

HPSP FACT SHEET

DOWRY BASED ABUSE



HARMFUL PRACTICES: DEFINITION AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Harmful Practices are forms of violence which have been committed primarily against women and girls in communities and societies for so long that they are considered, or presented by perpetrators, as part of accepted 'cultural' practice. In these cases, religion, culture, patriarchal codes of behaviour and perceived notions of 'honour' are used by one or more perpetrators as an excuse for coercive control, threats and abuse. The most common are forced or early marriage, so called 'honour' based violence, female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) and other lesser reported forms such as faith-based abuse, menstrual huts, acid attacks, so called 'corrective' rape and others. Harmful practices occur across all sexes, sexual identities and genders. They are not unique to a culture or religion. Often one and more forms of harmful practices occur at the same time, escalating risks and resulting in barriers to disclosure.

The notion of 'honour' is as relevant in broader discussions on coercive control and other forms of violence against women and girls globally. It is important that we understand this continuum while distinctively understanding the specific risks (such as multiple perpetrators) and needs of women from BME backgrounds who experience so called 'honour' based abuse and harmful practices. In the UK 'honour' based abuse and harmful practices definitions are shaped by the experiences of global majority/BME women's barriers to access, institutional racism and the specific contexts of escalation of risk in migrant and diaspora communities. Therefore, within the multiagency coordinated community response model of domestic abuse, harmful practices and so called 'honour' based abuse response is more effective when defined, informed and delivered by led by and for BME/global majority women's organizations.

WHAT IS DOWRY?

Dowry is a payment, such as property, money, or gifts paid by the bride's family to the groom or his family at the time of marriage. This not a voluntary exchange of gifts but done on demand or masked coercion as well as in the name of social/cultural norms. It is a major form of violence against women and girls in South Asia and other parts of the world. In India, where cases are disproportionately high, dowry demand and related abuse within 7 years of a marriage falls within the remit of a crime[1].

HPSP FACT SHEET

DOWRY BASED ABUSE



WHAT IS DOWRY BASED ABUSE?

Dowry based abuse refers to: any act of coercion, violence or harassment associated with the giving or receiving of a dowry at any time before, during or after marriage.

Dowry-related abuse commonly involves claims that dowry was not paid and coercive demands for further money or gifts from a woman and her family. This abuse may take the form of retaliation or shaming against the bride and her family, sometimes with the involvement and abetment by family and community.

The prevalence of dowry related abuse is therefore difficult to estimate as it is a hidden crime mostly carried out behind closed doors[2]. From emotional humiliation to physical abuse, it can lead to several other extreme outcomes, such as:

- Written or verbal threats of death.
- Marital rape.
- Different forms of abuse from more than one perpetrator.
- Character assassination and shaming.
- Transnational marriage abandonment.
- Passport taken away (if arrived from abroad).
- Abandonment of the woman with her children.
- Setting the bride on fire.
- Acid attacks.
- Attacks on family and community.
- Death by suicide.

It is very important to note that cases of dowry-based abuse (including 'honour'-based abuse and forced marriages) are largely under reported. Perpetrators and involved communities often make efforts to ensure these crimes are kept hidden and many incidents may never be reported.

Underreporting of dowry-related violence is further complicated when such deaths or injuries are misrepresented as merely kitchen accidents or suicides. Despite the scale of offences highlighted, this type of abuse is not officially recognised as a specific recorded crime category.

HPSP FACT SHEET

DOWRY BASED ABUSE



Many by and for agencies and IDVA services that are trained in asking questions around dowry based abuse report that it is prevalent among the diaspora and migrant communities in UK, and is often seen in conjunction with other forms of harmful practices such as 'honour'- based abuse, acid attacks, forced marriage etc.

WARNING SIGNS AND INDICATORS

- Survivors talking about undue pressure to get money from natal family and threats.
- Being starving, isolated and treated badly for not bringing enough dowry.
- No control over own income, money or jewellery.
- Acting withdrawn or upset.
- Depression, self-harm or suicidal attempts.
- Significant personality changes may become evident.
- Unexplained absence at work or any regular gathering.
- Unexplained poor performance at work.
- There may be noticeable deterioration in the victim's appearance, a lack of grooming.
- Physical injuries apparent, often frequent injuries, with the victim explaining them away as 'accidental'.
- High number of phone calls from family members or their spouse. They may look uncomfortable taking the calls, quiet and withdrawn afterwards. Hypervigilance and being accompanied to appointments.
- They may dress unusually to disguise bruises or injuries i.e., neck scarf in hot weather.
- Worry or fear of not being believed.
- Not allowed to learn a local language to communicate.
- Sudden travel arrangements to 'home' country.
- Their movements at home are strictly controlled.
- Family rows.
- Running away from home.
- A family history of female relatives going missing or harassed.

