



“It is a sin to be in love with a disabled woman”:

Stigma, rejection, womanhood and IPV among physically disabled women living in South Africa.

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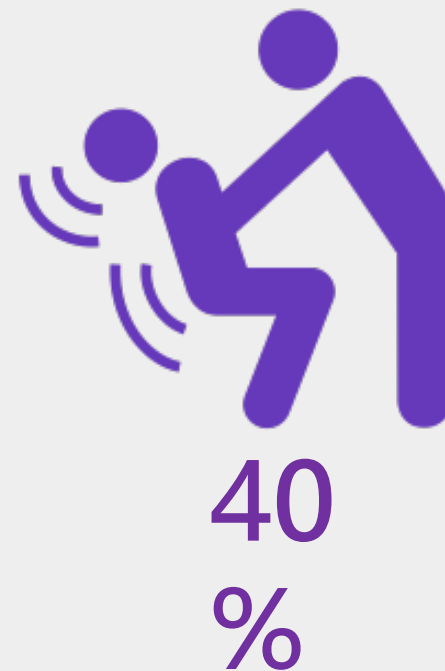
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WHAT DO WE KNOW?

80%
living in
LMICs

EXCLUSION & STIGMA





WHAT DON'T WE KNOW?



AIM: How does **disability stigma**, **rejection** and **notions of womanhood** shape their intimate relationships (IPV?).

HOW?

- ▶ **Qualitative – in-depth interviews [30]**

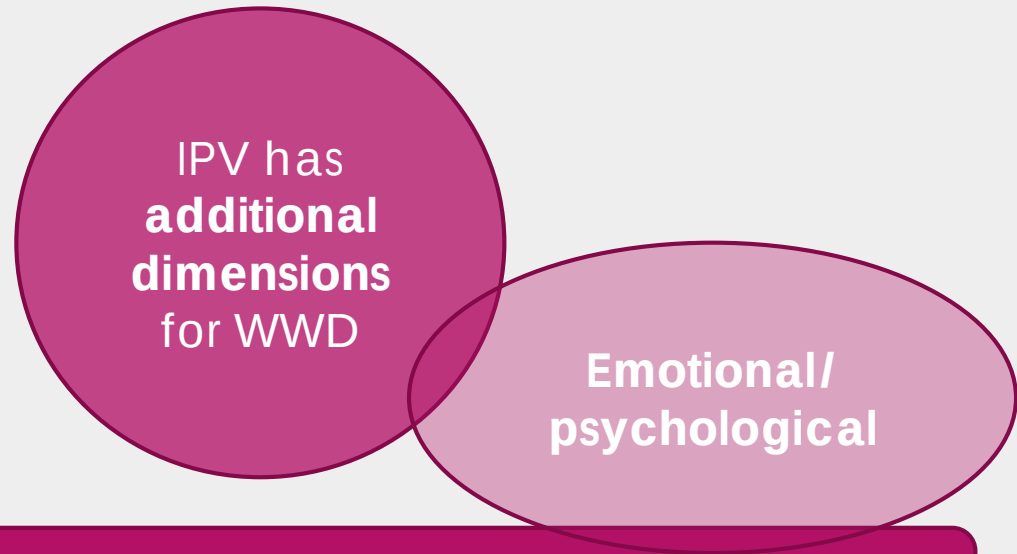
- ▶ **Range of physical disabilities**

Spina Bifida, Cerebral Palsy, Quadra-/paraplegic, amputee, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, hearing and sight impaired, albinism

- ▶ **PHD – lifetime experiences of violence** (Cape Town, South Africa)



FINDINGS



Exposure

Stigma and rejection from [non-disabled] partners

versus

Protection

Protective and loving (closeness, understanding, intimacy & protection)



RISKS / EXPOSURE



No 'normal' sexual relationship?

- ▶ Disability and sex is taboo / non-sexuality myth – **WWD lack sexual agency***
- ▶ **Mechanics** of sex and the **visibility** of impairment
- ▶ What is normal sex? **Control** over body and **respect/pleasure**

They tease and laugh and say 'You have a boyfriend? How?'

*They say **they would like to try 'it' with me, to see if it can be done...** I ask them if they even know how sex works, because they can see I am a woman*

*Men are scared when you have a disability, **they are scared to see how and if you can have sex***



He **won't have proper sex with me**, he flips me over and does it from behind, like I am a dog and I have no say.

