



ACHRH

Empowering Communities
through Knowledge & Research

ACHRH Newsletter

December
2014

IN THIS ISSUE

Say No To Dowry - anti-dowry walk

Join us for an anti-dowry walk from Federation Square to Parliament house. Assemble near the big screen at Federation Square and walk with us to the Victorian Parliament. Details appear below.

Anyone who respects women and peaceful relationships should join this walk.

We are moving together to make a difference. Say No to Dowry System 'My Friends'!

If you would like more information about this event, please contact Dr Manjula O'Connor at 0419 354 482 or email:

manjula@achrh.org.

There is a flyer attached to this newsletter – perhaps something to print and post on your workplace noticeboard?

There is also a piece written by Dr O'Connor, on Page 5, talking about the background to the walk.

Everyone at the ACHRH would like to wish all our friends a safe and happy Christmas, a very happy Hannukah, and a blessed Mawlid al-Nabi.



**Manjula
O'Connor**

Saturday 15 November

Report on a kitchen table discussion on domestic violence in the Indian community.

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2014 White Ribbon Day Melbourne Luncheon

On Tuesday 25 November, a fundraiser was held at Melbourne Town Hall to mark White Ribbon Day. You can read more about this initiative below, in a report by Gauri Kapoor.

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Kitchen Table Discussion

By Gauri Kapoor

Participants: Manjula O'Connor, Molina Asthana, Karamjit Kaur, Lalitha Gouri, Nisha Bajaj, Ashima Soni, Pratima Francis, Ritika Walia, Tanvi Mor, Pratiksha Sadh, Renu Vallath, Gauri Kapoor (note taker)

Observers: Amy Laffan and Kate from Department of Social Services, (Multicultural, Settlement Services & Communities - Family Safety Branch)

The Department of Social Services (DSS) was keen to learn more about issues affecting women in the Indian community and where government money is best spent in helping them. The DSS always seeks to engage more actively with people from all Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities in Australia.

A kitchen table conversation is usually an informal chat between 8 people or so. Dr O'Connor laid out the rules for the discussion and emphasised that everyone had an equal right to participate. She obtained consent from all participants for their involvement and assured them that their privacy would be protected. Statements would not be attributed to any one person present in the meeting. Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH) Domestic Violence pamphlets were handed out to everyone.

CHALLENGES

It is estimated that 1 in 3 women in the Indian community suffer from acute domestic violence from husbands and/or in-laws.

Women from both low and high socio-economic backgrounds are affected by domestic violence. Many women have

arrived on spouse visas and are highly dependent on their husbands. These women have little understanding of the rights and choices they have in Australia.

There are very different laws in Australia and in India. A key issue is how the law is recognising the unique problems affecting Indian women in Australia. Dowry related abuse is currently not recognised under financial abuse laws in Australia.

Divorce largely remains a stigma. There is pressure for people to stay in marriages that have been arranged by their families. Men are confident that their wives will not leave them and therefore expect women will tolerate their abusive behaviour.

A lack of family support is a big problem for both men and women. Parents have an important guiding role. That guidance ends when their sons and daughters settle in Australia without them.

Indian women form very strong emotional attachments to their families. They find it hard to be single and exist without the support of their family. Some are ready to put up with Domestic Violence than cope with separation anxiety. The rates of depression and suicide among Indian women are high.

These problems are not just prevalent in the Indian community. Similar problems exist in



the Chinese, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. ACHRH would like to work with all the different South Asian communities.

ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY AND/OR GOVERNMENT

Both mindsets and the law must change. Australian laws must be stricter and reflect the realities of life for Indian women here in Australia. Challenging deeply embedded cultural norms is the first step in a long process of reform that will help reduce rates of domestic violence in the community.

It is vital that there is a direct appeal to men in the community. Are there Indian men who are willing to speak up about violence against women? If so, it is important that they take a stand and speak up against domestic violence. Men may be more willing to listen to other men than to women.

