

# **Sex Workers' Discursive Constructions of Intimate Partner Violence**

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### Abstract

While intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive problem in all spheres of society, sex workers encounter especially harrowing abuse by their boyfriends and husbands. Thus far, their experiences have not been well understood. Grounded in intersectional feminist theory, this qualitative study explored how sex workers construct their experiences of IPV. Four semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with South African female sex workers. Based on the method of Foucauldian discourse analysis advanced by Willig (2008), it was found that the groups broadly drew on two discourses of heterosexual intimate relationships. Firstly, a *patriarchal discourse* pervaded descriptions of how their partners see the women as possessions that should be silent, subordinate and faithful. Although some men use sex workers as 'money-making machines', sex work is often in direct conflict with a partner's 'ownership', prompting jealousy, possessiveness and abuse. By positioning this as abusive and irrational, the participants unanimously advocated for female agency and empowerment. Secondly, the talk heavily utilised a *discourse of transaction* – where the male financially provides for the woman in exchange for sex, reproduction and domestic duties. Interestingly, participants constructed male abuse as a lack of financial support, or as an inversion of 'normal' relationship economics, where the sex worker supports her partner. At times, sex work was used to create a new discourse of female economic agency, as it enables women to earn their own money. On the other hand, sex work still involves being paid (and, sometimes abused) by male clients. This study deconstructs the discourses that are implicated in sex workers' experiences of IPV and the positions made available to them. It goes on to suggest implications for our theoretical understandings of IPV, support strategies for sex workers who experience IPV and ways to challenge and change unhelpful discourses that feed abusive intimate relationships.

*Keywords:* intimate partner violence; sex work; discourse; South Africa

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## 1. Introduction

While intimate partner violence (IPV) is a grave problem in all spheres of society, female sex workers experience especially harrowing abuse by their boyfriends and husbands (Dalla, 2000; 2002; Stadler & Delaney, 2006). Thus far, this particularly vulnerable group's experiences of IPV have not been well understood, especially in the South African context (Kistner, 2003).

This study is grounded in an intersectional feminist awareness that both IPV and sex work are symptomatic of a broader 'social pathology' of women's marginalization. Woven into the very fabric of our society are multifarious ideologies and social structures that tend to be inherently disempowering of women (Matjasko, Nicolon & Valle, 2013). This is particularly true in South Africa (SA), where women, and especially sex workers, often bear the brunt of pervasive patriarchal gender norms and historically rooted race, class and socio-economic inequalities (Kistner, 2003).

In an effort to foreground and re-empower the voices of sex workers, this research asked how they discursively construct their experiences of IPV. Specifically, it looked at how they talk about their intimate relationships, IPV as a phenomenon, their personal experiences of abuse and the impact of their sex work on their experiences of IPV. It is hoped that gaining a deep understanding of sex workers' experiences and understandings will help to inform better support strategies for these women. Furthermore, unpacking IPV from what tends to be a context of intersecting forces of female marginalization should provide clearer theoretical understandings of what it is, and how to go about challenging its prevalence in the broader social arena.

### **Defining and Situating IPV**

While IPV was initially viewed as 'wife abuse', constituting physical violence within heterosexual marriages, it is now acknowledged that it involves physical, sexual, psychological and even economic abuse in various kinds of intimate relationships (Brown & Hendricks, 1998). While delineations between the types of abuse are beyond this study's scope, McHugh and Frieze (2006) provide a good overview. Furthermore, although recent literature has begun to highlight the occurrence of IPV in same-sex partnerships (see Ard & Makadon, 2011; Messinger, 2011), and in heterosexual relationships where the man is the victim (see Coker et al., 2002), this study is directed at male violence against women, which

is still most common (Caldwell, Swan & Woodbrown, 2012; WHO, 2013). This work adopts the World Health Organization's (WHO) (2013) definition of IPV as "any behaviour that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or previous intimate partner", and uses 'violence' and 'abuse' interchangeably to reference this (p.1).

IPV is highly prevalent world-wide, with 30% of women who have had an intimate partner reporting abuse. IPV is potentially lethal, as 38% of murdered women are killed by an intimate partner (WHO, 2013). Even when women survive, they often endure extreme physical violence that tends to be concurrent with sexual and psychological abuse (Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006). In SA, 20.9% of people report partner violence, and 2.3% report sexual abuse by a partner, although this is probably an under-report (Statistics SA, 2011).

