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**How to prevent family violence in Australian South Asian  
migrant community: Lessons from community participatory  
theatre**

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## Abstract

**Background** Family violence (FV) is a universal phenomenon that harms physical and mental health. Immigrant communities are more vulnerable. Multiple intersecting forces enhance the vulnerabilities and demand structural solutions that are culturally responsive. This paper presents an immigrant community's response to FV. The Australian-Indian community defines the problem and explores solutions to FV within its midst, while balancing cultural continuity and traditions with the demands of modernity and migratory pressures.

**Method** A sample of 172 members of the Indian community in Victoria, Australia, was self-selected through local advertising. A total of 30 members participated in 6 workshops over 3 weekends to exchange their experiences and knowledge of family structures and FV. The participants, aided by a theater director and experts in the fields of gender, FV, and culture created scripts on four scenarios: a happy and ideal family, an arranged marriage with a big dowry, ill-treatment of the daughter-in-law, and a husband who becomes jealous and increasingly controlling. Through participatory research, the informants explored the changing power dynamics in the family unit by evolving the storyline, as well as by reflecting on and proposing culturally sensitive adaptations and solutions to the situations depicted.

**Results** The issues highlighted included gender inequality; the privileged status of young men; the impact of dowry expectations from the groom's family; and the abuse of power by mothers-in-law, perpetuating patriarchy and exacerbating FV.

**Conclusions** The use of theater concretizes FV, casting it in a form that the community can work with, to create its own solutions.

Keywords - Family violence, Indian immigrants, community participatory theater, prevention of violence

## Background

Family violence (FV) is a serious universal problem. Strong prevention programs are necessary to bring the rates down [1]. There is considerable global variation in the rates [2], suggesting that there are social, cultural, ecological, and other protective factors affecting the prevalence of FV. To change the culturally embedded forms of FV, there is a need to work

within the cultural constructions of FV [3] and to develop a culturally responsive theory of change [4].

In Australia, 1 in 3 women report facing FV comprising emotional, physical, sexual, and financial abuse [5]. In spite of a significant increase in both focus and resources to address FV in Australia, little has changed in the rates of FV since the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey in 2005 [6]. One reason appears to be that the attitude toward women and gender relationships are hard to shift. Responding to the lack of progress the national organization “Our Watch” has produced documents such as “Let us Change the Story” and “The Line” [7, 8], aimed at producing national attitudinal change in favor of respectful and equal relationships. For this message to be effective and to change the hearts and minds of people, it must reach communities and individuals in a culturally responsive manner. This project aims to do just that with the help of community participatory theater (CPT), to assist the community to define the problem better and explore solutions that are culturally nuanced, which the community members can use to find alternatives to path of violence.

While FV occurs in all sections of society, immigrants seem to be more vulnerable as they face multiple intersecting forces such as racism, under-employment or unemployment, changing roles in the family that may threaten the traditional patriarchal family structure, new cultural references, lack of social connectedness, and various issues specific to immigration status itself [9, 10]. Kimberle Crenshaw [11] first noted the intersection of the above negative experiences among minority black women in the USA and recognized that violence was commonplace, and that the collision of the abovementioned forces was additive. Such an intersection was also noted by Seagraves (2017) to heighten the vulnerability of immigrant women in the experience of FV in Australia. This vulnerability was acknowledged by the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence [12] and the Second Action Plan 2013-

2016 [13], as part of the Commonwealth National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (2010–2022). They have flagged the urgent need to fill the knowledge gap that is necessary for an appropriate response and for the creation of prevention strategies to address FV in immigrant communities.

The ANROWS study [14] suggests that immigrant groups from non-English speaking countries, like the mainstream population, are shifting toward more respectful relations and are less condoning of FV. Nevertheless, attitudes such as “women are emotional and better child-carers” and “men should have greater authority to make decisions” still persist in some ethnic segments of society (p. 12). Any solution to ending FV needs to seek assistance from cultural traditions to help change attitudes. This project aims to present challenges identified by the community and the solutions that the community arrived at for itself.

It is reported that in societies where women and men hold traditional gender norms and roles, where they hold unequal power and resources, where it is normal to resort to violence to resolve conflicts, and where the local culture does not sanction violence against women, there is a higher risk of FV [1, 14]. This is termed as structural violence by Galtung [15, 16]. Structural violence is a social structure that perpetuates inequity, thus causing preventable suffering by minority groups. Thus, the intersection of changing family dynamic with migration, isolation, precarious visa status, racism and sexism by a wider society, with unequal power relations between the genders renders immigrant women vulnerable with much suffering in the form of FV that is preventable [11]. This project analyzes the socio-structural contexts that bring together and consolidate power relationships, and social patterns that explain the origins and perpetuation of patriarchy [17]. In the spirit of Gandhian nonviolent conflict resolution, the community unpacks the intersectionality of oppressive forces and offers itself solutions that present alternatives to violence against women [11], and in the process, enhancing harmony and justice within families.

Almost 49% of people living in Australia were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas [6]. Indians constitute a significant immigrant group in Australia, with a majority of them living in Victoria. There are 468,000 Indian immigrants in Australia, as of 2016, which constitutes 2 per cent of the Australian population.

The Indian community was shaken by a series of FV-related murders and suicides among adults and children alike between 2009 and 2015 [18]. This spurred the community into urgent action to explore ways to stop FV in a culturally acceptable manner.

O'Connor and Colucci [19] identified the specific nature of FV in South Asian communities. They reported the response of the Indian community to FV. Relying on embedded cultural knowledge and action research, they explored the perceptions of FV among men and women and arrived at culturally salient solutions to FV. In their theater-based action research study of women from the Indian community in Melbourne, O'Connor and Colucci [19] and Colluci et al. [20] identified factors associated with rigid gender roles, patriarchal oppression, isolation, and violence against women. Women had to maintain silence and accept blame. Education and financial independence provided no way out for them.

Cultures and attitudes are contextually determined and do change, and makes FV amenable to change [23]. We propose an interpretative framework, underpinned by historical and contemporary influences on this migrant culture. Since the previous action research project with this community described above, through a multiplicity of factors, such as sustained Federal and Victorian Government campaigns and media stories, personal agency has been restored in women's hands in a way that has sufficiently allowed them to speak up and question violence. Thus, there has been a change in attitudes toward breaking silence and seeking help. Immigrant Indian women have changed their behaviors. There has been a

dramatic increase in the number of women who seek help, over the six-year period according to a media announcement by the National Family Violence Helpline (1800RESPECT) [24]. The exact prevalence of FV in culturally diverse communities is not known, as the ethnicity of victims of FV is not recorded in National or Police statistics, however the imperative must shift from raising awareness to exploring solutions.

In dealing with a complex problem such as FV, where there are multiple versions of every story and multiple intersecting factors to complicate every story, CPT offers a useful strategy to explore the existence and intersection of these contrasting versions, leading to the development of a shared appreciation of the “truth” forces that drive FV, while simultaneously moving from facts to understanding the story and changing the story by exploring forms of restorative truths [25]. The project in the tradition of participatory action research (PAR) involves collective self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake together, to understand the issue better. Baum [26] argued that since “history, culture, and local context” are “embedded in social relationships,” PAR can have an empowering impact over the people involved in the study. Building on previous work and using the participatory theater method, this paper describes the collaboration between multidisciplinary practitioners from the fields of theater, education, FV service providers, and cultural experts, along with the members of the Indian community with the aim of enhancing the community’s understanding of FV, documenting the nature of gender relations and gender norms, and promoting and disseminating positive solutions to prevent FV. Thus, this project fulfills the criteria of PAR.