A key problem is how to reach out to vulnerable women. Women aren't using existing phone Helplines as they either are too nervous or they don't know where to find them. Perhaps one central helpline would be a good idea.

One possibility is to reach out to women before they leave India by collaborating with

the Australian High Commission in Delhi who can distribute pamphlets or an Australian 'Introduction Kit' with visas.

ACHRH is developing a MCR (Mutual Cultural Respect) course for new migrants that will introduce them to Australian culture as well as provide information on what to do if one is a victim of domestic violence. If successful, it would replace the current citizenship test.

Another idea is to create workshops for women which will help them get a proper job. Women need a good stable job to become more confident in themselves and self-sufficient. A library could be used as a meeting place for a club where women can get together and discuss what is happening in their lives.

Airing TV ads on SBS which feature survivors of domestic violence would be ideal. Another possibility is a SBS Insight show devoted to discussing violence against women in ethnic communities. A less expensive option would be to set up websites which women could access. Putting information on the Department of Immigration website or sending an email link with information would also be helpful.

Forum theatre is another effective way of reaching out to men and women. ACHRH has a grant of \$26,000 put aside for a project that will target men in the Indian community and their mindsets through stage plays.

There are many women in need of free legal assistance. Legal Aid does not have the resources to provide such help. It would be helpful to organise a group of volunteers who have a legal background.

There is need to create a South Asian hub in Melbourne which will provide a well-established cohort of services for women.

Currently there is no such facility for women from different South Asian communities in Melbourne. ACHRH is a largely self-funded NGO. It would need funding for such a project. In the interim, it would be good to have regular meetings in areas like Tarneit, Dandenong and one near the city for Indian women who need help.

There are 200 or so Indian related associations in Australia. They should take a more active role in the campaign against domestic violence. These associations receive a lot of money from the Government and other sources of funding. Where is this money going? Is there any accountability?

What about the next generation—i.e. the children being born to these migrants? It is important that they be educated in our schools.

Short term goals:

- Collaborate with the Australian High Commission in India to work on an "induction into Australian life" toolkit
- Create a website with comprehensive information as to what and where help is available for women.

Mid-term goals:

- Education – workshops to help women in terms of jobs and financial education
- Running the MCR course which has case studies relating to respect for women
- The theatre project directed towards an Indian male audience

Long term goals:

- Create a Hub - a dedicated call centre for South Asian women

which will include counselling services, legal help, medical referrals etc.

- Work more closely with media outlets to raise awareness of domestic violence in South Asian communities

Support Us

ACHRH is an NGO and as such relies heavily and extensively on the mission partners and the wider community for support. If you would like to support us and get involved in any way then please do contact us, either via the website:

<http://www.achrh.org/>

Or Facebook.

White Ribbon Day Luncheon

By Gauri Kapoor



On Tuesday 25 November, a fundraiser was held at Melbourne Town Hall to mark White Ribbon Day. The event was sponsored by Telstra and the City of Melbourne. Special guests included Victorian Police Commissioner, Ken Lay, and Minister Mary Wooldridge. The fundraiser included a panel discussion on domestic violence in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD). The three panellists were Dr Manjula O'Connor (Psychiatrist & Director, Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health), Dr Tim Soutphassane (Race Discrimination Commissioner) and Will Irving (Head, Telstra Business).

It is estimated that almost one woman is killed by her partner every week in Victoria. Unfortunately, the issue of domestic violence has not received widespread public and media attention whereas the fact is that nearly everyone will come into contact with people suffering from domestic violence. It is vital that everyone looks out for the warning signs and makes a positive intervention to help both victims and perpetrators.



The motto of the day was "Making women's safety a man's issue too". The Master of Ceremonies, John Caldwell (Victorian Australian of the Year 2014) shared his own childhood experience of domestic violence. He emphasised the importance of men taking a strong stance on violence against women and children and changing the culture of silence surrounding domestic violence in Australia. Mr Caldwell praised the work of White Ribbon in the areas of education and prevention.