Beyond the experience of the abuse itself, IPV is a significant public health problem with extremely negative repercussions for survivors (Coker et al., 2002). In addition to physical injury, there may be indirect trauma symptoms such as sleep disturbance, sexual dysfunction, lowered immunity and negative health behaviours (Torpy, 2008). In SA, IPV is strongly correlated with increased prevalence of HIV (Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna & Shai, 2010). There is also overwhelming evidence that IPV is associated with serious mental health problems, especially depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Fleming, Newton, Fernandez-Botran, Miller & Burns, 2013; Golder, Connell & Sullivan, 2012).

Clearly, IPV is a pervasive problem. To combat it, it is imperative that we fully understand its nature. Significantly, much of the literature on IPV has been informed by quantitative research into the characteristics of 'male perpetrators' and 'female victims', as well as relational 'risk factors' for IPV (see Buzawa & Buzawa, 2013; Johnson, 2011; Lohman, Nepl, Senia & Schofield, 2013; Macy, Renz & Pelino, 2013; Watt & Scrandis, 2013; Yamawaki, Ochoa-Shipp, Pulsipher, Harlos & Swindler, 2012). Currently, the field accepts an 'ecological model', which frames IPV as resulting from complex interactions of individual, relational and community-level factors (Matjasko et al., 2013). More recently, the research has highlighted that abusive relationships tend to be characterised by ideologies of male control, scripts of violent conflict resolution and patriarchal gender norms (Zolotor, Denham & Weil, 2009).

### **Feminist Approaches to IPV**

There is a long standing history of feminist scholarship on IPV, which has run alongside mainstream approaches. Although there are many schools of feminism, feminist thinkers generally believe that women are often "objects of oppression, victimisation and

disenfranchisement", whose needs and subjectivities should be foregrounded (Bowen, Bahrick & Enns, 1991, p.228; Kiguwa, 2004). This is especially true in feminist research into IPV – a phenomenon where male power seems to overtly victimise and dominate the female (Marin & Russo, 1999). Importantly, under feminism, gender and gender-based violence are seen as socially constructed phenomena, which are affected by language, social interaction and institutional structures (Holt, 2011). Thus, many feminists argue that IPV is 'symptomatic' of the pathological gendered dynamics of a society where patriarchal ideologies and practices act to marginalize women (Bograd, 1990; Fox, Jackson, Hansen, Crew & Sikkema, 2007; Lazar & Kramarae, 2006).

As feminist work on IPV has intensified, it has increasingly called for more attention to be paid to issues of gender and to women's subjectivities (Deming, Covan, Swan & Billings, 2013; Mitra, 2013). By acknowledging that patriarchal gender norms and ideologies of male control are strongly correlated with the occurrence of IPV, mainstream approaches have begun to foreground issues of gender and power. This engagement is limited, however, by many authors simply positioning these things as causative factors. Furthermore, women's voices and experiences have remained largely invisible (Lindhorst & Tajima, 2008; McHugh, Livingston & Ford, 2005). Thus, feminists argue that much of the literature subjects women to the 'male gaze', acting to further perpetuate gender inequality and to silence women (Willig, 2008). To subvert this, women need to be foregrounded as valuable sources of knowledge and primary authorities on 'what it is like' to experience IPV (Eagle, Hayes & Sibanda, 2011; Yllo, 1990).

**Criticising Traditional Feminist Research: Essentialism and Exclusion.** Feminist research has done much important work in re-centring women's experiences of IPV. However this project has been plagued by widespread charges of essentialism and the resultant exclusion of women who are marginalised by factors such as race, class, ethnicity, socio-economic status and sexual orientation (Kiguwa, 2004; Nash, 2008). Post-structuralist and black feminists, in particular, have argued against the assumption of earlier feminists that 'woman' is a valid category of identity, and that all women therefore have a common experience of things like IPV (Collins, 2000; Kiguwa, 2004). Thus, many critics point out that much feminist work reflects only the lives of white, heterosexual, middle-class, Euro-American women, and should not claim to be universally applicable (Nash, 2008; Short et al., 2000). In reality, black women (as one example) may have a qualitatively different experience of IPV, partly due to their additional struggles with poverty and racial inequality

(Lindhorst & Tajima, 2008). Although initial criticism centred on the sidelining of black women, this soon extended to acknowledge many other categories of difference.

**New Approach: Feminist Intersectionality.** Although much feminist work has challenged problematic gender hierarchies, it may have also acted to reinforce the hierarchy that exists between different groups of women due to factors such as class, race and socio-economic status. Ironically this often excludes and silences groups which are most vulnerable to forces of gender and power (Yllo, 1990). In taking this into account, this research stems from feminist intersectional theory. Intersectionality advocates that the singular category of gender is inherently limited when explaining discrimination, and also invites scholars to acknowledge the legacy of under-documentation of “multiply burdened” women in feminist work (Crenshaw, 1989, p.140). As such, feminist intersectionality sounds a loud call that IPV research not only foregrounds issues of gender and female experience, but also unpacks and centres the previously silenced experiences of marginalized groups of women (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008).