The qualitative action research reported in this article differentiates itself from previous research with migrants in Australia for example by Segrave [9] by exploring the community knowledge among a specific group, the Indian immigrants in Australia about the nature of FV in their community, as constructed locally by their culture, and what they

perceive to be culturally effective solutions. This article studies men and women [27] in mixed groups. The community dialogue is facilitated through interactive theater to promote a shared understanding of gender norms, to explore culturally responsive means of responding to FV, and to enhance gender equality. Thus, the study aims at exploring the primary and secondary prevention of FV. The community audience also explores appropriate help-seeking approaches, thereby exploring secondary and tertiary levels of responsiveness as well. This project supports the goals of eliminating FV as espoused and declared by UN Women [28], the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action [28], the Federal Australian Government [13], and the Victorian State Government [8].

## Methods

The research team comprises an applied theater specialist (RB), an educationist with cultural expertise (PS), a psychiatrist of Indian heritage with expertise in gender-based violence (GBV) (MO), a qualitative research specialist (CM), and a medical anthropologist and transcultural psychiatrist with expertise in GBV (ME). The team's multidisciplinary backgrounds and the diversity of theoretical frameworks used helped build a successful transdisciplinary theoretical model that investigated culturally nuanced interventions around the origin, nature, methods of intervention, and prevention of FV in culturally diverse communities [29].

## Rationale for using community participatory theater (CPT)-

Woodson [29] provides a model and a mechanism for CPT. Here, the leadership is co-shared by several experts, and the community at large. The approach is underpinned by a deeply held belief in the rights and capacities of the community, and is informed by the feminist theory of FV, which focuses on power imbalance between genders as the root cause of violence, and identifies that power is largely concentrated in the hands of male gender across cultures (Our Watch). Utilizing a feminist-informed conceptual framework, this

project attempts to understand the construction of these links culturally and help articulate solutions as appropriate. Jones [30] says that “dramatic monologues and theatrical performances have recently been added to the researcher's toolbox, under the umbrella paradigm of “Performative Social Science.””

Heise’s nested ecological model [31] demonstrates the highly complex nature of FV where interactions between the individual, the family, the community, and society at multiple levels collide with intersecting forces giving rise to the multi-dimensional nature of FV. Therefore, a methodology that promotes the understanding of and solutions to the issue at multiple levels is necessary. Theater, as a medium, has “proved to be meaningful” in enhancing the understanding of the complexity of lived experiences in different groups and communities [32]. For example, Roberts et al. [33] found that theater improved the understanding and awareness of psychosis. Theater also helped change attitudes toward seeking help [29]. This is exemplified in the Australian Indian community where previous community theater performances helped to break profound silence around FV and as mentioned previously Indian women currently are the biggest callers to FV services. For Kip Jones [30], Performative Social Science as exemplified by theater “can... break down old boundaries, opens up channels of communication and empower communities through engagement.” (p. 1) and this fits in with the aims of this project. Theater helps extend storytelling by revealing, producing, and representing data in ways that traditional qualitative methods do not. Theater enriches communication and makes research accessible beyond academia.

Within the Indian sub-continent, as elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia, theater has been historically proven as a popular and effective tool to form, reform, and transform social practices [34]. For example the Forum Theater technique has been used extensively in India. Jana Sanskriti theater company in Kolkata utilizes Forum Theatre or the Theatre of the



Oppressed to empower, educate, and potentially change the lives of thousands of people [35]. This rehearsal on the stage becomes an inspiration for the actors and the spectators to work out solutions for themselves with the aim of ending all kinds of oppression in real life. Thus, theater fulfills the goals of action research brilliantly by being both a reflective process of progressive problem-solving and an analytical process owned by the community, to be fed back to the community [36]. Taking this further, Heard et al. [37] conducted a review of applied interactive theater in the context of preventing intimate partner violence and confirmed that participatory and interactive approaches such as playmaking and talk back sessions can enhance interventions, and that applied theater could be an effective tool for working in culturally diverse settings as well as with minority groups “when the target community is involved in creating the action” (p. 16). Further information on the rationale for choosing participatory theater as a methodology can be found elsewhere [19, 20]. This project pushes further the aims of the Play Back theater in Nepal that was used for its potential to educate, to heal “to release imagination, to open new perspectives, and to identify alternative” to FV [38] .

### Design and procedure

The methodology in this project is qualitative, and involves the use of PAR, incorporating applied theater [36] where culture is used as an asset and as a tool to explore experiences and behaviors through the collection and performance of vignettes. There is no hypothesis. Instead, the project looks for knowledge within the social system of the Indians in the Australian South Asian (ASA) Community. While the questions and discussions are advocated within the exercise, the conclusions are inherent in this research exercise as well. The shared beliefs are voiced in the representation of a negotiated consensus, which, in turn, contributes to a future harmony of actions [39].

### Workshops to explore community perception of key issues

At the outset, six workshops led by RB, PS, and MO were held over six weeks, on alternate weekends. The workshops comprised male and female community volunteers

recruited by word-of-mouth and advertising pamphlets left at Indian grocery stores. Working together, community members participated in workshops where they were engaged in telling stories that reflected cultural truths of their family lives, gender relations, and societal norms, thus creating cultural interventions that were utilized in interactive theater-making activities.

The preparatory work for the theater performances was conducted over six workshops held in central Melbourne. There were 34 participants, mostly Indian, with two Sri Lankans, with five Caucasians, including Theater Director RB. Her influence as the theater director and that of a small number of Caucasian audience participants was to convey the ubiquity of FV. Two Sri Lankan workshop participants / actors played a key role in the development of the themes and were able to convey the commonalities between Sri Lankan and Indian cultures.

### Theater interactive performances

The theater performances were conducted at Craieburn (n=25), Albert Park (n=48), and Dandenong (n=65), with a total of 138 audience members comprising 64 men and 108 women. Recruitment was facilitated by social media, newsletters, and informal connections. The age range of the sample was 15-75 years.

Three interactive theater performances were held with audiences of the Indian community over three alternate Sundays in three outreach locations, namely the Dandenong Senior Citizens Club, Craieburn Community Center, and the ISCKON Temple. RB and MO moderated the exchange between the stage and the audience, while PS played the role of an observer, taking field notes. Each performance lasted two hours, followed by a celebration with the community audiences with afternoon tea and stories of shared experiences.

All the performances were recorded on video. The audience and the actors consented to being videotaped, except for one senior citizen whose face was blurred and conversations were excluded. All other conversations were transcribed and analyzed by CM.

### Data analysis of theater performances

The qualitative data were managed and analyzed using NVivo 11 software. A systematic approach was used to collate, check, code, and interpret the data. The analytic approach was designed to ensure rigor and reliability. It involved three rounds of reading and coding, followed by discussions on the codes and emergent themes among the team members. The procedure followed has been described in detail below.

First, the data were transcribed *verbatim*, imported into NVivo, and organized according to each performance (i.e., each data collection episode). The data comprised the transcribed performances, which included audience reactions and contributions and research notes. This enabled the team to categorize the data effectively and proceed through the coding steps in a systematic manner. All identifying information, such as the names of participants, facilitators, actors, and venues, was removed at this stage.

Once this was completed, initial codes were developed based on the knowledge gathered from the literature and team discussions about the performances. The performance data were then read in full to establish any further codes that might also be represented in the data. A meeting was held between two of the research team members where the data were discussed in detail and triangulated with field notes in order to establish the accuracy of these initial codes. This process ensured a thorough analysis because it drew from both researchers' insights while collecting the data and using those observations and notes to evaluate the data derived by analysis with NVivo. The process augmented the first-hand experience of being present during data collection.

The codes were then applied to the performance data. This step involved a very close re-reading of the transcripts. The interactive nature of the performances meant that the transcribed data were very rich, involving both the scripted and spontaneous performance of a “scene,” supported by the facilitator and the audience commentary on the issues, barriers, and solutions during each iteration. During this step, new codes emerged. We applied these codes to the data, which, in turn, required further discussion within the research team to understand and clarify the salience of the data. This part of the process allowed the researchers to challenge or expand on the initial list of emergent themes (hence, “codes”). Such methods are contingent on the analysts remaining “open” to challenges to their own initial assumptions about the key themes in the data. Discussions within the team created a robust dialogue to tease out the most commonly found themes in the data.