Dr O'Connor discussed the growing problem of violence against women in South Asian communities. She started by acknowledging the positive impact of cultural diversity in Australia. The problem however is when "cultural practice interferes with human rights". Examples include genital mutilation, forced marriage and dowry related abuse. Dr O'Connor is an advocate for developing culturally nuanced solutions to domestic violence in CALD communities. She heads the Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH) which runs programs that are culturally specific and is sought to be achieved through culturally related activities. In many Asian cultures, in-laws play an important role in women's lives. In the Indian tradition, daughters-in-law are seen to belong to the husband's family. Women often face abuse at the hands of their husband's families. As an example, Dr O'Connor cited the case of a highly educated woman whose daily cooking, besides other chores, was rated on a scale of 1 to 10. She never scored above 5 and she was humiliated by her husband and his family on a daily basis.

Dr O'Connor has struggled to find widespread support in the Indian community for her efforts in combating domestic violence. The problem in many Asian cultures is that "societal bonding" comes first and primary/individual rights come second; the cultural control over its members can be termed an 'over eye', something which watches everyone and stops any deviation from the accepted norm. It is all too pervasive a phenomenon in CALD communities.

Mr Soutphassane said it is imperative that there is greater cultural understanding and sensitivity when approaching the issue of domestic violence in CALD communities. In certain communities where there are high rates of family violence such as the Aboriginal community, there is great stigma

attached to getting help from authorities. Mr Soutphassane also challenged the notion that community leaders speak on behalf of everyone. It is essential the voices of a few do not come to dominate the overall community narrative.

Mr Irving argued it is important that employers take the lead and help create a much needed culture change. It is estimated that 1 in 3 women are harassed and/or discriminated against in the workplace. He reiterated Telstra's commitment to increasing gender equality for women in the workforce.

Minister Mary Wooldridge delivered the vote of thanks. She praised the work of White Ribbon as well as the Napthine Government in tackling the issue of domestic violence. Guests were then invited to join the Walk against Domestic Violence starting from Federation Square.



Walk Against Dowry

By Dr Manjula O'Connor

Cultural Heritage Gives Us Identity. What about harmful practices that abuse human rights?

What is culture? Culture is a code of conduct that a group of people agree to live by.

Cultural diversity in the Australian context means successive waves of migrants have brought with them their shared code of conduct, rules of living, festivals, religions, dress code, foods which has added richness to Australian life.

Culture inheritance is to be celebrated; it gives us identity, meaning and purpose. But when the cultural heritage or practices start to interfere with human rights of individuals then that starts to create tension. The harmful practices have to be tackled and changed. But that can be a difficult and fraught process. You need to speak out against negative and harmful practices. But that is seen by many as betrayal. Because silence means solidarity with the group.

Breaking silence means whistle blowing and whistle blowers will be dealt with harshly by those in the community who see themselves as carriers of the culture.

But Silence we must break when things are not right and highlight those practices that are abusive to human rights be that of women, children or men.

For example Honour Killings, Female Genital Mutilation, Dowry, Female feticide, Violence against women are some such practices that abuse human rights.

In our culture, the extended family system is very important.

Daughter in law in Indian culture comes to live in the in-laws home and must see herself as their new daughter and according to Indian custom she is a divine gift handed from her parents to her new husband and his parents. So parents expect she will be treated with the same care and respect as in her own home. He and his parents in most families respect the new bride as their own daughter

In general terms it is expected *she will give unreserved respect to her in-laws and husband*. But when it comes to her she has to EARN their respect. She does that by working very hard, trying to please them all the time and earn their respect. Some brides must give dowry and gifts and cash to earn the in-laws respect. The more she and her parents will give more they will like her!

Otherwise she can be bullied, humiliated and disrespected. She can be subjected to physical abuse, humiliation and verbal abuse.

