

# DOWRY ABUSE IN AUSTRALIA

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## Executive Summary

This issues paper was prepared by Harmony Alliance and the Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health, as part of a collaborative project to develop a national community-led framework to prevent dowry abuse in Australia. 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. It will be delivered from 2020 to 2022.

As a complex form of family violence, dowry abuse is underrecognised in Australia. Dowry involves the transfer of substantial gifts from the bride's family to the groom's family leading up to or after marriage and is predominantly practised in South Asian communities.<sup>1</sup> While dowry giving is not necessarily harmful as a practice, a significant negative impact connected to dowry giving is abuse.

Dowry abuse may take the form of threats or acts of physical violence or abandonment, in order to extract more dowry from the victim and their family, leaving the victim increasingly financially dependent on the perpetrator. In extreme cases, deaths have occurred as a result of dowry abuse. Dowry abuse exists in a variety of forms and may be experienced alongside other types of family violence. What connects dowry abuse and other forms of family violence is the subordination and coercive control of women by men.

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Dowry is sometimes used in literature as a generic term encompassing various types of marriage payments in different culture. This issues paper refers to the specific practice of dowry in South Asian communities, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

This issues paper also explores considerations for the development of a National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse. This community-led framework would work to prevent dowry abuse on a national scale. It draws inspiration from existing work in the violence prevention space, particularly Our Watch's *Change the story* framework (2015). By identifying drivers of dowry abuse, specific strategies to prevent its perpetration and measures to evaluate success, the framework is designed to lay the groundwork for future efforts to address dowry abuse in Australia. As part of Australia's ongoing work to end violence against women, the prevention of dowry abuse is key.

## Introduction

Dowry abuse represents yet another form of family violence experienced by women in Australia. The practice of dowry giving, which occurs predominantly in South Asian communities<sup>2</sup>, refers to the exchange of substantial gifts from the bride's family to the groom's family leading up to and after marriage. Abusive behaviours linked to the giving of dowry are not reflective of particular cultural norms surrounding property and marriage but rather of a widespread pattern of violence against women. While dowry giving in itself is not necessarily a harmful practice, in some cases, abusive behaviours may be used in connection to the practice of dowry.

Dowry abuse may take the form of threats or acts of physical violence or abandonment, in order to extort more dowry from the victim and their family. In extreme cases, deaths have occurred as a result of dowry abuse. Dowry abuse exists in a variety of forms and may be experienced alongside other types of family violence. What connects dowry abuse and other forms of family violence is the subordination and coercive control of women by men.

Preventing violence against women in Australia has been a national priority for years. There exists an extensive body of work outlining primary prevention approaches and strategies. This issues paper aims to contribute to the conversation surrounding preventative approaches to violence against women, with a specific spotlight on preventing dowry abuse as a complex form of family violence.

Specifically, this paper explores:

- Forms of dowry abuse
- Factors driving the perpetration of dowry abuse
- Prevalence of dowry abuse in Australia
- Gaps in research
- A community-led preventative approach to dowry abuse.

Where possible, Australian-specific studies and examples are cited in this paper, however, more international literature is available on this topic. Key learnings from other countries can nevertheless be applied to the Australian context. Findings from this issue paper will help inform the development of a National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse (the

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<sup>2</sup> South Asian communities refer to ethnic groups from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Framework). The Framework is designed to align with Our Watch's *Change the story* framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia, by focusing on essential actions to prevent dowry abuse, in addition to measures to evaluate success. The focus of both this issues paper and the future Framework supports the twelfth national priority of the Fourth Action Plan of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*:

Better equip the service system and communities to address complex forms of violence and harmful cultural practices including early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting, *dowry abuse* and human trafficking (emphasis added).