HPSP FACT SHEET

DOWRY BASED ABUSE



DOS AND DONT'S

DO:

- Follow the ONE Chance rule - this may be the only opportunity you have to speak to the victim.
- Be trauma informed in approach and led by survivors as they are experts by experience.
- Take them seriously and be patient in understanding the dynamics of power and risks.
- Consider that there may be multiple perpetrators.
- Listen to what the victim wants to happen and be honest if you will need to break their confidentiality.
- Establish safe means of contact.
- Do safety planning and recognise survivors are experts by experience.
- If under 18, follow child safeguarding procedures.
- If over 18, follow adult safeguarding procedures.
- If over 16 consider a MARAC referral and follow child safeguarding procedures.
- Offer specialist by and for support where possible (see agency details below).
- Be extremely careful how information is recorded and shielded within your organisation.
- **ALWAYS REMEMBER - IN AN EMERGENCY DIAL 999.**

DONT'S:

- Attempt to mediate.
- Send them away.
- Let the family, community or social network know about the disclosure.
- Meet in a place where you could be seen by a member of the family/ community
- Use members of the family or community to interpret.
- Underestimate the perpetrator/s of DBV.
- Underestimate the risk even if there have been no previous reports - DBA can escalate very quickly.

HPSP FACT SHEET

DOWRY BASED ABUSE



AGENCIES

Karma Nirvana UK Helpline: 0800 5999 247

You can refer cases and enquire about training on harmful practices via your local P&ACT Ending Harmful Practices Agencies:

Women and Girls Network - Bromley, Ealing & Hounslow

Email: rcc@wgn.org.uk Phone: 0808 801 0660

Phoenix (P&ACT) Project at PLIAS Resettlement - Barnet, Brent, H&F, Harrow & Ealing

Email: shirley.ricketts@plias.co.uk Phone: 07494 091586 or 0208 838 6800

Midaye - H&F, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster

Email: contact@midaye.org.uk Phone: 07593440944

FORWARD - Croydon, Bexley, Greenwich & Merton

Email: forward@forwarduk.org.uk Phone: 0208 960 4000

Southall Black Sisters - Ealing, Hillingdon & Hounslow

Email: info@southallblacksisters.co.uk Phone: 020 8571 9595

Ashiana Network - Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets & Waltham Forest

Email: info@ashiana.org.uk Phone: 02085390427

IKWRO Women's Rights Organization - Camden, Enfield, Merton, Southwark & Sutton

Email: info@ikwro.org.uk Phone: 020 7920 6460

Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organization - Enfield, Hackney, Haringey & Islington

Email: referrals@kmewo.com Phone: 020 72631027

Latin American Women's Rights Service - City of London, Haringey, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark & Sutton

Email: priscila@lawrs.org.uk Phone: 020 7336 0888

Asian Women's Resource Centre - Brent, Barnet, Kensington & Chelsea, Richmond & Harrow

Email: info@awrc.org.uk Phone: 020 8961 6549

DVIP - Kensington & Chelsea, Kingston upon Thames, Lambeth & Wandsworth

Email: DVIP.al-aman@richmondfellowship.org.uk Phone: 020 8563 2250

IMECE - Barking & Dagenham, Hackney, Islington, Lewisham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets & Waltham Forest

Email: vawgreferral@imece.org.uk Phone: 0207 354 1959

HPSP FACT SHEET

DOWRY BASED ABUSE



REFERENCES

[1] **Anti-dowry laws in India (progressed and amended over the years):** Under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, giving and accepting dowry is an offense. People found guilty of either one can be punished with 5 years of imprisonment and a fine of Rs 15,000.

[2]. Section 304B of the Indian Penal Code deals with dowry deaths which are officially described as - the death of a woman in the initial seven years of marriage as a result of dowry demand by her husband or his family/relatives.

[3] The official anti-dowry law prohibits cruelty by the husband or his family towards a woman. It punishes perpetrators who force women to commit suicide for money or property. This amendment allows immediate arrest and jailing of a woman's spouse and her in-laws in the case of harassment or cruelty. The case once filed cannot be withdrawn by the petitioner and is also non-bailable. So, a complaint can lead to the arrest of the accused and it would be rest upon the courts to decide whether to grant or refuse bail.

- International Conventions: India is a party to several international human rights instruments which provide theoretical remedies to the dowry problems. These international conventions include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ("UDHR"), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ("ICCPR"), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights ("ICESCR"), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ("CEDAW"), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child ("CRC"). CEDAW codifies the rights most.

Relevant to the discussion of dowry-related violence: the rights of women. However, there are issues of non-intervention and cultural relativism which impede the use of international law to combat dowry deaths.

[2] The National Crime Records Bureau of India reported 8,233 dowry deaths in 2012—in other words, one wife is killed every 60 minutes. However, since social and cultural taboos discourage women from reporting cases, the 8,233 cases represent only the tip of a predominantly submerged iceberg.

About 20 dowry deaths were reported every day in the country between 2017 and 2021, with Uttar Pradesh recording the highest at six deaths daily. According to data shared by Union Minister of State for Home Ajay Kumar Mishra in Rajya Sabha, 35,493 dowry deaths were reported in the country between 2017 and 2021.