

To whom it may concern,

My name is Naomi Selvaratnam, I'm a journalist who has covered the issue of dowry for the last five years. I was contacted by the Department of the Senate with a request to provide a submission, which I am providing below.

Through my work, I have travelled throughout both India and Australia to document the stories of women who have experienced dowry violence, the families of women killed as a result of dowry, as well as lawmakers. It's important to note that my research into dowry is focused purely on its prevalence in South Asian communities.

From my work in this area, I have found that while dowry is not widespread, it does occur in marriages in South Asian communities. Most alarmingly, in those marriages where a dowry was taken, family violence (either physical and emotional) featured prominently. Many women told me they felt like commodities in their marriages, leaving them extremely vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment.

I want to also note that there is a significant reluctance within many South Asian communities to speak about the fact that dowry is still being exchanged in some families, particularly among communities that have migrated to Australia. However, many leaders from these communities in Australia will deny that the practice is occurring, to the detriment of the communities they serve. I believe this reluctance to acknowledge the issue is what has led to the practice becoming even more pernicious – I strongly recommend that community education must be a central part of the process of eradicating dowry in Australia. Without open acknowledgement of the issue, it will continue to spread throughout migrant communities in Australia- and a central part of this is dealing directly with leaders and the broader community to ensure that they aren't simply sweeping this issue under the rug.

While dowry is illegal in India, often families will not openly advertise the fact that they are seeking a dowry in the process of finding a bride. I conducted several interviews with people who would only discuss the idea that they were seeking a dowry as conversations developed. It's a known fact that dowry is socially frowned upon among most south Asian communities, so is instead exchanged covertly. In many cases the dowry would be claimed through extravagant gifts of jewellery, gold and clothes, and not simply through money.

There are several cultural factors that make the exchange of dowry particularly dangerous. When speaking to victims of dowry violence both in Australia and across India, I found that many were deeply ashamed that their marriages had failed- in South Asian communities, divorce carries a significant social stigma and can lead to a bride being ostracised from her community. As a result, many will choose to put up with abuse from her husband and in-laws, along with the escalating demands for dowry. I am yet to see a case where a dowry was taken, and the demands simply ended there. Usually, taking a dowry from the outset leads to the bride receiving repeated and unending requests for more money, gifts and jewellery throughout the marriage. It opens her up to a cycle of emotional and sometimes physical abuse that is difficult to end.

Crucially, I also believe that education of police nationally will have significant benefits. Most of the women I spoke to while researching this issue noted that when they experienced abuse and approached the police, many officers didn't know what a dowry was, and it led to further confusion. In some cases, the police would dismiss the woman's complaints as a 'property dispute' and failed to

recognise that it was symptomatic of abuse. I believe it is vital that police nationally receive training or at the very least, some basic information about dowry. It will help to ensure that when a woman contacts the police, her claim will be taken seriously. I also believe that interpreters need to be present where required- and some of the women I interviewed told me that when they called the police, they were unable to communicate with the officers due to a lack of English skills, leaving them vulnerable.

While I do applaud the fact that Victoria is changing the law to recognise dowry as a form of abuse, I am not confident that this alone will prevent or end abuse for women. The move to recognise dowry under the law has great significance but needs to be paired with community education and cultural changes to have true impact. I believe what is crucial is legal change in conjunction with community education about family violence.

Thank you for your consideration. Should you require any further information, feel free to get in touch.

Warm regards,

Naomi Selvaratnam