

THEATRE – A NOVEL MEANS OF EXPLORING THE PROBLEMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE IN INDIAN HOMES

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An Indian community participatory action project has been well received by the Indian community. The project was, initiated by Australia India Society of Victoria and Centre for International Mental Health (University of Melbourne), overseen by the drummond street services, with crucial role played by Thirdway Theatre to examine aspects of family life and harmony within the Australian Indian Community. We were pleased to receive strong support from DISHA, (an Indian Ladies Philanthropic organization) and Western Punjabi Cultural Association (including Tarniet Gurdwara)

The project was a 3 phase process. In the first phase we used focus group discussions with the Indian women on the nature of harmonious family and what constitutes domestic violence in an Indian home, barriers to service use and optimal solutions.



1st Phase Focus Group Discussions

The first step of the project involved community *Focus Group Discussions* held in 3 venues - Glen Waverly, Balwyn and Sunshine. We were pleased to receive strong support from the Indian ladies group DISHA and Tarniet Gurudwara. The topics of discussion were - the anatomy of a HAPPY Indian family; what does it look like when there is emotional abuse or physical violence or other forms of abuse of power and control within the home.

At the end of the focus group discussions women were asked if they would like to participate in theatre workshops, focused on using theatrical games and exercises, to further investigate and explore the themes above. The outcome of these workshops was to work with community members to create a short play that told the deepest truth of the community current thinking around DV.

2nd Phase – Formation Of Theatre Pieces

The participants engaged in trust building exercises, played theatre games, as metaphors to talk about family disharmony, from their point of view and understandings. They made mime acts with some spoken lines that were then analyzed and broken down, looking at question of where, who, why and how? These techniques were used as a means to get inside and further understand the theme.

From the theatrical investigation and Focus Group Discussions, a script was devised that aimed at supporting an interactive dialogue with community audiences.

This was no ordinary theatre, as audiences played a vital role, and were encouraged by the Artistic Director Kris Reardon, to reflect and participate in dialogue, replace the protagonist on stage in order to find ways – together- to break the silence. This stage formed one aspect of the evaluation of the project.

3rd Phase- Theatre performance

We performed theatre pieces at 4 venues-Glen Waverley, Balwyn and Tarniet Gurudwara and University of Melbourne.

We were delighted and grateful to have 6 actors, 5 drawn from the Indian community and one non-Indian woman. The project was supported by Penelope Glass, Co- founder of Teatro Pasmí from Chile, who collaborated with Third Way Theatre and Project Coordinators.

The theatre pieces were designed to encourage audiences to reflect on the performances that were usually mime with sparing dialogue, and then discuss what they saw, heard.

The audiences usually comprising Indian women mixed with Indian men and non-Indian audiences were asked to comment on scenarios. They used imagination, and interpretation of the scenes. A participatory dialogue between the stage and the audience ensued and was dynamic. The audience were asked what they read into the scenes, identified various forms of domestic violence (enacted by the actors). Images had been created of Indian family life, depicting the nature of emotional, physical, financial abuse, control, coercion in an Indian family.

The audience reflected on the social drivers behind such violence. They explored the role of mothers, daughters-in-law and social pressures that enforce training of submission and silence in the face of domestic violence, what type of help they would want and what type of service they would use, why they were unable to engage with current services, barriers to current services. During some performances audience members replaced the main character on stage to get what they want. This created much merriment and excitement in the audience. There was a lot of fun as well as learning for the community, the audiences and the research team.

The project partners are currently analysing the findings from the project which will allow us to plan for future events and to create better understanding and support for the Indian Australian community. The data are currently undergoing analysis by the Melbourne University's Dr Erminia Colucci.

The Indian community engaged really well. The audiences actively participated in dialogue with the Artistic Director and Indian cultural consultant Dr Manjula O'Connor.

The Indian Australian Community is a new and emerging community; its contribution to Australian society is significant. Indian culture is more than 5000 years old. It has been a very successful culture and people still hold on to traditional patterns of behaviours. While this gives a sense of stability and identity, many practices and social issues such as respectful relationships and human rights for women need attention by the community. The solutions to these new issues also rest within the energy and expertise of the community. The aim of AISV is to facilitate transfer of knowledge and tools from the experts into the hands of the community leadership. Thus building community capacity to solve as well as prevent its own DV problems.

Important contacts

Family Relationship Advice Line - Freecall ™ - 1800 050 321

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