

'It Is a Sin to Be in Love with a Disabled Woman': Stigma, Rejection and Intersections of Womanhood and Violence among Physically Disabled Women Living in South Africa

Authors : Ingrid Van Der Heijden, Naeemah Abrahams, Jane Harries

Abstract : Background: Commonly, womanhood is defined as the qualities considered to be natural to or characteristic of a woman. However, womanhood is not a static concept; it is contextual and negotiable. For women with disabilities, gender roles or 'qualities' of womanhood are often overstated or contradicted because of assumptions of weakness, passivity, asexuality and infertility. Currently, little is known about how disability stigma intersects with notions of womanhood to make women with disabilities vulnerable to violence, or how women navigate this intersection to prevent or protect themselves from violence. Objective: To describe how the stigmatized constructions of womanhood and disability promote women with physical disabilities' exposure to or protection from violence. Methods: Qualitative data for this paper comes from a doctoral study involving women with disabilities living in Cape Town, South Africa. It presents data from repeat in-depth interviews with 30 women with a range of physical impairments. Women attending protective workshops, rehabilitative centers and residential care facilities for people living with disabilities were invited to participate. Consent procedures and interviews were conducted by the first author (who is herself a woman living with a physical disability), and a female research assistant/translator who is a qualified occupational therapist. Reasonable accommodation is central to the methodology and the study as a whole. Findings: Descriptive and thematic analyses reveal how stigma and local constructions around womanhood, as well as women's self-image and physical limitations, promotes women's exposure to psychological, physical and sexual violence. It reveals how disabled women feel they are presumed incapable of living up to expectations of a 'proper' woman. This plays out as psychological violence, with women reporting that they feel 'devalued,' 'rejected' and deprived of lasting intimate relationships. Furthermore, forms of psychological violence perpetuate physical and sexual violence. Women also discuss using strategies to prevent violence; by refusing to date, avoiding certain places or avoiding isolation, creating awareness, hiding their physical impairments, and exaggerating their 'femininity.' Implications: Service providers need to be made aware of women's violence experiences, and provide a range of accessible psychological and mental health services to women living with disabilities, as well as raising awareness around disability, and violence prevention, among caregivers, men, and women. Violence awareness and prevention interventions need to involve disability experts, researchers and people with disabilities.

Keywords : disability, gender, stigma, violence awareness and prevention interventions

Conference Title : ICDD 2017 : International Conference on Disability and Diversity

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : May 04-05, 2017