In the third and final step, the research team discussed the findings in relation to the gaps in the current literature. This step allowed the team to confirm the findings that came through strongly in the data as expected, and the findings that were unexpected but still salient to the issues under investigation. The next section discusses the findings in more detail.

## Ethics

The Melbourne Clinic Human Research Ethics Committee approved the project (Project 264). Consent forms seeking permission to record a video of the session were signed by the volunteers and community audience/participants at each of the workshops. Ongoing consultations were carried out with community members from the outset in order to keep the community informed and prevent potential negative effects of participation in this project. During the workshops and performances, all care was taken to ensure that a suitably trained therapist as a support person was present in the room to provide culturally sensitive advocacy and services for anyone in distress.

## Results

### Community perception of key issues

Six exploratory theater workshops were held over three alternate weekends, each lasting three hours. These workshops explored and discussed the community's views of the common and salient scenarios of FV. The community perceptions emerged over the course of these six workshops. The workshops were based on the recognition that the participants are experts on their own lives [40]. The first session focused on building cohesion and trust in the group with theatrical games and exercises that were designed to lower barriers. The researchers of the same community (Indian) rather than only observing and taking field notes, took part in the games actively. In the process, they oriented the group toward thinking about gender relations and about pressures on men and women in family life as immigrants exposed to the stressors of acculturation and mental health in a new environment.

Key themes discussed in the workshops included the following: perceptions of strengths and barriers influencing gender relations within the community, images of healthy families, images of positives and negatives of being male / female, understanding what aggression and FV look like within a family, exploring pressures and influences, exploring images of emotional abuse, financial abuse, dowry-related extortion and physical violence and the close mother-son bond.

The participants in discussion with the researchers arrived at an agreement on four themes that appeared repetitively during all the workshops. These themes were further developed by the participants through the means of spontaneous drama. The following scenes were finally written into screenplay formats by two participants in partnership with the Theater Director, RB:

Scene 1 – An ideal, happy family showcasing alternative expressions of masculinity, wherein the loving, kind, and generous father cooks breakfast for the children and the wife (a rare occurrence in Indian

families) with humorous dialogues, acted in comically and slightly exaggerated fashion with a role reversal that is rarely seen in an Indian family. This scene was used to send a message in a lighthearted manner that the theater performance was about family life. The scene was non-threatening, humorous and acted as an icebreaker. The audience cheered, laughed, clapped, and appeared engaged.

Scene 2 – An arranged marriage showcasing a marriage arranged by parents between two unwilling partners, namely an Australian-Indian man and a woman in India. The “deal” is sweetened with offerings of huge dowry by the bride’s family, while the groom’s family expects and demands more. Upon her arrival in Australia, she suffers rejection by her husband, besides humiliation, social isolation, violence, and abandonment. He already has a girlfriend he loves.

Scene 3 – The daughter-in-law and extended family showcase two generations of an Indian family living together. This family includes a newly married couple, and the mother and sister of the husband. The mother-son duo subject the new daughter-in-law to social exclusion, servitude, verbal and emotional abuse, bullying, and violence.

Scene 4 – Pathological jealousy, showcasing a young husband who barely manages to show fake pleasure in response to his wife receiving a superior job offer. As she progresses at work and becomes more social with her colleagues, he becomes progressively jealous and controlling, restricting her social contact. As she discloses her plans to move out, he murders her.

## Interactive Community Theater

Three outreach performances of Interactive Community Theater were carried out with the participation of the community in order to explore their suggested priorities and pathways to finding solutions to FV. Each performance lasted about two hours and was video recorded [41]. We describe the raw data from a scene of a theater performance at the ISCKON Temple.

### Scene 3 – “Daughter-in-law and extended family”

*The daughter-in-law (DIL) is required to serve tea to the extended family after a full day’s work. The mother-in-law (MIL), sister-in-law (SIL), and new husband/son are sitting and enjoying a television program. The DIL is berated by her MIL for making bad tea and is beaten by her husband for complaining to her mother on the phone.*

Two mediators moderated the exchange with the audience.

Mediator 1 (M1): *Have you have heard this story before?*

Audience: *Yes.*

Mediator 2 (M2): *Where does the responsibility lie?*

Female Audience Member: *Both, mother and son.*

Female Audience Member: *It is with the son; he needs to be a man.*

M2: *What does he need to do?*

Male Audience Member: *He needs to be her back* (meaning, wife's support). *He just can't do that. His mum or sister is berating all the time. His responsibility is toward his wife and he must make sure that she is looked after well.*

M1: *If he does that, he looks after his wife and he takes her side, what, then?*

Female Audience Member: *The mother will argue with the son.*

At this point, the audience is invited to offer a solution. The solution is enacted by the community volunteers or actors with impromptu dialogues.

Male Audience Member: *He needs to be her (wife's) back.*

M2: *Let us say the son became a man.*

M1: *Let us replay the scene.*

The scene is re-enacted using the audience's suggestions.

MIL (agitated, angry): *Is this tea for me? Why did you not put sugar in it?*

DIL: *Yes, mum, this tea is for you. Mum, the doctor has asked you to not to have sugar.* (The DIL shows care toward her MIL)

Son/Husband: *It is okay, it is okay, Mum. I will bring you some sugar.* (The son/husband tries to find a way to calm his mother down and shows slight support for his new wife).

Son/Husband to his wife (DIL): *From next time, put two spoons of sugar in her tea.* (The son/husband tries to placate his mother, and soften the impact on his wife).

SIL to her brother (husband): *The doctor has asked her to take less sugar.* (The SIL tries to support the new DIL).

MIL is getting agitated and shouts at her DIL.

Son/Husband: *I will make tea.* (The son/husband recognizes that the situation is complex and that he alone has the power to make his mother less angry with his wife).

MIL to son/husband: *Why did you go into the kitchen? I did not spend so much on your education for you to go into the kitchen to make tea!* (The MIL puts up barriers to change).

Son/husband to MIL: *Mom, it is fine, it is okay... You all sit, I will make tea.* (The son/husband is willing to support his wife without doing away with support for his mother, thereby challenging the barriers to change)

At this point, the audience cheered and clapped.

## Issues and underlying factors

Several core themes emerged from the data, many of which respond directly to the gaps identified in the literature. These themes are dealt with below according to the ecological model. After an initial comment on the family matrix, the results focus on lateral issues such as the socialization of sons and daughters and vertical issues such as gender-based relations.

The results report individual issues at the family level. The portrayal of intra-familial and inter-familial relations at the family level was found to be at the core of some of the problems that emerged during the performance. The play proved that these relationships were complex, revealing the tensions between the individual, family, and community levels. This emerged from the data because the play deals with many variants of the relationships among the protagonists involved. For example, the relationships between parents and their adult children, parents and future in-laws, and between the children as spouses, each revealed interesting dynamics that the audience responded to.

### **Lateral issues**

#### **Lack of self-confidence among males in communicating their feelings openly to their partners**

In Scene 4, the play was based on a real-life story. The male protagonist was jealous and resentful in response to his wife's growing financial and social success. An act of defiance against the seeming oppression by his wife leads to verbal and physical violence and murder. It evoked a strong reaction whereby the participants rejected his jealous and controlling behavior. They linked his inability to recognize that his jealousy arose from his deep insecurity to individual and societal issues. At the individual level, in terms of explaining the behavior of the husband, the participants reflected that a part of the issue was caused by his inability, perhaps embarrassment and shame, to communicate his feelings of insecurity to and empathize with his wife. Upon further prompting by Mediator 1, a deeper cause, that is, the lack of self-confidence among males in communicating their feelings openly and constructively, was noted.