May not be a 'proper' GF/ mother / wife

Burden: *He said he couldn't marry me...his parents would not agree. I would be **too much of a worry**– and I need to take care of a man, not have a man take care of me.*



Gender/social norms: *I can cook, but I can not fetch the water, ...*

*I was no longer good in bed, I was **not a good enough wife***

*They say you **can't have a boyfriend, because you can't walk** and stuff like that*



May not be a 'proper' GF/ mother / wife

Unsuitable parenting: *He left because **he was afraid for the child**, that I would not bring it up right.*

People say 'But you can't have children' – because I have one arm"



Infantilisation:

*But how can she look after a child if **she is a child herself?***

Fear: Deaf woman
will give birth to a
deaf son



Rejection – psychological IPV

Absent fathers: *My first rejection came from my father – when he left my mother because I was not “right”.*



Secret liaisons: *“They don’t hold hands with you in public, and only walk with you in the dark, **they want to keep you hidden, because it’s a sin to be in love with a disabled woman**”.*

In-law violence: Refusals to pay [dowry] or rebukes that they were “not proper wives with her).

Favours: “You’re not my type, but **I’m doing you a favour**” (by having sex

Internalised stigma/feelings of shame

- Perceived low body- and self-esteem = scared, embarrassed, unattractive, lack confidence:



I don't think about it (sex) because **why would anyone ever want to have sex with me?**

It's hard to be accepting of your body when people think there is something wrong with it – **its hard to consider yourself as attractive or sexy**

When we have sex I close my eyes, I look away, I don't want to see my body, and I don't want to see him seeing my body



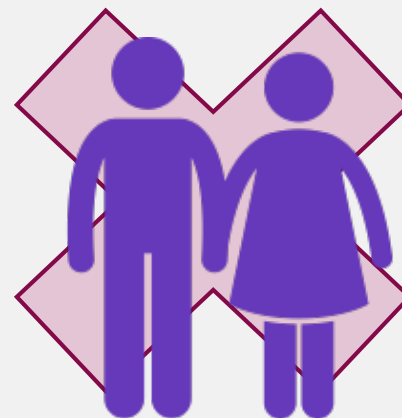
PROTECTIVE AGAINST IPV



Online dating -
affirmation



No dating



Accepting their
body / dress to
impress

Supportive partners:

*“he motivated me that I
was beautiful, there was
nothing wrong with me
even if I had a disability,
**he liked me the way I
was***



Mental health –
confidence/self
esteem



Healthy sex life
(communicating with
partner / feeling
desirable/



Ask for help from
other women



Pregnancy – able to
fulfil gender norms



Other **options** –
employment (skills)
Access to resources,
sexual education (school
attendance) and
awareness training





WHY IS IT A 'SIN'? LESSONS FROM THE STUDY

GENDER AND SOCIAL NORMS

- ▶ The metaphor depicts disability as **immoral** and going against what is right in society (negative, harmful).
- ▶ They can not fulfill what is expected of women in South Africa (patriarchal norms)
- ▶ Therefore they are, or feel, isolated / rejected, lacking (**IPV was psychological/emotional**)



IS IT ONLY ABOUT STIGMA AND REJECTION?

- ▶ **Women's perspectives** of why men do/don't date them – **no voices from [abled/disabled] men***
- ▶ Women **do date**, and have intimate partnerships and experience love and fulfilment:

Validity: *motherhood proved I was **capable**, and not disabled*

*My partner wanted to see, he wanted to feel my leg, even though I was scared. **He took the [prosthetic] leg off and said it was better that I be natural and myself***

*Hunt X et al. 2017.

KEY MESSAGES

Intimate relationships for WWD are characterized by emotional IPV

What women want:

- ▶ Be sensitive to their aspirations **to fulfill 'normative' ideals of womanhood**
- ▶ They want **access to online resources and platforms** on sex, self esteem and body image - relevant.
- ▶ **Awareness raising among men** (*'they need to change what they expect from us'*)

Change beliefs and social norms & Autonomy/ Empowerment



Social / Human Rights Model of disability*

*Barnes et al, 1992



More research and intervention is needed:

- ▶ Disability – relevant
- ▶ **ACCESS TO IPV interventions?**
- ▶ How do we **engage couples** in reducing psychological violence and promote healthy intimate partnerships?
- ▶ Awareness/stigma reduction – **community action/mobilisation**

Evaluation on IPV **prevalence** and **access** to IPV interventions in LMICs



WhatWorks

TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

A Global Programme To Prevent
Violence Against Women and Girls



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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THANK YOU.