It should be noted that while dowry is sometimes used in literature as a generic term encompassing various types of marriage payments, this issue paper refers to the specific practice of dowry giving in South Asian communities, involving the transfer of substantial gifts from the bride's family to the groom's family upon or after marriage. Marriage payments practised in other communities, including those in the Middle East and Africa, may share similarities with South Asian dowry practices. For example, bride-price, which is practised in some African communities, is another form of marriage payment that is sometimes grouped together with dowry but involves the payment of money, livestock or goods from the groom's family to the bride's family (Lacey, 2013 in Yuol et al., 2019). Research highlights the link between bride-price and gendered violence, as women are disempowered through the payment of bride-price which reduces them to property (Matope et al., 2013). The impacts of dowry and bride-price on women may be similar, in terms of coercive control and subordination. Further research is needed to explore similarities and differences in abuse associated with dowry versus bride-price. This issues paper focuses only on dowry abuse, while acknowledging there may be relevant implications and learnings for addressing abuse related to bride-price.

Finally, dowry abuse is typically framed as a complex form of family violence, due to the intersection of culture and gender. However, it is important to recognise and address dowry abuse as part of a wider problem of violence against women, rather than violence against women of a certain cultural background. The nature of dowry abuse is also complicated by the fact that it often occurs transnationally. Like all other forms of family violence, dowry abuse must be eliminated from society.

## Dowry abuse is an underrecognised form of family violence

For a variety of reasons, dowry abuse is not consistently recognised as a form of family violence in Australia. Victoria is currently the only state in Australia to include dowry abuse in its definition of family violence in state legislation, specifically the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) (Law Council, 2018). This section explores dowry abuse as a type of financial or economic abuse and identifies reasons for the lack of recognition dowry abuse receives as a form of family violence.

### Dowry abuse is another form of financial abuse

Abusive behaviours linked to the giving of dowry (which may include but is not limited to property, cash, white goods and jewellery) can be classified more broadly as financial or economic abuse. Kutin et al. (2017) identify economic abuse as a form of intimate partner violence, involving 'behaviours aimed at manipulating a person's access to finances, assets and decision-making to foster dependence and control'. Dowry abuse may take the form of threats or acts of physical violence or abandonment, in order to extract more dowry from the victim and their family, leaving the victim financially dependent on the perpetrator and creating barriers to seeking help.

Similar to the underlying drivers of other forms of family violence, the element of coercive control is crucial. Sheel (2005) highlights that dowry abuse is characterised by 'an element of compulsion in that the bridegroom's family exerts pressures, implicitly or explicitly, on the bride's family to fulfil their demands and expectations'. Threats or actual use of violence are used to fulfil additional demands of dowry. The expectations of the groom and his family regarding dowry payment is dependent on the groom's family background, level of education, social status and in some cases, foreign residency status (Kaur, 2018). This is explored in further detail below.

### Dowry is accepted as a social and historic norm in various cultures

While dowry as a practice has existed for hundreds of years, its transformation from the exchange of gifts upon marriage to a potential tool of violence and oppression against women is an alarming transition in modern times.

While India officially criminalised the giving and receiving of dowry in 1961 through the *Dowry Prohibition Act*, it is still commonly practised (Gondal, 2015). Srinivasan (2005)

highlights the 'obligatory' nature of dowry giving, emphasising that the practice is viewed as key to maintaining family honour and enhancing social status:

[D]owry is a euphemism for strategies to acquire status and prestige, high lifestyle, and mobility. This is especially the case when aspirations cannot be fulfilled in one's lifetime or with one's own earnings.

The relationship between dowry giving and dowry abuse is complex. While some research links dowry giving to the long history of female mistreatment in India, it should also be noted that in direct contrast, the practice of dowry giving is sometimes characterised as a historic tool facilitating economic empowerment of women (Banerjee, 2013; Belur et al., 2014). The giving of dowry was seen as an opportunity for parents to transfer wealth to daughters in cultures where sons traditionally inherited property, as well as a means for women to marry up the social ladder by offering their groom gifts as an incentive, otherwise known as hypergamy (Teays, 1991 in Banerjee, 2013).

