



Emerging Insights from our National Survey on Dowry Abuse

Through the *Community-led Projects to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children* program, Harmony Alliance (the Alliance) has been working with the AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health to support the development of an emerging evidence base on dowry abuse in Australia. Dowry giving is the practice of transferring substantial gifts, including money, property and jewellery, from the bride's family to the groom's family upon marriage whereas dowry abuse refers to controlling, isolating and violent behaviours linked to demands for dowry. From August to October 2020, the Alliance ran a national survey to understand levels of knowledge and awareness in the community regarding dowry demands and their link to abusive behaviours.

The survey received a strong response from South Asian communities in Australia

The online survey was developed in six languages – English, Sinhala, Punjabi, Hindi, Tamil and Telegu – and received 150 individual responses from respondents located across various states and territories in Australia. While the survey was primarily targeted towards members of South Asian communities in Australia, where the practice of dowry giving is concentrated, the survey received wide interest from Australians from different cultural backgrounds, with over 20 nationalities represented in the cohort.

Community understanding and awareness of dowry abuse is high

Women expressed greater interest in the issue of dowry abuse, with approximately 84 per cent of respondents identifying as female. Although the survey was promoted through a wide range of mediums, including social media, ethnic newspapers and professional networks to reduce selection bias, the majority of respondents were extremely or very familiar with the concept of dowry. Moreover, over 90 per cent of respondents agreed that dowry demands may be linked to abusive behaviours, indicating a high level of awareness in the community regarding dowry abuse.

Respondents considered verbal abuse the most common abusive behaviour linked to dowry demands

When asked to consider a non-exhaustive list of abusive behaviours, including humiliation; verbal abuse; controlling behaviours; financial abuse; threats; physical assault; domestic servitude; social isolation from friends and family; extortion; and sexual assault, respondents identified verbal abuse as the most common behaviour connected to dowry demands, followed closely by humiliation and controlling behaviours. Respondents also provided other examples of dowry abuse, including murder; reproductive control; child abuse; threats of deportation; family insult and use of family court proceedings against the woman.

Gender inequality was identified by respondents as the key driver of dowry abuse

According to respondents, gender inequality, greed and men's control of financial decisions are the top three drivers of dowry abuse. Additionally, 56 per cent of respondents said that pressure from family was also a significant driver of dowry abuse. Other examples of driving forces behind dowry abuse, as suggested by respondents, include outdated patriarchal arrangements, societal norms, long-term customary expectation and the perception of dowry as a status symbol.



Almost a third of respondents had either experienced dowry abuse or know someone who has

32 per cent of respondents indicated they had experienced incidents of dowry abuse or interacted with a victim of dowry abuse. Examples of de-identified incidents supplied by respondents are presented below:

Figure 1 | Example of dowry abuse provided by respondent

My husband demanded my father to buy his house in Australia, which [is] nearly not possible for my father. When my husband realised that my father just couldn't afford to buy him property...He started hitting me. He asked me many times that I should tell my father to sell his work shop and divide money between me and brother [sic].

Figure 2 | Example of dowry abuse provided by respondent

My parents were coerced to send \$16,000 to my ex husband when I was pregnant. My in-laws taunted me on several occasions I did not [bring] enough dowry during my marriage to their son.

Figure 3 | Example of dowry abuse provided by respondent

The parents-in-law made the son feel guilty that his wife brought less dowry and exerted emotional and financial control over him so much that the bond between him and his wife was negatively impacted. They made sure that the son excluded the daughter-in-law from all financial matters and decisions.