*“You obviously have to do something with this thought about this insecurity and jealousy. Now...to do that...I mean it is problematic. Maybe he could have actually asked her and then accepted it rather than getting into a whole amplification and that...that initial jealousy amplified. It reminds me of a gargoyle in many ways in Shakespeare...the whispering in his head and given that he was insecure and he felt that he wasn't earning enough and so on...and it takes out all that.”*

*Male participant*

Participants noted the male protagonist's inability to communicate with his partner.



*“The problem is that after feeling jealous and insecure he does not actually vocalize that at any point...he just sort of says, ‘Tell me what’s happening with this guy at work.’”*

### **Vertical issues**

#### **Socialization of sons: Exploring the mother-son-daughter-in-law relationship**

**The highly** favored upbringing of sons/male children over daughters/female children is criticized in the play as it manifests in a number of ways.

*“When a son is born in the family, he is brainwashed literally emotionally that ‘You are my one and only one support, you are going to look after us, you are everything for our family.’”*

#### *Female Participant*

*“It is the mothers who give extra attention to boys ahead of the girls.”*

#### *Male audience member*

*In India, you see a lot of guys sharing a special relationship with their Mum and vice versa ... they are very protective of their sons so when the son (in Australia) actually gets married, the mother gets possessive of the son and he is not able to enjoy his relationship as a husband with his wife.”*

#### *Female Participant*

Socialization of daughters as “guests” in their parental home

The portrayal of intra-familial and inter-familial relations was found to be at the core of some of the traditions that emerged during the performance.

*“.....Girls are always considered like that, she does not belong to this house and mostly mother does that.”*

#### *Female participant*

*“It is a pattern in Indian society. So, the ways in which the boys and girls are brought up is the way in which society is evolved. When a girl grows up, the father starts getting tensed about her marriage as she is an adult.”*

#### *Male participant*

Resolution of vertical relationships between parents/in-laws and kids

A greater level of education has a positive impact. As stated by a female audience member:

*“In today’s world, there are few arguments between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, because they are both educated. Most mothers-in-law do not interfere, but there is no patience in today’s generation.”*

## *Structure of Family Violence*

### *The family matrix: An overhaul of marriage as an arrangement related to social status, including dowry*

An arranged marriage between two reluctant adult children raised issues related to parenting styles, among the audience.

*“... Indian parents believe that if their children do not say no to them, they are good or obedient kids.”*

*Male audience member*

A senior male member of the audience stated that it was the parents' fault, as they forced young girls to get married even when the girls themselves expressed their reluctance to do so, with statements such as “Papa, I don't want to go so far!” He stated that fathers need to put a stop to this, as every father behaved like this. Another male member noted that the *“expectation of submissiveness from children is stunting the progress of Indian culture.”*

*“In the second scene it was the mistake of the parents who finalized their children's marriage without taking permission from their children. Parents should not push their children to get married to the children of their friends.”*

*Male audience member (a self-identified father)*

*“Arranged marriages need to be modernized. Parents should listen to their children.”*

*Male audience member (a self-identified grandfather)*

*Here I can see both parents...they succumb to pressure and they want to do things according to what is expected of them as parents so that they can show off...they can show off saying ‘I have married my daughter to a wealthy guy,’ and on the other side, they can show off saying ‘My son has married someone who has given lot of money to marry off their daughter.’”*

*Male audience member*

There were several occasions during the performances where the actions of the families were driven by the need for high social status. (Scene 2 - Arranged Marriage).

*“Instead he is focusing more on the things that society wants to see. When he is mentioning the boy, he says that Raj's family is rich and that Raj is educated. If Raj is educated, that does not mean he is socially educated. Apart from this, in this scenario, the mother was focusing on dowry.” (Male Participant)*

The audience reflected that one of the issues exacerbating domestic violence was the important role of social status. There were several occasions during the performance where

the actions of the families were driven by the need for high social status. In this case, responsibility was largely apportioned to the parents for seeking to gain social advantage as a consequence of arranging the marriage between their daughter in India and an Australian-Indian resident. In the play, the potential bride's mother tells her reluctant daughter:

*“Why do you object to marrying him? You will live like a queen in Australia!”*

### *Focus on dowry*

Greed featured heavily in the audience's responses to this theme of the play, which drove the decisions and actions of the characters involved. Dowry, initially a gift for the bride, has been increasingly used as an enticer to catch the best groom possible. One audience member, a self-identified father, reflected on the play and spoke about his own daughter's arranged (and rather expensive) marriage to an Australian-Indian groom. He said, *“It is hard to find good boys in India, and people want so much dowry!”* This father approached the lead researcher (MO) in an individual conversation during the afternoon tea and revealed that he, as the bride's father, was primarily responsible for paying for the extravagant wedding celebrations and the dowry demanded by the groom and his family. After the wedding, there were repeated coercive demands for cash by the Australian husband that put him in a precarious financial position. His daughter was subjected to violence when she resisted the demands for more money.

### **Solutions**

The participants recommended that modern Indian women should use their education and resist patriarchal traditions, including dowry.

### *Role of son/husband as a solution to FV in an extended family*

As mentioned in the excerpt, the audience used common sense and suggested that the husband should be supportive of his wife in countering his mother's hostility toward her.

In the third play titled 'Daughter-in-law and extended family' (described under Methodology), the MIL is conscious of her power and flaunts it. She disrupts the emotional bond between the new wife and the son/husband. She encourages her son to interpret his wife's behavior as insolence and entices him to hit her, thus supporting patriarchy. It entails different forms of control by multiple perpetrators and the disempowerment of the DIL around complex family living arrangements. According to a young male audience member, *"We cannot always blame men. Women do it to themselves, as shown in the script."*

*You know, going to your original question of what to look for in a solution. I'm very interested in resolving this incredible issue, and it seemed to me that there's a dynamic with men ... (they) have assumed all sorts of privilege and power, mainly because of being a man ... and a lot of women in a sense have either complied to that... (or) are in cahoots...like the earlier scenes about the arranged marriage, you know, in the sense that they have almost agreed to what the situation is*

*(Senior male participant).*

A female audience member noted that a simple change in language can enable positive communication and diminish barriers: *"Why don't we call our daughters-in-law daughters?"*

### **Challenging female gender norms**

In Scene 2, after the arranged marriage to a reluctant groom, the new bride moves from India to Australia. She suffers rejection, humiliation, criticism, physical violence, and finally abandonment at the hands of her husband. The lack of self-confidence in the new bride affects the portrayal of the woman in the performance. This is largely related to her inability to stand up to her spouse and believe that she can break out of the abusive cycle that she is caught in. The participants noted that as individuals, educated women in situations similar to hers seem to be headed to Australia to lead lives distinct from the one arranged for them, between her parents and in-laws:

*“If the girl is educated enough, and gets out of the house she may meet other people and get help and find solutions. But the first thing that has to be there is from within herself. If she feels that there is something wrong with her, ..... Then she has to find self-confidence and believe that this is not what she wanted. This is not what she came to Australia for. If she takes that one step, then people outside will come forward to help her. But if she is behind those walls, nobody knows. So, the voice has to come from the women.”*

*Female Participant*

The participants commented on the impact of women having greater economic achievement on the traditional power balance.

*“In today’s world, a woman is educated enough and all she needs is to find out what she wants, whether she wants to take up a job or whether she wants to pursue hobbies..... Because right now what she is doing is she is just waiting for her husband to come home, and 12 hours or 13 hours of waiting will just make her frustrated, ~~and~~ so she needs to come out of home.”*

*Female Participant*

### **Lateral issues**

**Lack of self-confidence among males in communicating their feelings openly to their partners**

In Scene 4, the play was based on a real-life story. The male protagonist was jealous and resentful in response to his wife’s growing financial and social success. An act of defiance against the seeming oppression by his wife leads to verbal and physical violence and murder. It evoked a strong reaction whereby the participants rejected his jealous and controlling behavior. They linked his inability to recognize that his jealousy arose from his deep insecurity to individual and societal issues- At the individual level, in terms of explaining the behavior of the husband, the participants reflected that a part of the issue was caused by his inability, perhaps embarrassment and shame, to communicate his feelings of insecurity to and empathize with his wife. Upon further prompting by Mediator 1, a deeper cause, that is, the lack of self-confidence among males in communicating their feelings openly and constructively, was noted.