The transformation of dowry giving from a practice supporting the economic status of women to a potential tool of abuse and coercive control has been linked by scholars to the rise of consumerism or new materialism (Black, 1991). In the age of increased migration and transnational marriages, demands for excessive dowry may be partly justified by perpetrators. This is based on the belief that their foreign citizenship and ability to sponsor partners to live overseas is a valuable asset (Good Shepherd & InTouch, 2018). It can therefore be seen that consumerism and migration conditions influenced by globalisation may play a role in facilitating the growing prevalence of dowry abuse.

Kishwar (2005) identifies four common justifications behind the ongoing practice of dowry giving. First, in most cases, sons typically inherit property from their parents, so the giving of dowry ensures that daughters received a share in inheritance. Second, when a new wife moves to her marital home without any property or items of her own, her dependence on her husband and in-laws may increase. Third, if women move to their husbands' homes empty-handed, they may not be treated as equal partners; dowry is therefore seen as an investment in the husband's household, enhancing access to status in the husband's family. Finally, dowry giving is sometimes a mutual practice between in-laws as an act of goodwill, not necessarily a one-sided exchange. The justifications for the continuation of dowry as a practice, as highlighted by Kishwar (2005), reveal the imbalance in power and rights that women continue to experience in communities that practice dowry giving. It further emphasises how dowry occurs within a broader context of social and structural gender inequality.

### Dowry abuse is perceived as a culturally specific practice

The practice of dowry is largely prevalent in South Asian communities which may contribute to the 'othering' of dowry abuse. This view is supported by Bhopal (2009) who points out that notions of "arranged marriage", "Asian women" and "Asian traditions" have been translated in public and dominant discourses in oppressive ways in which "cultural difference" and "otherness" are interpreted as alien and different.' In particular, the concept of arranged marriage challenges the Western norm of marriages for love. Dowry abuse may therefore be viewed by the public and in mainstream media as something that only happens to 'other' women in 'other' cultures outside of Australia. Lack of community awareness surrounding dowry giving may also explain the limited focus on dowry abuse in the mainstream narrative of family violence that currently exists in Australia.

### Different types of dowry abuse exist in the Australian context

Dowry abuse exists in a variety of forms and may be experienced alongside other types of family violence. For example, spouses may face pressure from their partners to produce a higher dowry after marriage or be subjected to the use or threat of violence, harassment, psychological abuse or other coercive measures in response to the perceived inadequacy of dowry given. For some victims, dowry abuse may also form part of the Australian migration experience, as demands for dowry can be linked to visa sponsorship. Two case studies<sup>3</sup> illustrating different types of dowry abuse in Australia, including threats relating to visas, are discussed below.

### Dowry abuse is often experienced alongside other forms of family violence

As a complex form of family violence, dowry abuse highlights the different ways in which perpetrators exert power and control over their victims. Dowry abuse can begin from initial demands for dowry and escalate to physical violence, which explains why dowry giving is sometimes characterised as a cause of family violence, rather than a symptom. Instead, Anitha et al. (2018) argue that dowry-related demands mirror other forms of family violence experienced by women. This view is further supported by Gethin (2019), who highlights:

Victims of dowry abuse commonly find themselves subjected to other forms of domestic violence. This includes physical assaults, emotional abuse, and coercive control measures

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<sup>3</sup> Case studies were supplied by Dr. Manjula O'Connor, psychiatrist and Executive Director of the Australasian Centre for Human Rights & Health, with permission from the women.

such as being isolated, locked in the house, prevented from working and having all their money taken.

Similarly, Rocca et al. (2009) note that women with 'relatively smaller dowries, those whose in-laws have expressed dissatisfaction with their dowries, and those who have faced post-marriage dowry requests have been repeatedly found to be more likely to report domestic violence'.

It is therefore important to emphasise that while dowry abuse refers to mistreatment specifically relating to the giving of dowry, dowry abuse often occurs alongside behaviours falling under the general umbrella of family violence.

### Case study 1: Meera

Meera<sup>4</sup> entered into an arranged marriage with an Australian-Indian man in October 2019. She moved to Sydney to be with her husband and immediately after marriage, he told her to deposit money in their joint bank account to fund the purchase of a taxi for their livelihood. Meera deposited \$6,000 into the account and within days, her husband asked her to deposit more money. Further demands for money were made by her husband and his father. In total, Meera deposited \$16,000 into the joint account, which her husband later spent before demanding additional money to buy a house.

