

A close-up photograph of a person's feet, likely a woman, resting on a dark purple, textured blanket. The feet are positioned in the lower half of the frame, with the toes pointing towards the bottom right. The skin tone is dark. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the blanket.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Exploring young women's strategies to navigate violent relationships

Samantha Willan, Nolwazi Ntini, A. Gibbs, R. Jewkes

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Agency

The power to define ones goals and act upon them –
'the power within'

Kabeer (1999)



Kabeer: argues for strengthening women's agency through building their resources (economic and social), thus improving women's health and wellbeing and reducing IPV

eThekweni, South Africa

- ▶ Informal settlements: extreme poverty and unemployment, almost no services or housing
- ▶ Stepping Stones and Creating Futures Intervention (21 sessions) RCT 1360 women and men
- ▶ Qualitative research: 15 women (18-30 yrs), IDI's, Photo voice and participant observation, inductive content analysis
- ▶ All currently in heterosexual relationships, and women tended to focus discussions on most significant relationships



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The young women's lives

IPV experiences very high

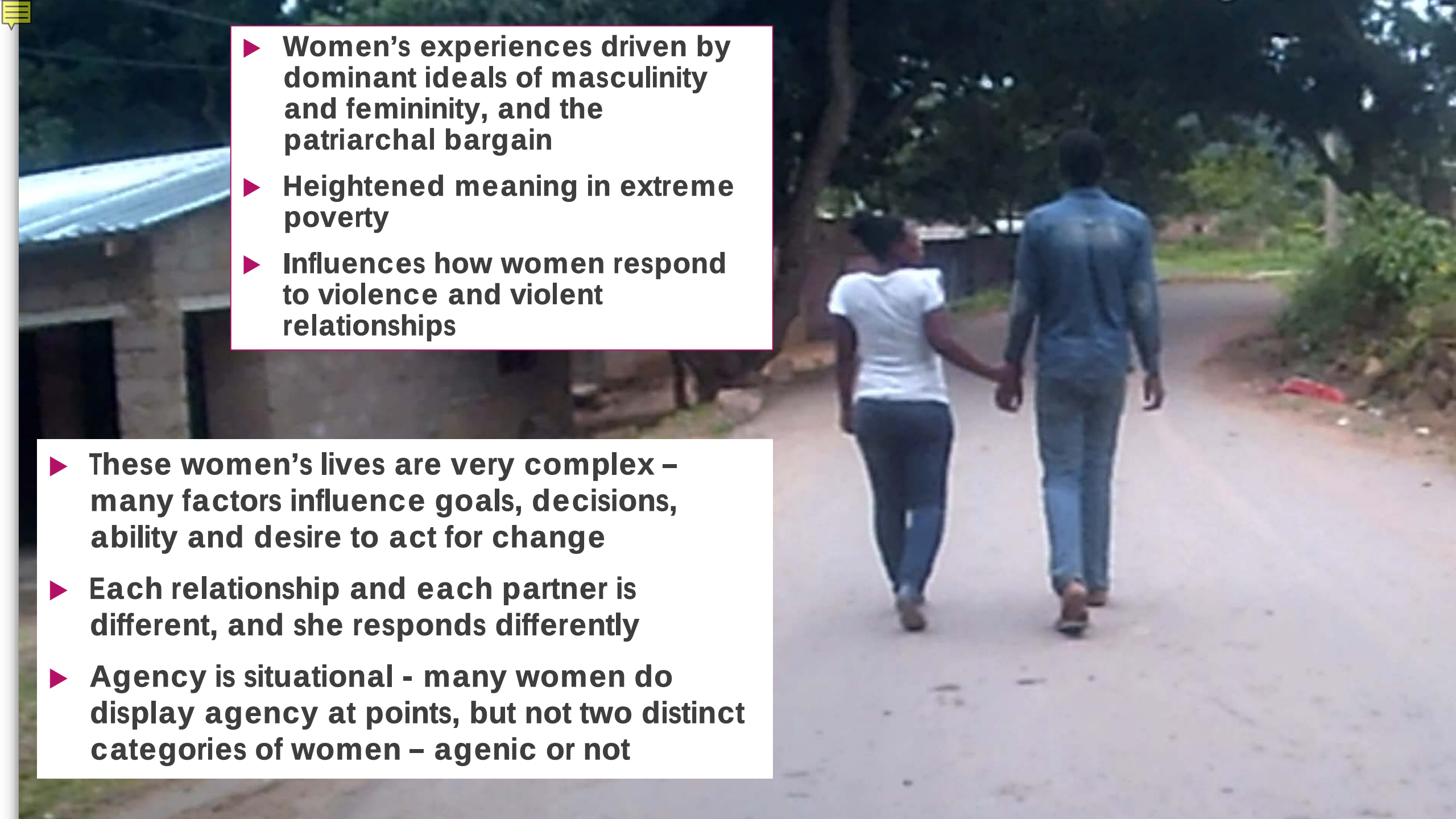
- ▶ Quants 65% of women reported physical and/or sexual IPV in past year
- ▶ All but 2 of these women reported experiencing IPV

