

The health impacts of dowry abuse on South Asian communities in Australia

Dowry abuse is fundamentally driven by gender inequality and is a lesser known form of family violence in Australia

Dowry is a cultural tradition maintained by some migrant and refugee communities living in Australia. It has long been practised in India, but with rising materialism in the post-colonial era, the size of gifts for marriage increased to multiple times that of the annual income of the bride's family.¹ Dowry is also linked to family prestige.² Rampant dowry abuse associated with significant interpersonal, family and community harm in the newly independent India gave rise to the antidowry movement and laws prohibiting it in 1961.³ Decades later, countries with large South Asian diasporas, such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, continue to experience cases of dowry-related abuse, including the husband's confiscation of dowry wealth followed by abandonment of brides.⁴

Dowry abuse is a form of family violence in Australia that clinicians should consider in their practice. Dowry is practised in various cultures across the world and involves a ritualised tradition involving gift giving in the context of marriage. This article deals with the practice of dowry in South Asian communities, including those living in Australia, where dowry typically involves the transfer of wealth from the bride's family to the groom's family.¹ As the Indian-born population is now the third largest migrant community in Australia, clinicians should be aware that some of their patients from this community may experience family violence and mental harm associated with dowry abuse.⁵

The practice of dowry is not necessarily abusive. Many parents see it as assisting the new couple in their married life² and, on the surface, it appears no different to spontaneous gift giving as a gesture of goodwill to the newlywed couple. However, it is the coerced nature of dowry demands, as opposed to voluntary giving, that is a source of concern. Abuse associated with dowry includes controlling and coercive behaviour by the husband and his family who pressure, threaten or demand substantial gifts from the woman and her family in the context of the marriage. Among migrant communities in Australia, dowry abuse can manifest in demands for gold jewellery, white goods, gifts, or cash to start a business or buy a house.⁶ Refusal to comply with demands for dowry may be associated with threats, violence, verbal harassment, criticism and abandonment.⁷ A series of high profile family violence murders in Australia in the Indian community in 2012–2016 were in part related to dowry issues.^{8,9}

Prevalence of dowry abuse

There is limited evidence on the prevalence of dowry abuse both overseas and in Australia. Under-reporting

of dowry abuse can be attributed to a range of reasons, including desire to keep the marriage or family intact, social isolation, dependency on the perpetrator, and language barriers.⁷ In Australia, the practice of dowry was first identified in 2005.² However, data on the incidence of dowry abuse in Australia remain largely anecdotal. The increase in migration from the subcontinent has not been met by a similar increase in research and data collection.¹⁰ The 2019 Senate inquiry report into the practice of dowry and the incidence of dowry abuse in Australia noted the paucity of evidence.¹² A Queensland-based social worker reported dealing with over 30 domestic violence cases in the Indian community 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.¹² A clinical audit of 56 South Asian victims of family violence presenting to one psychiatric outpatient setting revealed dowry abuse in 50% of cases.¹¹ A high profile partner murder in 2015 brought dowry abuse under focus in Victoria.^{7,8} The high level of distress suffered by the family in India was expressed by the victim's father in a letter to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence 2015–16.⁷ The recommendation to include dowry abuse in the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic) led to the proclamation of the law in 2019 in Victoria.¹² The extensive range of case studies and the stories shared by victims as part of the inquiry¹² are a strong indicator that dowry abuse remains a prevalent concern in some communities in Australia.

The link between dowry demands and abusive behaviour

In 2020, a national survey on dowry abuse was conducted in Australia (Human Research Ethics Committee of the Melbourne Clinic, Project 336). The survey received 150 participant responses.¹³ Participants were recruited through adverts 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. Nearly half of respondents (44%) identified their country of birth as India, followed by Australia (19%) and Sri Lanka (18%).¹³ The survey asked respondents to identify drivers contributing to the perpetration of dowry abuse and nominate abusive behaviour most frequently associated with demands for dowry. When asked to consider a non-exhaustive list of abusive behaviour, respondents identified verbal abuse (85%) as the most common behaviour connected to dowry demands, followed by humiliation (77%) and controlling behaviour (77%).¹³ Of note, the survey

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found that 32% of respondents reported either experiencing dowry abuse themselves or knowing someone who had.¹³

Drivers of dowry abuse

As with other forms of family violence, dowry abuse is fundamentally driven by gender inequality.¹⁴ Survey respondents independently identified gendered factors related to dowry abuse, including outdated patriarchal arrangements, societal norms, long term customary expectation, and the perception of dowry as a status symbol and prestige.² Other intersecting factors that contribute to the perpetration of dowry abuse in Australia include the gendered nature of migration patterns, temporary visa status of the victim, family dynamics, and lack of adequate legal protection. In relation to migration, men with Australian citizenship or permanent residency are perceived as more attractive in the marriage market due to their ability to sponsor partners to live in Australia.¹²

Family dynamics, such as imbalanced power relationships within multigenerational households, can contribute to dowry abuse. The role of mothers-in-law in perpetrating abuse was highlighted as a feature of dowry abuse in a community participatory theatre-based action research project.¹⁵ The Victorian Coroner's findings into the 2014 murder of a woman also noted coercive demands for more dowry from the woman's in-laws.⁸ Finally, while the law plays a powerful role in signalling unacceptable behaviour in Australia, the legal protection afforded to victims of dowry abuse is currently inadequate. The Senate inquiry report¹² recommended the inclusion of dowry abuse in the federal *Family Law Act 1975* and in state family violence legislation. That would provide more protection to victims and further strengthen their rights in property settlements. It also recommends "the creation of a temporary visa — for example a 'Woman at Risk in Australia' visa" for survivors of dowry abuse. Unfortunately, the current approach across Australia is insufficient and inconsistent.¹⁰ As of 2021, only Victoria and Western Australia have included dowry-related abuse in family violence legislation. Our clinical observation that the new Victorian laws, accompanied by heightened media reporting and awareness raising, appear to have had a significant impact on the incidence of new dowry abuse cases is suggestive of their merit.

The role of health professionals in responding to dowry abuse

The World Health Organization recommends that health practitioners engage in training to better understand the vulnerability of women in minority groups to intimate partner violence.¹⁴ The education programs need to pay attention to complex intersections of gender, migration and other social issues.¹⁶ Dowry abuse is associated with serious mental health harm and risk to life, with reports of patients having post-traumatic stress disorder¹⁷ and common mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and suicidality.¹⁸ Yet silence around dowry abuse acts

as a barrier to seeking help. Routine interactions with general practitioners and other health professionals can provide a valuable opportunity to intervene and break the silence.¹⁷ Risk factors such as female gender, South Asian background, marital relationship problems, temporary visa status, unexplained illnesses, and mental health presentations should serve as reminders to check for dowry abuse and related signs of family violence. It is essential to provide appropriate referral to domestic violence service providers (national domestic violence service provider 1800RESPECT, www.1800respect.org.au) or police (www.triplezero.gov.au or call 000) if life is at risk. Culturally responsive counselling services, trauma-informed care, and treatment of associated mental health conditions should be initiated.

Conclusion

Dowry abuse is a lesser-known form of family violence in Australia. Key elements of dowry abuse include coercive control, threats or actual physical violence, emotional abuse, and death. Drivers of dowry abuse include patriarchal attitudes, power imbalance, multigenerational family, and migrant status. When treating married migrant South Asian women with anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation, dowry-related family violence should be kept in mind, and appropriate referrals arranged.

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