

## Family Violence, Social Injustice and Suicide in Ethnic Communities

Dr Manjula O'Connor

A recent World Health Organisation (WHO) 2009 report states that it is inequality that has the most profound and far-reaching consequences for individuals and wider society. The study, which draws on extensive research states "there is overwhelming evidence that inequality is a key cause of stress, ....." and "the adverse impact of stress is greater in societies where greater inequality exists and where some people feel worse off than others. Even in animal kingdom inequality has terrible health consequences. Studies of monkeys show that subordinate animals are more likely than socially dominant animals to suffer from clogged blood vessels and other changes in their metabolism. In humans there is a deep connection between injustice and poor mental health. Depression, chronic anxiety, chronic insomnia, fatigue, diabetes, and a harmful pattern of cholesterol, blood pressure are some of the harmful effects. Depression is the most common pathway to suicide.

Family violence is the most insidious form of social injustice and inequality. In the Indian home this does not often take the form of physical violence but mental torment and torture. In a culture where the male has the dominant role in all aspects of home and society, where his supremacy until recently has been unquestioned for the past 4000 years there is inevitably strong gender inequality with significant mental consequences for the underdog. One such consequence is the highest suicide rate for Indian women in the world (along with the Chinese women).

Physical violence is less frequent than emotional abuse. Often the women are not physically beaten but emotionally abused, tortured by the husband and /or in-laws. Emotional neglect, made to feel irrelevant, invisible in one's own home - is the type of emotional abuse that women often silently suffer, is common and injurious to mental health. This factor can act as antecedent factor to depression, anxiety and suicidal behaviour. A recent research report from Goa, India has provided a statistical proof of direct connection between domestic emotional and physical abuse with suicidal behaviour in the Indian women of Goa. (Chowdhry N, Patel V. 1:J Postgrad Med 2008 Oct-Dec 54(4):306-12. There is a possibility that such a link exists in the women of Melbourne Indian Diaspora and by extension in South Asian Communities generally. There is no research data available.

Domestic violence can be subtle such as the need always for the male to be the most revered in the family or in society or at work. An interesting piece of research shows that while marriage for Indian women is a predictive factor for suicide, having a son (instead of a daughter) is protective against suicide. The woman must always subsume her role and authority as secondary to the man she is with. What other form does domestic violence take? It is verbal assault, emotional neglect, sarcasm, accusations of infidelity, sexual demands in marriage, actual physical assault, and death by suicide or other means. Why the Indian women find it hard to challenge this family structure lies in cultural factors like allegiance to the family that is greater than society, shame factor, an outsider cannot help, family must stay together at all cost, fear of deportation.

AISV (Australia India Society inc) and FIAV (Federation of Indian Associations of Victoria) feel we have an obligation to bring this issue of gender inequality and injustice that is harmful to the individual's mental health and community's well being and social fabric to the senate's attention. It is the social fabric that is protective to mental health thus lowering suicide rates.