- ▶ **Violence is normalized** - problematic yet accepted
- ▶ Individual **meanings of violence differ**
- ▶ Violence **tolerance levels differ**

- ▶ **Constructions of Love** and 'Love Relationships'
- ▶ Relationships are often **fluid and flexible**, with **multiple homes** and **ex-partners** lingering
- ▶ They are **very poor**, with very limited prospects of jobs or economic independence



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- A photograph of a man and a woman walking away from the camera on a paved path. The woman is on the left, wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans. The man is on the right, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. They are holding hands. The background shows trees and a building with a corrugated metal roof.
- ▶ **Women's experiences driven by dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity, and the patriarchal bargain**
 - ▶ **Heightened meaning in extreme poverty**
 - ▶ **Influences how women respond to violence and violent relationships**

- ▶ **These women's lives are very complex – many factors influence goals, decisions, ability and desire to act for change**
- ▶ **Each relationship and each partner is different, and she responds differently**
- ▶ **Agency is situational - many women do display agency at points, but not two distinct categories of women – agenic or not**



Constraints and Agency

Structural and Social constraints limited the young women's desire to, and options for, leaving

- ▶ Poverty and Unemployment
- ▶ Social norms – harmful masculine behaviors and acquiescent femininities

The family as an actor

- ▶ Often a source of support – emotional and economic
- ▶ A home, a network of support
- ▶ However, in cases they were also a constraint – social and economic

And yet many young women did leave violent relationships

- ▶ Accepted/tolerated the violence
- ▶ But when the patriarchal bargain broke down she often left
 - ▶ Fathers failure to support child(ren)
 - ▶ Partners indiscretion around concurrent relationships

Broken bargain - the man's responsibility to support his children, usually financially

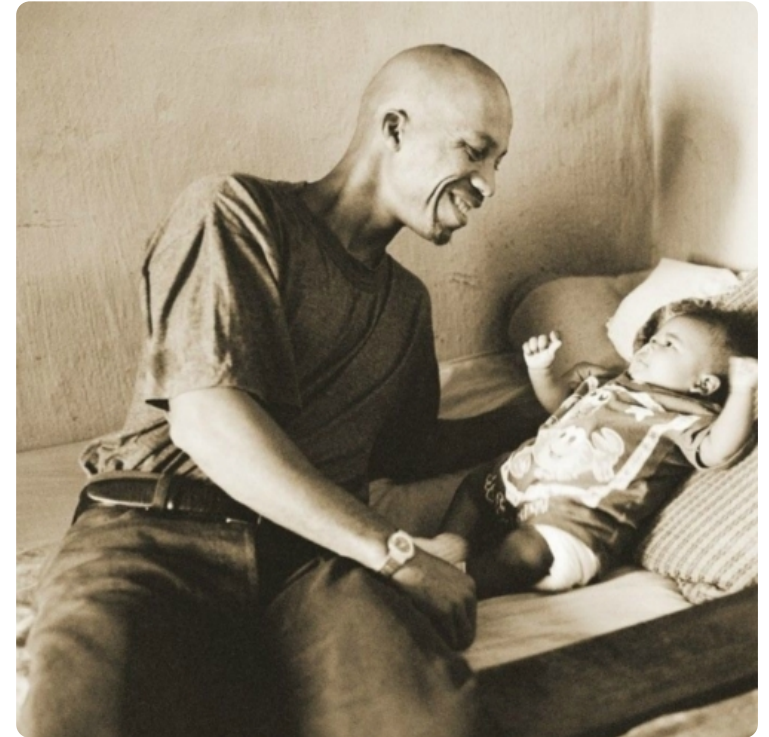
Women left when the father stopped supporting their child(ren)

I left him he wasn't helpful and he would beat me...

Would you have stayed if he beat you but helped you and looked after you and the kids?