Dowry according to the UN is abuse of human rights. According to Australian laws coercive financial demands are considered economical abuse and therefore domestic violence

DOWRY is gender inequality and a matter of great shame that the groom and his parents have an expectation that bride will bring gold gifts and cash for them, their relatives and the groom himself. Parents love to give gifts to their children when they are getting married. But there are important differences between dowry and gift giving. First, gifts at weddings are given because one wants to do it where as Dowry is an EXPECTATION and sometimes a coercion that her parents will provide gifts for his family and him. Dowry is demanded and it is multiple times the income of the bride's family. This means her parents have to borrow money.



Dowry when not given the bride is humiliated and abused for not bringing expected gifts and cash. But the excuse given is she is to blame, it is her faults that led to domestic violence.

Domestic Violence is a crime and the law gives punishment including jail

There was an epidemic of Farmers suicide in India some years back. Many farmers borrowed money against the crops they were expecting. This was to pay for their daughter's dowry. Sadly there was a drought and there was no income. The farmers were unable to pay the loans. The threat of the banks was too much for many and they took their own lives. If you think this has no bearing for us in Australia you would be wrong. Hundreds of young women's parents have borrowed money to marry them to NRI husbands and only to find the husbands abandon them and /or are not satisfied with the dowry amount and this leads to abuse and violence. We must stop dowry demands now

We request the Victorian government to add the words "demands for dowry" to be classified as Economical abuse and therefore domestic violence

Let us bring this to the attention of the new Labour Government.

JOIN US FOR A WALK AGAINST DOWRY. Help bring change to this harmful cultural practice that is an abuse of human rights and responsible for pain to thousands globally.

We have started a petition. And we are now planning a WALK AGAINST DOWRY

www.achrh.org



**Walk against dowry demands
on 14 December 2014**

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

- **POLICE IN EMERGENCY -- 000**
- **YOUR GP -- they are helpful, easy to reach, they will refer you to the right place.**
- **NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT, DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE COUNSELLING SERVICE -- 1800 RESPECT**
- **INTOUCH MULTICULTURAL CENTER AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE --
1800 755 988**
- **WOMENS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRISIS SERVICE (WDVCS) --
24 Hour state wide line 1800 015 188**
- **MEN'S 24 HOUR REFERRAL SERVICE --
1800 065 973 (FREE CALL VICTORIA ONLY)**
- **VICTORIA IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN'S COALITION --
03 9654 1243
virwc@virwc.org.au, www.virwc.org.au**
- **WOMEN'S INFORMATION & REFERRAL AGENCY (WIRE)
03 9348 9416
inforequests@wire.org.au**
- **DR MANJULA O'CONNOR, FOUNDING DIRECTOR ACHRH --
03 9654 5271
manjula@achrh.org**



WHY GET HELP?

- ❖ Domestic Violence damages our culture
- ❖ Domestic violence breaks our homes
- ❖ Domestic Violence causes:
 - Anxiety,
 - Depression,
 - Suicide,
 - Homicide in women, men and children

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- ❖ Support those who may be victims
- ❖ Encourage victims to seek help and become survivors
- ❖ Encourage perpetrators to seek help
- ❖ **DO NOT BE SILENT ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Say No to Domestic Violence

www.achrh.org



Walk against dowry demands on 14 December 2014

“SAY NO TO DOWRY”

Marry without the dowry

Anyone who respects women and peaceful relationships should join this walk.

Date — Sunday 14 December 2014

Time — 2 pm – 4 pm

ASSEMBLY POINT — near the big screen at Federation Square

We are moving together to make a difference. Say No to Dowry System 'My Friends'!

Please RSVP to any of the following:

Mr. Avinash Rain: 0413 400 007 avinashrain@gmail.com

Nomeet Lakhani: 0425 833 528 nomee_72@hotmail.com

Dr. Manjula O'Connor, 0419 354 482 manjula@achrh.org

Sonia Cheema, 0430 389 090 scheema@slsirst.vic.edu.au

If you would like more information about this event, please contact any of the above.