good, and very helpful
- felt that the post-workshop survey (which went directly to Harmony Alliance) was good and most asked participants to complete this while they were still online
- found that they were *'exhausted after the first workshop'* because there was so much emotion but less so for subsequent workshops as they became more used to the process
- found that delivering the workshop online was less daunting than facilitating face to face workshops and meant the facilitator could have their notes and scripts by their side and keep the workshop on track
- found the experience very fulfilling and felt confident and able to facilitate more workshops.

'It was very draining, but very fulfilling.'

'I love it, it's so good. I know it all by heart now.'

Is there a continued interest in the community to discuss the topics?

Some facilitators felt there is a continued interest in discussing the topic of dowry abuse and were planning to have more workshops.

Others were not sure, noting that it is a difficult topic to discuss, especially for community members whose priorities were around day-to-day life. Providing the \$50 voucher for participation was really important in encouraging and enabling people to participate.

It was also noted that the topics of dowry abuse and gender inequality were often not a priority unless it directly affected an individual, their family or friends. *'You get more traction with the people with lived experience or who have had a friend or family member experience this.'*

There was clear commitment from some trainers for continued community education and a clear sense of the need in the community, as this final comment indicates:

'We need to find ways to encourage people to come and join us to discuss this. All community leaders feel this is a really important issue. We need to keep trying, we can't get tired. We need to be persistent, keep finding ways to make it interesting, engage the community, make it appealing to them. It is impacting the day to day lives of women, of their children and their futures. I am receiving disclosures nearly every day.'