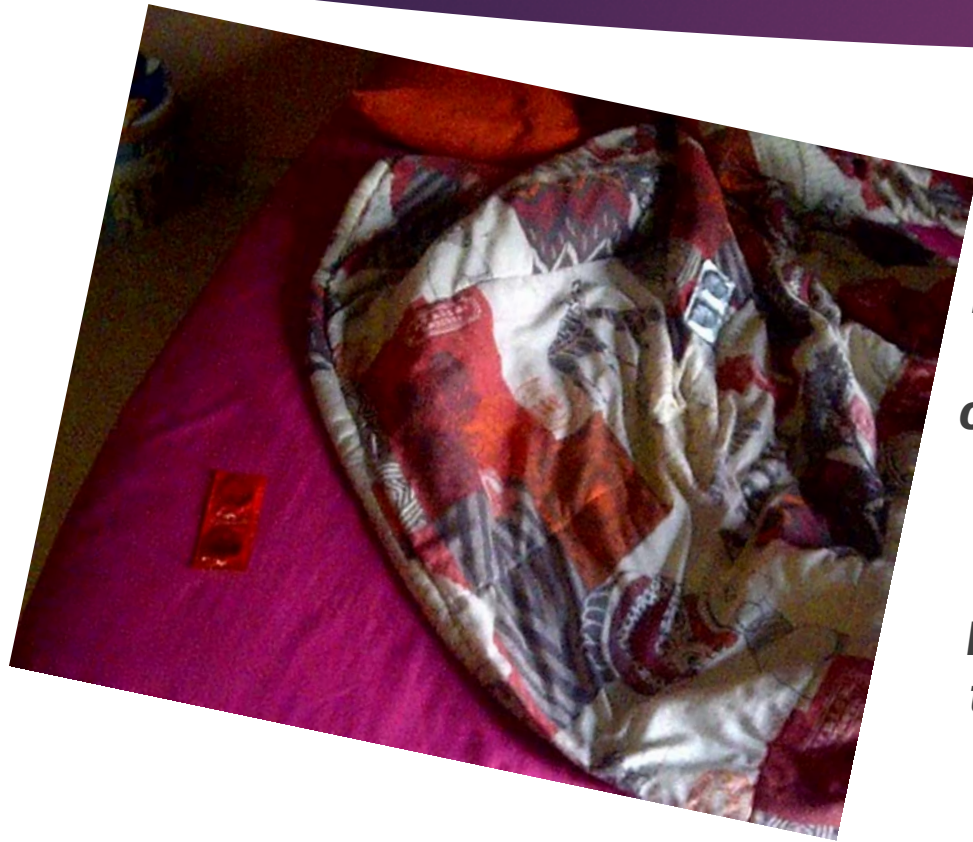
I would have, I would have stayed. I am a very patient person and I can persevere through relationships, most of my relationships are long term.

Ndoni (25yrs, 2 children, very poor family)



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Broken bargain - expectations of discretion around concurrent relationships



Women left over their partners indiscretion

... you can't prevent that because men do that, they always have girlfriends always looking for girlfriends, you can't change that. It's just something you have to understand, and it's fine as long as your partner respects you.

What does that mean, as long as he respects you?

Let's say your boyfriend has a girlfriend, he has to make sure that he covers his tracks, he has to make sure that you don't see or hear anything about it... Like with phones, he must delete things when they are done talking or texting

Zoleka (23yrs, no children, close family relationships)

The need for economic security for their children severely limits women's agency

Noluvuyo is 19, she has one child, she's been with the father for four years, the relationship is violent, she is sometimes happy with him and sometimes unhappy, she has had two suicide attempts, she does not have a very good relationship with her family and they do not support her or her child

She stays as he provides for their child



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Agency is situational

It is not a static trait that one women has and another does not

- ▶ It is complicated, situational, and constructed within each specific relationship and context
- ▶ She may exercise “agency” one day and yet not on another day
- ▶ Avoid simplistic analysis of agency
- ▶ Despite not wanting violence she often tolerated it, agency was easier to exercise when he violated the patriarchal bargain - child support and discretion



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These findings validate the need to work intensely with young women to...

- ▶ reflect upon and debate their own femininities and what it means to be a young woman dating and in love – in a context of heightened poverty
- ▶ critically reflect on how they respond to the prescribed masculinities and femininities and whether they want to, and can, disrupt any of these
- ▶ strengthen their economic position, and break the ties of economic dependence on men

With huge appreciation to the
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and the team



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