“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.

Ms I Van der Heijden, Prof N Abrahams, Prof J Harries

South African Medical Research Council / University of Cape Town.

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WHAT DO WE KNOW?

80% living in LMICs

EXCLUSION & STIGMA

2 X

World Bank Report on Disability 2011
Smith 2012; Schrottle et al 2013

40 %
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

- Stigma and rejection from non-disabled partners
- Protective and loving (closeness, understanding, intimacy & protection)

IPV has additional dimensions for WWD versus Emotional/psychological

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 – it's 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

Accepting their body / dress to impress

Mental health - confidence/self esteem

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

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
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Email: iheijden@mrc.ac.za (What Works / SAMRC)

THANK YOU.