Should I Stay or Should I Go? Exploring young women’s strategies to navigate violent relationships

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Kabeer: argues for strengthening women’s agency through building their resources (economic and social), thus improving women's health and wellbeing and reducing IPV.
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
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
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)
Broken bargain - expectations of discretion around concurrent relationships

Women left over their partners indiscr retion

... 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.
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.
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 young women, Nolwazi Ntini and the team.