*“You obviously have to do something with this thought about this insecurity and jealousy. Now...to do that...I mean it is problematic. Maybe he could have actually asked her and then accepted it rather than getting into a whole amplification and that...that initial jealousy amplified. It reminds me of a gargoyle in many ways in*

*Shakespeare...the whispering in his head and given that he was insecure and he felt that he wasn't earning enough and so on...and it takes out all that."*

*Male participant*

Participants noted the male protagonist's inability to communicate with his partner.

*"The problem is that after feeling jealous and insecure he does not actually vocalize that at any point...he just sort of says, 'Tell me what's happening with this guy at work.'"*

### **Vertical issues**

#### **Socialization of sons: Exploring the mother-son-daughter-in-law relationship**

The highly favored upbringing of sons/male children over daughters/female children is criticized in the play as it manifests in a number of ways.

*"When a son is born in the family, he is brainwashed literally emotionally that 'You are my one and only one support, you are going to look after us, you are everything for our family.'"*

*Female Participant*

*"It is the mothers who give extra attention to boys ahead of the girls."*

*Male audience member*

*In India, you see a lot of guys sharing a special relationship with their Mum and vice versa ... they are very protective of their sons so when the son (in Australia) actually gets married, the mother gets possessive of the son and he is not able to enjoy his relationship as a husband with his wife."*

*Female Participant*

Socialization of daughters as "guests" in their parental home

The portrayal of intra-familial and inter-familial relations was found to be at the core of some of the traditions that emerged during the performance.

*".....Girls are always considered like that, she does not belong to this house and mostly mother does that."*

*Female participant*

*"It is a pattern in Indian society. So, the ways in which the boys and girls are brought up is the way in which society is evolved. When a girl grows up, the father starts getting tensed about her marriage as she is an adult."*

*Male participant*

Resolution of vertical relationships between parents/in-laws and kids

A greater level of education has a positive impact. As stated by a female audience member:

*"In today's world, there are few arguments between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, because they are both educated. Most mothers-in-law do not interfere, but there is no patience in today's generation."*

### *Challenging male gender norms*

As a solution, the audience suggested a number of ideas. At the individual level, the community suggested that individuals do have a choice to prescribe the ownership of the abovementioned issues and seek help. The barrier to change, as noted by the participants, was the reluctance on part of the men to seek help, a notion that has been constantly enforced through social notions of masculinity. Help-seeking for mental health issues comes with the risk of bringing not only shame on oneself, but also disgrace to one's entire family. As a solution, the audience noted the strong role of the media in promoting positive images of men seeking help and that groups led by men may be better accepted as a result. They said that peer groups and the media have important roles to play in effecting this change:

*"I think it is also really important to acknowledge the fact that men...if they already have these issues and if they have already been brought up with...you know...this idea of I am better than a woman then it is going to be very difficult for them to take lessons, instructions, and advice from a woman...So I think we really need to look at having males doing group sessions where it is just all males talking to males."*

### *Going upstream*

#### *Solutions aimed at parents*

For parents, the audience recommended positive parenting skills wherein children will be imbued with notions of equal respect and empathy for boys and girls without discrimination.

#### *Education: The role of schools and the media*

Central to this process of empowerment is the educational system, and social structures such as the media, childcare centers, and the ability to frame and inform change in individual attitudes.

*..... we also have to probably think about teacher education to equip our teachers to be able to deliver this kind of work and... most important thing is to educate girls to have access to high-status jobs because once they are economically independent, they will actually naturally embark on a process of self-consciousness and...economically independent women always change the dynamic in the family naturally, so I think these are issues that can help*

#### *Female Participant*

*"That is very much what I was thinking along the lines of...the role of the media to give men permission to [say] that it is okay to seek help too, that it is not weak to seek help."*

## Discussion

### Community perception of key issues

There is a growing awareness of the need to engage communities meaningfully in efforts toward tackling FV and its allied challenges [42]. This article shows how workshops are a powerful means to tap into a community's perceptions of key issues. Professional facilitators are successful in leading participants through a carefully planned agenda of research questions using the medium of theater. As this was a group mainly from North India, despite the linguistic diversity, the group shared a common cultural outlook. In this way, there was common ground in the expression of views about family life in natural settings. The community representative group were able to share these common perceptions and understandings of family interactions and why, how, and where these interactions may turn to violence against women. Hence, engagement with the entire community will occur as themes so developed will resonate with the target audience of the same community and generate informed debate [43].

### Interactive Community Theater

Interactive Community Theater occurs in community-based locations and is motivated by a desire to generate social change. It is a strong method to elicit people's beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes around an issue that generally seem to influence their behavior and help shape events. Thus, underlying factors that predispose, precipitate, and perpetuate FV were elicited through spontaneous dialogue. These themes seem to be encompassed in an ecological framework such as the one advanced by Lori Heise in her ecological model of gender-based violence, in which the violence is conceptualized as a multifaceted interplay between personal, family, situational, and socio-cultural factors with embedded levels of causality [31].



It comes as no surprise that given the family's central value for Indian society [44], the participants elaborated on how the family unit in their communities rested on a number of interacting cultural imperatives that can each be a target for change. At the family level, the findings highlight and extend the observations by Sharma [45] and Rao [46] that social and cultural norms influence the type of relationships between mother and son, and mother and daughter, and thereby, there exists pervasive gender inequality. One of the strong themes emerging from the data has to do with how these relationships manifest in future expectations and abusive behaviors toward women [47].

### Influences on FV in Indian immigrants

The dialogue with the audience revealed causal factors that appear to influence, and/or exacerbate FV as portrayed in the performances, in Indian homes. These factors are largely interlinked among individual, family, social, legal, and broader socio-cultural norms. This is described below.

### Vertical issues

#### *Socialization of sons: Exploring the mother-son-daughter-in-law relationship*

The play depicting complex family living arrangements exposes the implications of patrilineal and patrilocal systems in Australia and echoes the earlier findings of Sonawat in India [48]. It comes as no surprise that a daughter-in-law's relocation to her husband's extended family home weakens her position. Among immigrant groups in North America, the bride of an expatriate Indian husband relocates (migrates) to her husband's family [49]. The play identifies that in a family violence situation in an extended family, a Among Indian groups in Australia, one tends to find a strong mother-son relationship and insufficient support by her husband, to some extent as a continuation of traditional cultural patterns after resettlement. This is similar to the situation reported among Asian immigrants in the United

States [50]. The finding in Australia that the husband is socialized to be emotionally closer to his mother than his wife also echo similar findings reported in India [51].

### *Socialization of daughters as “guests” in the parents’ home*

Gender always influences human development, and this is particularly true in Indian society, where it is an “added layer of social stratification” [46]. This is exactly what emerged according to the audience, which highlighted the manner in which the female is put at a level of disadvantage from birth. A daughter is a guest in her parents’ home. A woman receives social respect after marriage. Bloch, Rao, and Desai [52] state that “a daughter’s prime destiny is to get married and it is every parent’s prime duty to get their daughter married. An older unmarried daughter is seen as misfortune and a great social cost.” Young women married at young ages are shown to be more vulnerable to FV, especially where the parents hand over responsibility for the daughter to husband and in-laws after marriage. As it is in India, where as an adult she must relocate to her rightful home (that of her husband’s), the sooner the better [45], the Australian participants also showed that these traditions do not die away.