Meera told her husband that she did not have any more money to give and neither did her parents in India. In response, her husband became aggressive and physically assaulted her. After experiencing repeated physical abuse, Meera decided to ring the police. However, before she could do so, her husband rang the police and fraudulently claimed that he was the victim of domestic violence, showing the police a bite mark on his arm. Meera was taken to the police station and placed under a temporary apprehended violence order (AVO).

When Meera returned home, her husband reported her for breaching the AVO. Meera explained the situation and was given a domestic violence service provider number. She spent three months living in a safe house before moving to Melbourne to seek help.

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<sup>4</sup> Not her real name.

### Visa sponsorship is a tool commonly used by perpetrators of dowry abuse

In the context of the Australian migration experience, dowry giving may be linked to abusive behaviours, including visa-related threats. Research indicates that threats relating to visas are commonly used by perpetrators of dowry abuse residing outside of their home country. Particularly in Australia, Gethin (2019) points out that the prospect of securing Australian residential status through marriage provides extra coercive power for men who use violence and their families to demand additional dowry from their partner. Dowry abuse related to visa sponsorship can include demands for grandiose weddings in India costing up to \$80,000 and a dowry of \$500,000 for Australian residency (Gethin, 2019). The demand for excessive dowry is facilitated by the existence of partner visas for Australian permanent residents or citizens to sponsor their partner or spouse to live in Australia temporarily. Abusive behaviours may be used due to the perceived inadequacy of dowry given in relation to the groom's status, including his ability to provide a pathway to foreign residency.

There is a body of evidence that temporary migration status acts as a lever for perpetrators of family violence to exert further control over their victims (Segrave, 2017). Uncertainty of visa status and unfamiliarity with Australian immigration policies creates the ideal conditions for dowry abuse, as perpetrators may demand additional dowry from their spouse's family using the threat of abandoning their partner in a foreign country without support. In some extreme cases, Anitha et al. (2018) notes, '[w]omen who migrated upon marriage recounted how men weaponised women's insecure immigration status to threaten them with deportation.' This is particularly complicated if children are involved, as custody may become an issue.

Another form of abuse linked to insecure visa status is spousal abandonment. As discussed by Anitha et al. (2018), this may involve a variety of circumstances, including: 'a woman who has migrated with her husband after marriage may be deceived into visiting India and abandoned there, while her husband returns and revokes her visa...[or] a woman may be left behind with her in-laws in India after marriage while her husband goes back with assurances that he will sponsor her visa, but the woman is eventually ousted from their home or leaves because of domestic violence.' In these circumstances, women are often unable to obtain redress or adequate assistance, due to a lack of knowledge regarding their rights as well as services they can access in the country that they've migrated to. Furthermore, as women in these situations are often temporary residents, the legal rights and protections they can have access to are usually also quite limited. In the case of

transnational abandonment, there are also additional barriers to redress given that they are in different legal jurisdictions from the perpetrator.

### Case study 2: Priya

Priya<sup>5</sup> entered into an arranged marriage with an Australian citizen of Indian origin in February 2016. The wedding took place in Delhi, India and during the wedding ceremonies, dowry (in the form of cash, gold and diamond jewellery, and clothing) was given by the bride's father to the groom and his extended family.

Before the couple relocated to Melbourne, Australia in April 2016, Priya had already experienced dowry abuse perpetrated by her husband and his family. Her mother-in-law harassed her for not bringing enough cash, furniture and gifts as dowry, in addition to confiscating Priya's personal jewellery.

While living in Melbourne with her husband, Priya was not permitted to open her own bank account and was forced to remain inside the house. Her husband demanded household goods and furniture from Priya's father, who shipped them from India. Priya's husband physically and emotionally abused her, refusing to pay for her medical treatment when she had a tooth infection.

