

Shattered dreams: the women tormented by dowry abuse

Neelima Choahan

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[Premier weighs levy to help house victims](#)

The wedding album is the perfect advertisement of a big, fat Indian wedding. Colourful, traditional and opulent.

The glossy images document the seven days of the Sikh ceremonies: there are the women singing at the sangeet; here's the henna for the mehendi.

There is the photo of the father of the bride handing over a pile of banknotes to the groom, and giving 22-carat gold jewellery to the extended family of his soon-to-be son-in-law. All part of a lavish dowry.

Amid it all is the bride: Simran (not her real name), beautiful and young.

Simran said her family had spent \$100,000 on the wedding and gifts, but that wasn't enough for the groom, considered a prime catch because of his permanent residency visa in Australia.

She said her three years of marriage had been littered with increasing demands for money, and escalating violence when those demands were not met.

Dowry was banned in India in 1961, but many victims complain authorities fail to grasp that the cultural practice exists in Australia.

Now the Royal Commission into Family Violence has recommended that within 12 months the Victorian government should include dowry-related abuse as a form of family violence - in particular [economic abuse](#).

Premier Daniel Andrews has said he will implement all recommendations of the 1900-page report.

Manjula O'Connor, an Indian-born psychiatrist and Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health director, has been campaigning to ban dowry in Australia. She said the recommendations would give greater clarity to authorities, and a voice to the victims.

"When the young women goes to the police and say, 'He has kept my dowry, he has got my gold, and all the cash', police say to the girls, 'We don't know what you mean by dowry?'" Dr O'Connor said.

"When they explain it is a gift, [the police] say, 'Why did you give so much gifts in the first place?' They have no cultural awareness of the pressure the family are under to give these huge amounts of gifts.

"What this will do is make them [the women] feel heard and validated, and it will allow the judiciary to document, and the police to document the words 'dowry-related gifts' in their statement."

In 2014, former Victorian premier Ted Baillieu [tabled a petition in State Parliament](#) calling for the practice of dowry to be made illegal in Victoria.

For Simran, the relentless coercion for money spelt the end of her young dreams.

Married at just 20 to a man she had barely exchanged a few words with, the law graduate hoped for a happy wedded life. Just like in the movies.

"I thought I would look beautiful on my wedding day, pose for a lot of photos, go for a honeymoon," Simran said. "I will cook for him, he will be happy. He will help me too. We'll go to the movies, for a drive."

Now Simran is in a safe house somewhere in Melbourne, battling memories of the physical, verbal and economic abuse, and struggling to rebuild her life.

She said the recommendation would make it easier to ask for help in a foreign land.

"It means when we go to the police and complain, they won't say, 'What is dowry?'" she said. "When I told a social worker about the abuse, she said, 'It sounds like a story.' I said, 'This is not a story; this is my life.'"

For help or information regarding domestic violence, call the Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service on 1800 737 732, or visit 1800respect.org.au

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/shattered-dreams-the-women-tormented-by-dowry-abuse-20160407-gnznx.html>