### *Overhaul of marriage as an arrangement related to social status, including dowry*

In India, parents traditionally desire for their daughters to “marry up” and raise their social status [52]. Thus, the young woman might end up being sent to marry a groom who has settled in Australia with a presumably higher social status and may have attained Australian residency. This groom, supported structurally by the sponsorship policies of the immigration system, holds most of the power. The audience had concerns about this sort of scenario in the play depicting domestic violence. These women may even face the dismal prospect of being sent back to India if they are found to be too submissive or conversely too assertive for the husband and his family. The National Commission of Women (India) reports that as many as 20,000 abandoned brides – “disposable women”— are living in India today [53].

## Lateral: Role of the son/husband as a solution to FV in an extended family

Family violence in India is associated with family constellations in which wives feel unsupported by their husbands and “hurtful mothers-in-law,” and conversely, marital satisfaction comes in the wake of a husband and family supporting the wife [54-56]. The findings of interactive community work highlight the importance of enlarging the focus on the in-laws. They may either directly or indirectly through a third party use emotional violence with systematic and hurtful verbal attacks. They may also show a total lack of interest and engagement with their daughters-in-law and shape their social exclusion from the local community. In the third play, the mother-in-law is quite conscious of her power and flaunts it, which is a phenomenon identified by Kandiyoti [57] as “bargaining with patriarchy,” in which women are rewarded by power and options in return for their accommodation to and acceptance of patriarchy. On an optimistic note, bargaining with patriarchy is susceptible to transformation, as new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between the genders emerge alongside migration, both of which challenge traditional roles [10]. The participants, who were largely Hindi speakers, suggest how simple changes in language can make a difference, for example, calling one’s “daughter-in-law” (*bahu*) as “daughter” (*beti*), and programs such as those reported by Krishnan [55, 56] which aim to enhance the relationships between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law can yield benefits by participating in combined activities outside the home .

### *Challenging male gender norms -Individual*

The theater performance opened up the dialogue on potential solutions. It would seem that individuals do have a choice: rather than being stuck as victims of hegemonic masculinity [58], men can “lean in” and take ownership and engage in help-seeking behavior, besides transforming the attitudes and behaviors of other men through change programs run by male peers [59] and by seeking help for mental health issues as described below. On the other side of the equation, however, the barrier to change as noted by the participants was the

reluctance of men to seek help, which probably has to do with “caveman” social notions of masculinity. In other words, men play roles that are understood as requiring them to be physically fit and self-reliant, besides being the breadwinner of the family [60]. Remarkably, the participants noted that men would be better off getting help and feeling empowered in their own lives, rather than having to seek power through abusing their wives. The men who cannot rise above hitting their wives actually remain at a disadvantage [61], continuing to suffer emotionally and physically, while acting out the script of hegemonic masculinity despite personal vulnerabilities. The cultural barrier in such situations is that help-seeking for mental health issues brings with it the fear of shame on oneself and disgrace to the entire family. As a solution, the audience noted the strong role of the media in promoting positive images of men seeking help and that groups led by men may be better accepted and better suited to change hegemonic gender norms and hegemonic masculinity [62].

The final and fourth play presents events that trigger episodes of violence and homicide in a context of professional and sexual jealousy. Having a joint bank account has symbolic value and practical benefit. On the one hand, the joint account expresses family unity, partnership, and strength; on the other, it shows how the man, as an expression of his hegemonic masculinity, holds onto power and control over his wife’s autonomy [63]. Therein lies the problem. According to Singh and Bhandari [63], “money management” and the exercise of financial power is an expression of masculinity and, as Simister and Mehta [64] argue, that women have become progressively more educated and liberated and with subsequent threat to traditional gender roles since the 1990s. At least some men have responded to this change in the women around them with gender-based violence. In responding to the play, a good number of the participants in Australia echoed this sentiment,

noting that as women become more financially independent, some may evoke a backlash, with more vulnerability to violence in the home.

Another challenge for traditional gender roles has to do with what Vandello and Cohen [65] depicted as male honor and female fidelity. In their study of Brazilian “honor culture,” they concluded that a man who perceived his wife as having betrayed him would feel compelled to react with physical violence toward her as a way of asserting his masculinity – and, paradoxically, his love and to restore his honor. The case is similar in the traditional Indian patriarchal society, which is also fueled by honor. Women have learned that they should remain loyal and to stay with their husbands despite all the violence they face. [14]. In the play, the mediators did not delve into the act of homicide arising out of jealousy per se but to avoid anxiety and defensiveness in the audience, they turned the conversation to focus on violence prevention strategies [66]. The result was a rich discussion around men’s barriers to owning their feelings of insecurity. The audience also noted the lack of self-confidence among males in communicating their feelings openly and constructively.

Gender is multi-dimensional [42, 67] and alternative expressions of masculinity are possible and may have to be learned. The community audience proposed workshops led by men for the men in the community, based on the principles of Men’s Behaviour Change Programs (Victorian Government 2009), to reduce barriers to seeking professional support [60] among men.

### *Challenging female gender norms*

Enhanced economic achievement of women [68] over time coupled with greater access to social resources can undermine the traditional power balance in a marriage. This is exactly what was highlighted by the participants. The women, too, may feel paralyzed. For example, educated women faced problems as a result of their immigration status, particularly those of having very few rights, having no social networks, and having limited financial

resources, besides facing FV. Such women may feel “dumbed down.” As suggested by the participants, women in such situations can and should embrace their capacities in the use of technology, for example, to reach out to members of their community and to government services. However, this suggestion may be inadequate in situations where women may face varying kinds of technological abuse, such as controlling behaviors and isolation by cutting off access to technology, or listening in on conversations.

### *Going upstream*

For parents, the audience recommended positive parenting skills, wherein children are to be imbued with notions of equal respect and empathy for boys and girls without discrimination, valuing all members of the family equally, and challenging gender norms by setting limits through authoritarian parenting [69]. As suggested by the audience, all immigrant parents of children should receive training in parenting skills and in understanding social factors such as the abuse of power in communal settings.

### *Individuals can challenge gender norms assigned to men and women*

The female participants responded strongly to the play depicting the woman earning more than her partner. They remarked that the process of resettlement challenges the relevance and utility of family traditions such as the masculine gender norms in which the male is the provider who is in charge. These women were critical of such norms, which, as Jacobsen [70] highlights in the Cambodian case, can spur change and transformation. Younger male audience members echoed this sentiment. They considered individual empowerment and independence of thought among children as an essential step to creating eventual change in the collectivist extended family culture, and as inevitably breaking away from the traditional family system. In this way, the women gave vent to the sentiment that what might have worked in mid-20th Century India no longer worked in the context of the contemporary 21st Century Indian Diaspora in Australia.

Benjenyan et al. found [71] evidence that in the United Kingdom, the second generation immigrants in collectivist cultures chose to continue the tradition of arranged marriages, and partners were chosen according to parental and elders' choices. This can lead to an ambivalent relationship with their intimate partners, while maintaining strong ties with their extended families. Thus, while strong commitment and trust in parents' choices is noted on the one hand, a weak investment in the marital relationship is found on the other. The audience for this play displayed independent thinking, indicating that the younger generation is keen on changing cultural ideology. In the second play, one of the most prominent issues discussed was the culture of arranged marriage in contrast with the Western system of love marriage. Younger participants were in favor of having the freedom to choose their partner based on love rather than duty. In saying this, they did not ignore the problems inherent in the Western approach, but at least they wanted the freedom to choose. The older men in the audience were highly critical of open-slasher free choice, citing the very high divorce rates in Western societies. The senior men thought that it was better to continue the arranged marriage system while allowing the prospective brides and groom the space they needed to express their choices. This tension between the preferences of the elderly men and the young people shows what Bejanyan et al. described as the relationship between commitment, passion, and mate preferences in the light of opposing roles of parental influence and what they term as family allocentrism or stronger family ties [71]. Intergenerational tensions concerning allocentrism and freedom of choice call for further study to elucidate how women and young people can be empowered without unnecessarily tearing the cultural fabric.