In June 2017, Priya's husband and mother-in-law asked Priya to fly to India to attend her brother's wedding, with the understanding that Priya's husband would join her later in India. Instead, she was abandoned in India to live with her parents in Delhi and her husband stopped responding to her phone calls. A few months later, Priya decided to return to Melbourne in an attempt to repair their marriage. However, her husband refused to let her into the house and later sent her an email declaring his intentions to separate, remove her name from the lease and withdraw his sponsorship for her partner visa.

### There is limited data on the incidence of dowry abuse in Australia

The prevalence of dowry abuse in Australia is unknown, due to limited data collection. While formally reported figures are virtually non-existent, anecdotal evidence suggests that dowry

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<sup>5</sup> Not her real name.

abuse is experienced by a significant proportion of women from South Asian communities living in Australia. In her submission to the 2018 Senate inquiry into the practice of dowry and the incidence of dowry abuse in Australia, Dr. Manjula O'Connor highlights that between 2015-2018, she has seen approximately 180 cases of family violence in Indian and other South Asian communities in her psychiatric practice, of which 40 per cent featured dowry-related extortion and coercive demands (O'Connor, 2018). Similarly, Jatinder Kaur, a mental health social worker specialising in working with migrant and refugee communities in Australia, reports dealing with over 30 Indian domestic violence cases across Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and regional locations in the past few years, with more than half of these cases featuring dowry and financial abuse (Kaur, 2018).

## Various drivers help perpetuate dowry abuse

Like other forms of violence against women, dowry abuse is largely driven by gender inequality, in particular patriarchal attitudes that emphasise men's control and domination over women. In addition to gender inequities and patriarchal mindsets that contribute to male entitlement and the commodification of women, other factors that contribute to dowry abuse are discussed below.

### Patriarchal values are a significant factor driving dowry abuse

The relationship between patriarchy and violence against women has been extensively covered in feminist literature and is particularly relevant to the discussion surrounding dowry abuse. At its core, patriarchy refers to 'systems of male domination and female subordination' (Hunnicut, 2009). The connection between dowry abuse and patriarchy is examined by Naved and Persson (2010) who argue that, '[p]atriarchal attitudes expressed in an inability to accept a wife's assertiveness, or in her enhanced bargaining power or *in dowry demand*, lie at the core of physical wife abuse' (emphasis added).

The role of patriarchy in shaping household dynamics is discussed by Singh and Sidhu (2020), who highlight that in the Indian patrilineal joint family (which refers to a household containing three generations of parents, married sons and grandchildren), men traditionally control money. Upon marriage, women become part of their husbands' patrilineal joint family and their money and wealth is owned by the men of the household. In their qualitative study of 17 women from Indian communities in Australia, Singh and Sidhu (2020) note that four participants had their jewellery taken by their husbands and his family, with the husband's family feeling entitled to use the gifts and money (dowry) given to the marital couple by the

bride's parents. In one case, the groom's parents demanded a car and gold from the bride's family two days before the wedding and upon receiving only gold gifts, verbally and emotionally abused the bride and her family due to the perceived inadequacy of the dowry (Singh & Sidhu, 2020). Some may question why marriages continue to take place even after excessive demands for dowry are made, or why wives remain with their husbands despite the abuse perpetrated against them. However, in some cultures it is considered a 'social disgrace' for women to return to their families after marriage, even if their new husbands are abusive (Samuel, 2002). In addition to cultural shame, women (and their children) may face risks to their safety if they leave their abuser.

#### Gendered power dynamics within the family unit play a role in enabling dowry abuse

Family hierarchy and gendered power dynamics within the family unit are identified in literature as driving factors behind dowry abuse. As O'Connor and Colucci (2015) note in their study of Australian-Indian women living in Melbourne, Australia, participants often experienced family violence from their husbands and mothers-in-law, highlighting that 'extended family hierarchy can play a significant role in gender oppression in Indian families living in Australia'.