## Dowry

Dowry has been described as a toxic mix of patriarchy and greed by Babu and Babu [72]. The inducements include enhancement of the groom's power, display of social status by the families of the bride and groom, and material gain for the groom and his family, which

maintains the dowry system and transforms it from being about simple gifts for the bride to an ostentatious display of goods and gold for the groom and his family that are worth more than the family income [52]. One author's (MO) clinical experience in Australia documents hundreds of cases in which families have relinquished hundreds of thousands of dollars, worth many times their annual income, for each daughter's marriage in India to an Australian-Indian groom and have gone into debt and, sometimes, poverty [73].

The abuse of dowry practice has serious mental health consequences [74, 75]. Dowry-related murders and suicides, described as dowry deaths, are common in India [76] and have been spoken about in recent times in Australia [77]. The audience clearly echoed the clamor of calls to proclaim dowry abuse a crime in Australia, going so far as to describe it as an entrenched harmful traditional practice and a public health hazard [72].

India proclaimed dowry giving and taking illegal in 1961. In Australia, the 2016 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence recommended a law for Victoria to stop dowry-related abuse (Chapter 5, Recommendation 156). The audience in this play was familiar with the Indian laws and supported the application of this recommendation. The draft Bill explaining the new anti-dowry-abuse laws was passed unanimously in the Parliament of Victoria on 7 August 2018. [78]. According to the new law (due for proclamation in June 2019) any form of abuse associated with dowry will trigger the Family Violence Protection Act of Victoria. However, such laws cannot transform normative expectations on their own and will need strong community endorsement and participation. As Heise pointed out, interventions that aim at shifting social norms are more effective than those that only address individual attitudes and behaviors [79], and this where the CPT plays a powerful role in creating room for transformation.



## Five ecological factors that underpin FV

The interactive theater discourse facilitates a reflection on the community's new and old values and brings to light the ecology of violence against women [80]. The chorus of participants unabashedly identified the complex system in which FV and culture collide. From the data, we propose five factors that underpin FV in the Indian immigrant community in Australia, and which, as in the US studies [50], show continuities with the situation in the home country.

### Factor 1: The birth of a daughter is seen as unfavorable

Birth of a daughter is considered not to be as favorable as that of a son. Although a significant event, the birth of a daughter is often received negatively. Traditionally, a daughter is only ever viewed as a guest in her parents' home. Her birth is not rejoiced [46], as expressed in the question, "Why don't we distribute sweets when a daughter is born?" This is partly because female children are not seen as part of the family but are viewed as transients. Another reason is the unwelcome burden of marriage and dowry. The expense of dowry is largely due to gold, which is traditionally considered an integral part of it. Confirming the burden of dowry felt by parents of girl children, Bhalotra, Chakravati, and Gulesci [81] have shown the association between the rising of price of gold and that of female feticide in India, thus demonstrating that the birth of a daughter is an unwelcome event.

The birth of a son, in contrast to the birth of a daughter, is treated like winning a lottery. The arrival of a son is celebrated [82], and his status is exalted, giving rise to unearned care and pampering. This unequal treatment of boys and girls starts early in their life and is an example of what was been termed the 'pampered child syndrome' [83]. Narcissistic qualities include grandiose views of the self, an inflated sense of entitlement, and exploitive attitudes toward others [84]. The audience in our study observed the prevalence of

this unequal treatment, noting that the quality of childcare given to boys is higher, which in turn gave rise to a sense of entitlement in sons. There are significant consequences when this beloved boy grows to marriageable age. The groom's mother, as seen in the play, expects and demands dowry as large amounts of cash from the bride's family. This 'building up' of the young man does him no good because, as the findings in the responses to the last play show, these sons, beneath their inflated and narcissistic exterior, can be vulnerable to being tipped into low self-esteem, an observation that tallies with the Danish findings [85]. In thinking about how to redress the imbalance, child-rearing of boys and girls with a greater degree of congruence over matters such as entitlement, culpability and responsibility was the target recommended by the audience – seemingly fathers as well as mothers.

#### Factor 2: Wives and daughters are considered the symbol of familial honor

Family honor defined by woman's chastity or her reputation for being chaste and the quality of knowing and doing what is morally right is placed on women's shoulders to maintain the name of the family. As noted by Vandello and Cohen [65] the honor of the family goes through the female. It is a positive power for the family when a daughter marries up. Traditionally, the view is that a daughter must be married and relocated to her "rightful home," which is her husband's home, according to patrilocal customs, as soon as possible. As stated by a young woman of marriageable age responding to the play where the woman did not want to enter an arranged marriage and be sent to Australia, "When the daughter is grown up father starts to get tensed." This leads to worry and desperation if a daughter remains unmarried, is single, and is living at home with her parents [86]. To that extent, her parents must dutifully try to arrange the best possible marriage for their daughter in a highly competitive and tight marriage market with a shortage of good-quality grooms. Parents in India, irrespective of religion and caste, often resort to the use of dowry as an enticer [87]. They arrange their daughter's marriage as soon as possible, even to a man who may live as

far away as in Australia, giving rise to the potential for a number of intersecting vulnerabilities [9, 88, 89], including economic disempowerment and intra-household inequality, and immigration status as a sponsored partner in Australia. A temporary visa can be withdrawn at the whim of the sponsor without the knowledge of the spouse according to the rules of immigration. This renders the new bride highly vulnerable and she can be declared an illegal citizen at any time. An increasing number of new brides are being deported back to India from a number of Western countries and Australia, and constitutes a new problem that creates abandoned brides and disposable women [90]. Social isolation is a factor common to all immigrants and further enforces the imbalance of power between the genders. Patriarchy dictates that any betrayal by daughter or wife must be dealt with physical violence and even murder to restore honor. The women learn to stay within the tightly prescribed notions of honorable behavior. Daughters remain chaste and give in to the custom of arranged marriage denying love marriage and wives remain loyal to the husbands even in the face of violence.

### Factor 3 - Arranging the best possible marriage for daughters, as soon as is practical.

A father from India visiting his daughter speaks in an individual interview about why he arranged a marriage for his daughter in India to a man in Australia, "*There aren't enough good boys in India.*". In a bid to maximize opportunities to secure a good marriage for their daughter, to a groom of a higher social class (such as the one conferred by residency of Australia), parents are willing to pay more than the maximum amount of dowry or groom-price that they can afford. In addition by making big payments for extravagant wedding celebrations that can go on for three or four days, parents display their social status while depriving themselves of their life savings. The net result is an exorbitant financial layout and a burden amounting to vastly more than the annual income of the family, some say six times the family assets [52, 91]

#### Factor 4 - The daughter-in-law is seen as an outsider, representing another “sub-culture”

The daughter-in-law is seen as an outsider, representing another sub-culture.

Sons live with parents and daughters-in-law follow. As seen in play 3, the daughter-in-law is the outsider, excluded from family conversations and subjected to menial treatment. This trend is also observed in Bangladeshi families by Alyson Callan [92] where the woman after marriage is always regarded as an outsider. The participants suggested change in language can make a difference. Daughters-in-law (bahu) should *be called 'beti' or a daughter* and treated as such. And “*Husband should be his wife's back*”. Callan notes how he should support her in her new home where she is unfairly expected to learn the rules instantly without expectation of help from husband or mother-in-law, and this can lead to adjustment disorder with depression and anxiety and suicidality because ‘agency is asymmetrically distributed’ (p.97). The new daughter-in-law is powerless. As in Bangladesh, in India marriage to NRI or nonresident Indian settled abroad in Australia raises their social status but further undermines her agency. Isolation, lack of social networks and knowledge of local resources further places her on the outer. As a solution the participants suggest enhanced motivation to use her education, modern technology to reach out for help.