The role of family hierarchy in facilitating coercive control is also highlighted by Kandiyoti (1988), who highlights the cyclical nature of power and control in patriarchal households:

Woman's life cycle in the patriarchally extended family is such that the deprivation and hardship she experiences as a young bride is eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughters-in-law...Older women have a vested interest in the suppression of romantic love between youngsters to keep the conjugal bond secondary and to claim sons' primary allegiance.

This finding is further supported by other researchers, who found that in many cases, mothers-in-law play an instrumental role in creating violence and conflict (Krishnan et al., 2012 in Jeyaseelan et al., 2015):

This was particularly evident in cases where the mother-in-law perceived her daughter-in-law to be getting in the way of her relationship with her son; or where she felt her daughter-in-law was not suitably obedient to her or to her son; or *if the dowry she brought was not adequate*; or if her daughter-in-law failed to produce a son. (emphasis added)

In a study of 168 women admitted to a post-natal ward in New Delhi, India, 40 per cent of participants described their mothers-in-laws as 'the main instigators of violence against them in their marital home' (Muthal-Rathore et al., 2002 in Jeyaseelan et al., 2015).

One explanation for the role of mothers-in-law in perpetrating dowry abuse is that after her son's marriage, a mother may find that her power within the household diminishes. In response, she may attempt to control the bride and the relationship of the new couple, with 'possible dissatisfaction with the amount of dowry [adding] ammunition to a volatile situation' (Jethmalini & Prasad, 1995 in Rastogi & Therly, 2006).

The role of multiple perpetrators in dowry abuse is further confirmed by Anitha et al. (2018) in their study of 57 women in the Indian states of Delhi, Punjab and Gujarat married to men of Indian origin. As one participant recounts:

My mother-in-law used to say, 'Do you know, in our village dominated by Patels, what is the price of an NRI [non-resident Indian] son-in-law<sup>6</sup>?' I would respond, 'How would I know what the going rate is?' When I answered back, that made them angry and they used to beat me with whatever was at hand. My sister-in-law's two children used to join in beating me.

The participation of multiple perpetrators in dowry abuse, including mothers-in-law, increases the difficulty for women to escape family violence as their support network is limited. This is particular challenging in patrilocal communities where women are expected to reside with their husband and his family after marriage, as well as situations where women reside abroad with their abusers, with the complicating factor of visa sponsorship, as discussed above.

### Community attitudes towards family violence may normalise dowry abuse

Attitudes that are supportive of family violence can help perpetuate dowry abuse. This is based on the notion that attitudes 'influence social norms or expectations of what is acceptable behaviour. These expectations in turn influence behaviour itself' (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2004 in Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety [ANROWS], 2017). Thus it could be argued that communities with attitudes that condone family violence are more likely to perceive dowry abuse as acceptable behaviour.

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<sup>6</sup> Non-resident Indian (NRI) refers to people of Indian birth, descent or origin who live outside of India.

Findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) indicate that the strongest predictors of attitudes supportive of violence against women are:

- Low level of support for gender equality
- Low understanding of violence against women
- Prejudicial attitudes towards people based on other attributes
- High level of support for violence in general.

These findings are highly relevant in understanding how community attitudes can help perpetuate and normalise dowry abuse. The link between low support for gender equality and violence against women, in particular, is reinforced in other literature (Our Watch, 2015; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). Some research has found that risk of domestic abuse increases when the cause of the abuse is perceived as 'legitimate' by the community (Rao, 1997 in Simister & Mehta, 2010). Therefore, if inadequate dowry is perceived by the community as a legitimate reason for abuse, there is a risk that dowry abuse may increase.

#### Perpetrators of dowry abuse have different motivations

There is limited research on the individual motives of perpetrators of dowry abuse. According to Anitha et al. (2018), some 'research participants reported that their dowry was used to fund men's education or business ventures abroad... Once the men completed their studies/established themselves and were entitled to secure immigration status, and often when no further dowry transfers were forthcoming, they initiated divorce proceedings.'

In contrast, Black (1991) links dowry abuse to the rise of consumerism in India, pointing out that for the groom and his family, 'marriage may become a means of acquiring the shiny new toys – stereos, video recorders, motorcycles, even cars – that they could never afford on their own salaries'.

In their 2002 study of a rural Indian community, Bloch and Rao find that 'marital violence is not only closely linked to low dowry payments, but that a woman who comes from a wealthy family is more likely to be beaten by her husband in an effort to extract higher transfers from her parents.' This indicates that the size of dowry payment and wealth of the bride's family are motivating factors in the perpetration of dowry abuse.

Another possible motivation for dowry abuse is the shame that some men may feel upon accepting dowry, which conflicts with societal and traditional perceptions of men as

providers; in response, some men may feel the need to reassert their superiority through physical and emotional abuse (Kumari, 1989 in Rastogi & Therly, 2006).

Migration stress is another factor linked to the perpetration of dowry abuse. In their 2013 study, Colucci et al. examined the views of women in the Indian migrant community in Australia towards domestic and family violence, with some participants highlighting situations where the reality of life in Australia does not meet the expectations of migrating couples, leading to financial stress and frustration, thereby exacerbating conditions for dowry demands and family violence. Furthermore, migration contributes to the isolation of women from family support, thereby increasing barriers to seeking help.

## Gaps in research

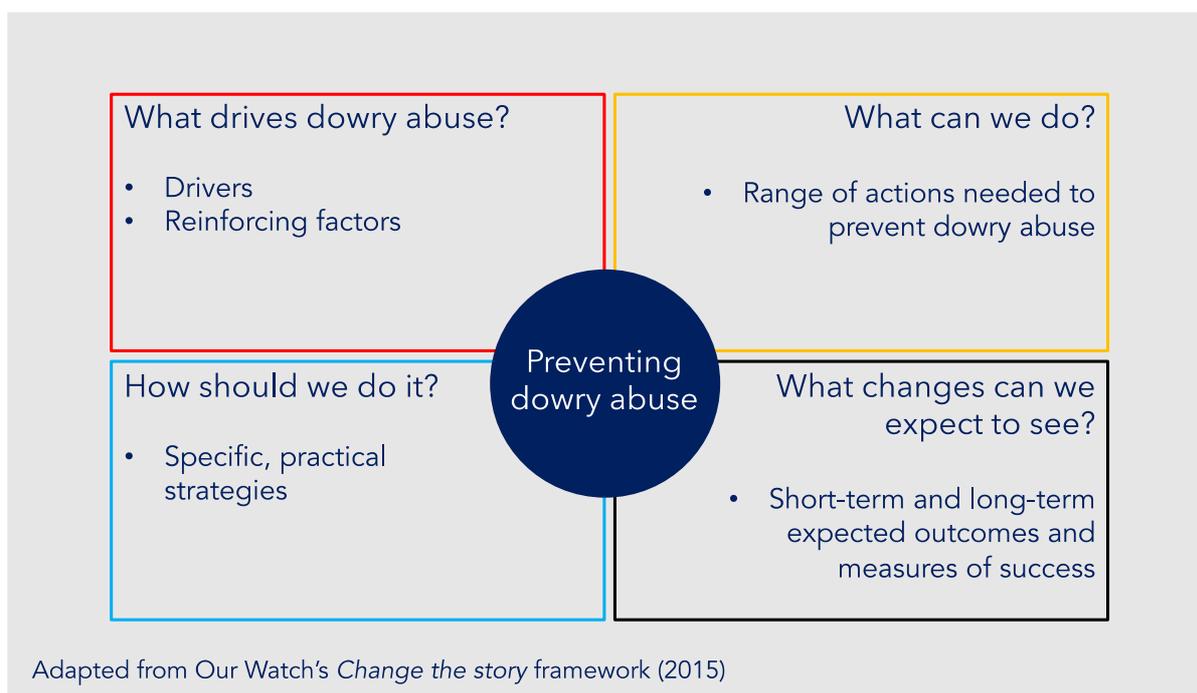
In developing this issues paper, a review of the literature surrounding dowry abuse indicated key gaps in research. Specifically, the incidence of dowry abuse in Australia is unable to be determined, which is a significant limitation that points to the hidden and underreported nature of dowry abuse, much like other forms of family violence. Further, as dowry abuse falls under the category of economic abuse more broadly, its specific incidence may be obscured. This can be attributed to the hidden nature of economic abuse as an 'invisible' form of family violence (Postmus et al., 2020). Further research is needed to determine the prevalence of dowry abuse in Australia.