#### Factor 5: Daughter-in-law is a threat to the close mother-son bond

A son lives with his family of origin, brings home a wife and dowry, and she serves and takes care of his extended family. A daughter-in-law is perceived as a threat to the mother’s close relationship with her son. In classical patriarchy, women are individually and collectively oppressed. Within that system, women come to identify sources of empowerment [57] giving rise to and potentiating the abuse of women by other women, in this case the mother-in-law over her daughter-in-law [55], a situation that Kandiyoti famously termed the “patriarchal bargain” [57]. In a recent study by Sardinha and Catalábeen [93], women’s justification of violence against women was found to be high in developing nations,

especially in South and South East Asian countries. The continuity of cultural practices is made evident by the participants. Taking this further, the structure of the Indian household in Australia is not conducive to the development of a strong relationship between the husband and wife [71]. For an elderly mother, her son is the major source of social, moral and financial support, and naturally she would be inclined to view her daughter-in-law as a rival vying for the attention and love she craves from her son. As a first step to a solution, the participants felt that the husband could do more:

*“He needs to be her back.” (Female participant)*

However, the participants appreciated that this was no easy matter. Perhaps the young groom should stand by his bride in the face of the barrage of bullying, servility, and social exclusion she faced at the hands of her mother-in-law, but there were also limits on the extent to which her hapless husband could be emboldened to stand up to his own mother [88].

### Strengths and weaknesses

The strength of the study lies in the fact that the medium of participatory theater helped externalize and concertize the complex problem and facilitated strong engagement among participants during the workshops and between the participants and the stage during the performances. The comments by the audience were spontaneous and as men and women explored the solutions to the multi-layered problem together, it gave rise to rich material that reflected realistic life. As one participant noted, “This is not just a performance for any of us. It is all real.” The process of theater-making as an intervention, thus, became, in the words of Woodson et al., a method of “sharing cultural truths and understandings” [29]. Interactive theater can indeed help us understand domestic violence [94]. An impact study would be useful to determine whether the participants perceived it as an efficient mode. The discourse on drivers of and solutions to FV in this study is limited by the number of scenarios presented on stage. This is not to suggest that these scenarios are the only ones that can be found in the

Australian-Indian community. They represent key issues raised by the community volunteers during six workshops and resonated with community audiences.

Another strong point in this project was that it displayed narratives and concept from the simple to the complex, in diverse settings and thus has a wide variety of possible applications.

The presence of external participants, for example, a small number of Caucasian participants including the theater director (RB), can be criticized on grounds of being voyeuristic in nature. However, it was truly an asset. RB is a Caucasian theater director and that identity helped the participants to appreciate the universality of FV. Two Sri Lankan participants / actors who played key roles in the development of the themes and plays in the workshop conveyed the commonality of issues between Sri Lankan and Indian cultures. The audiences largely comprised people of Indian origin, who identified and engaged strongly with all the stories presented. The strength of the project was also derived from the leadership involved in its execution, each representing varied disciplines such as theater, cultural expertise and education (PS), clinical expertise on gender-based violence in ASA communities (MO). Their presence helped the multi-dimensional development of the plays.

This study has a few limitations, as well. The sample size is small. Further, the cultural heterogeneity within the community of Indians in Australia has not been addressed. The generalizability of the study, given the limited sample size, remains a question. Further, one cannot ignore the fact that non-Indian participants were also part of the audience and may have impacted the responses shared. The sensitive nature of the subject matter and the in-depth exploration of family related issues and FV may have constrained participation due to the social stigma and silencing of survivors. For example, some women expressed an interest to participate, but withdrew their names. Male and female participation together may have

inhibited some women from speaking out. The presence of senior men and women may have inhibited younger women. It is possible that the medium of theater may have helped overcome such inhibitions.

The issues raised were complex and discussions were sometimes limited due to time constraints. There may have been other views or solutions representing the position of women and men in relation to social norms that were not expressed. For example, having both men and women together may have posed as a barrier for some women to express themselves fully, while having younger and older women together may have been a barrier for some younger women who may be daughters-in-law of the older women in the room. Filming the session may have influenced some of the participants negatively. However, on the positive side there was intensive engagement of the audience and the workshop participants/actors over the entire period of 12 weeks. Theater acted as a powerful means of concretizing a problem that for many remains obscure. Perhaps the most powerful community endorsement of the process came from a South Indian journalist who reported in the Indian Australian online magazine [94], “And as we watch marriage being treated as an obligation and financial investment, women disempowered by both men and other women, and men allowing their insecurities to build up until they become deadly, we recognize what’s happening. This is not just a performance for any of us. It’s all real.” Culture itself can become an asset and key intervention [29].

## Conclusions

CPT acts as a powerful medium to offer clarifications around the complex issue of FV. The live performance of scenes representing family relations with gender-based themes serve to concretize the assumptions and thoughts rather than leaving them as abstract ideas [95]. By engaging the audience, this form of action research has the potential to transform social understanding and effect social change. For example, showing their support for the

new anti-dowry abuse amendments to the Family Violence Protection Bill, 2008 the community indicated the future success of the implementation of the new legislation [78]. A close relationship between academics, practitioners, and community members of the Indian community enhanced the understanding of FV [96], and exposed five underlying cultural factors. Community-based research is a useful strategy in developing interventions and solutions to address the unique community needs of the Indian immigrant community in Australia.

Theater performance tells a story and depicts a familiar world in a way that enhances the shared experience of the audience [95]. CPT draws upon the principles and traditions of Forum Theatre espoused by Boal [40]. The line between the audience and the actors is blurred and the audience is invited to cross that line and tell their version of the story with the actors, thereby leading to the members of the audience acquiring a certain authority. As Stuttaford declares in the setting of South Africa, they are the experts as they draw upon their expertise relating to the presented events. Although most participants were of Indian origin, the findings are generalizable to the Sri Lankan community . The strong cultural ties of Sri Lankan Tamils to South India , a practice of a similar patriarchal extended family system, where arranged marriages are the norm and dowry abuse is documented [38].

CPT is an innovative approach to community-based research on seeking to find solutions to FV. Further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of the solutions and interventions proposed in this study. Research is also needed to investigate the potential of theater as a method to finding solutions to FV in other immigrant communities

### Conflict of interest

The lead author is one of the co-founders of the community organization, the Australasian



Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH). As an Indian immigrant, arriving in Australia in 1971, and married into a Western family, she observed and learned the differences between eastern and Western family systems and cultures. The lead author also developed theories around the strengths and weaknesses of both cultures by commuting to and working in India since 2005. The role played by the lead author in this study was one of a participant-observer. Many of the questions addressed in this study emerged through the lead author's periodic work in India and her work with South Asian victims, in particular those from India, in Australia. The method of study, that is, participatory community theater, utilizes the experiences of the community, while placing the researcher within and outside the community simultaneously.

### List of Abbreviations

FV – Family Violence

PAR – Participatory Action Research

CPT – Community Participatory Theater

### Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethics approval was obtained from The Melbourne Clinic Research Ethics Committee, project number 264/2015. All workshop participants signed their informed consent to be videotaped and all conversations were recorded over the entire period of six weeks. The community audiences were informed about the performance being filmed, the voluntary nature of their participation, their freedom to walk out at any time, and the freedom to stay on during the performance but not be filmed. The collective audience consent was sought verbally and videotaped before each performance. One senior citizen informed us of her decision to not have her contribution recorded. Her face was blurred and voice edited out.

Consent for publication: Participants were informed that this was a research project. They were given verbal information to explain the meaning of the research in this context. They were informed that their discussions will be transcribed, analyzed, and published and made available to all participants through the NGO ACHRH website [www.achrh.org](http://www.achrh.org).

Availability of data and material: All transcribed materials are available on request and an edited version of the videotape can be found on the ACHRH website ([www.achrh.org](http://www.achrh.org)).

Competing interests: The lead author is a member of the Australian-Indian community. The lead author is also the co-founder of the NGO, the Australian Centre for Human Rights and Health, which is a community organization that is active in the prevention of family violence in Indian and South Asian immigrant communities.

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Authors' contributions: MO assisted in running the workshops and collected the data. ME provided the cultural framework and contributed to the interpretation of the data.

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