Another gap lies in the development of strategies and interventions specifically designed to prevent dowry abuse. In countries where dowry giving is commonly practised, such as India, approaches to address dowry abuse are primarily focused on providing legal protection to victims, either by prohibiting dowry altogether or by recognising dowry abuse as a form of family violence. Research indicates there are few strategies or tools designed to prevent the occurrence of dowry abuse in the first place, that is, a primary prevention approach. Primary prevention is designed to stop violence before it begins, targeting the whole population including those already perpetrating or experiencing violence (Our Watch, 2015). In recognition of this gap and in alignment with the existing work of Our Watch (2015) in developing a framework for preventing violence against women and their children, the following section conceptualises a community-led preventative approach to dowry abuse. This approach will inform the future development of the National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse.

## Conceptualising a community-led preventative approach

This section explores considerations for the development of a National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse. This community-led framework would work to prevent dowry abuse on a national scale. It draws inspiration from existing work in the violence prevention space, particularly Our Watch's *Change the story* framework (2015). Figure 1 below presents key elements of the National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse.

Figure 1 | Elements of the National Framework for the Prevention of Dowry Abuse



### What drives dowry abuse?

Various drivers of dowry abuse have been identified in this issues paper. Drivers of dowry abuse include, but are not limited to:

- Patriarchal values
- Gendered power dynamics within the family unit
- Community attitudes towards family violence.

There are a number of factors that can affect the frequency or severity of dowry abuse, but do not drive dowry abuse itself. These reinforcing factors include, but are not limited to:

- Size of dowry
- Financial stress
- Substance abuse
- Unemployment

- Resident status of perpetrators and victims
- Familial and community connections or lack thereof
- Migration stress.

### What can we do?

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). A primary prevention approach may involve addressing the drivers of dowry abuse through education. Educating communities on the negative impacts emerging from the practice of dowry helps reinforce the message that dowry abuse is unacceptable.

### How should we do it?

Community engagement and education through a series of workshops is one strategy to help prevent dowry abuse in Australia. The workshops will bring together various actors including multicultural organisations, community groups, service providers and law enforcement to gain an understanding of their views on dowry abuse, with the aim of promoting gender equality and countering violence-supportive attitudes. Community engagement will also target those at risk of experiencing and perpetrating dowry abuse.

According to ANROWS (2017), violence-supportive attitudes are mindsets and beliefs that:

- Hold women responsible for the occurrence of violence or its prevention, while excusing perpetrators of violence
- Downplay the seriousness of violence against women, by minimising its impact or consequences
- Deny the need for consent in sexual relations
- Question women's reports of violence as potentially exaggerated or vengeful.

Challenging violence-supportive attitudes is critical in preventing dowry abuse and other forms of family violence.

## What changes can we expect to see?

Evaluation is critical to measure the impact of community engagement and education workshops in shifting attitudes towards gender equality and raising awareness of dowry abuse. Rigorous data collection is needed to establish a baseline, in order to assess the intended and unintended impacts of the workshops. In the short-term, improvement in participants' attitudes towards gender equality and increased awareness of dowry abuse can be expected. In the long-term, sustained improvement and awareness is desirable.

By surveying participants before and after the workshops, two objectives are achieved. First, a baseline of data is established, against which workshop impacts can be measured. Second, the opportunity to revise and refine the workshops based on participants' feedback is presented. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the workshops is informed by principles of action research, namely the need to plan a change; act and observe the process and consequences of the change; reflect on the processes and consequences; and replan (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000 in Koshy et al., 2010). Through the process of active planning and reflection, the effectiveness of the workshops can be improved.

## Conclusion

Dowry abuse is an underrecognised 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. However, 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.

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