### **Sex Workers' Experiences of IPV**

Much helpful work has already been done in unpacking the perspectives of vulnerable groups of women (for some examples, see Callands, Sipsma, Betancourt & Hansen, 2014; Loke, Wan & Hayter, 2012; Magnussen, Amundson & Smith, 2008). However, Kistner (2003) suggests that sex workers are one marginalised group whose experiences of IPV have not been adequately explored, particularly in the South African context. Sex workers are defined here as people who trade sex for money or other commodities (Overall, 1999). It is well known that sex workers experience almost endemic violence from clients and from the police (Elmore-Meegan, Conrow & Agala, 2004). However, there is less awareness that they also experience particularly high incidences of abuse by their intimate partners (ie: boyfriends or husbands) (Kistner, 2003; Stadler & Delaney, 2006).

As a group, South African female sex workers certainly seem to be multiply burdened. As women, they experience the patriarchal realities of the broader South African society (Kiguwa, 2004). In addition to this, issues of gender discrimination are often deeply entangled with their sex work. There is wide-spread stigma attached to ‘prostitution’, and clients often force sex workers to do sexual acts they are uncomfortable with, refuse to pay and regularly rape and physically assault them (Dalla, 2000; 2002; Gould, 2008). Furthermore, this group also contends with issues of race, class, and socio-economic status,

as the majority of South African sex workers are black or coloured, and tend to enter sex work due to poverty (Gould, 2008). Because of this web of factors, sex workers may experience IPV quite differently to other women.

Because, as of yet, there is little understanding of how IPV is uniquely experienced by sex workers, this research aimed to further the lines of inquiry. It was hoped that their perspectives – stemming from an extreme instance of patriarchy and social marginalisation – would be able to add to the feminist conceptualisation of IPV in terms of gender and power. Furthermore, it was hoped that a more nuanced understanding of how they experience IPV would aid the development of tailored support strategies for sex workers as a group.

## **2. Aims and Objectives**

### **Aims**

This research explored sex workers' discursive constructions of IPV. Thus, it aimed to elicit the discourses that are available to female sex workers who encounter IPV, unpacking the subject positions and 'ways of being' that these make available, or prevent (Willig, 2008).

### **Main Research Question**

How do sex workers construct their experiences of IPV?

#### **Sub Questions.**

1. How do sex workers construct their intimate relationships?
2. How do they talk about IPV as a general phenomenon?
3. How do they construct IPV as a personal experience?
4. In what ways does their sex work affect their experiences of IPV?

## **3. Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study utilised an intersectional feminist, qualitative approach. While there is no single intersectional feminist research methodology, this generally represents a shift away from mainstream approaches in terms of the content studied, the research process, and the accepted underlying scientific assumptions (Eagle et al., 2011). One aim of feminist intersectional work is to unpack the subjective experiences of marginalised groups (Nash,

2008). Thus, qualitative methods are often most appropriate, as they allow participants' speech and perspectives to rise to the surface (Eagle et al., 2011). This method also challenges positivist assumptions that knowledge is objective and value-free. In general, feminist, qualitative research endorses a social constructionist understanding that there are no essential determinants of the social milieu (Holt, 2011). Thus, the research aims to identify the culturally available ways of constructing social reality, and how these impact human experience (Willig, 2013).

Specifically, this study focused on language as the engine through which meanings and 'realities' are produced. The research process is seen as dialogical – a co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants (Bowen et al., 1991; England, 1994). Furthermore, this project's understandings were shaped by the organization of talk into discourses. These feed into people's language and behaviours, and are, in turn, reproduced as they are "talked and practiced" into being (Holt, 2011, p.69).

### **Recruitment and Sampling Strategy**

Qualitative research does not aim to generalize beyond the immediate sample. Thus, random sampling is unnecessary and, actually, unhelpful (Kelly, 2011). Instead, this bent of research strives for deep, coherent understandings of specific people's experiences (Willig, 2008). This study looked to highlight discursive formulations of IPV within a group of female sex workers. Accordingly, I used a purposive sampling strategy, and selected participants on the basis of being female sex workers who reported having experienced IPV at some time in their lives. This study engaged in a discourse analysis, for which Holt (2011) suggests the sample is kept relatively small, due to the level of detail required. Thus, I conducted only four focus groups.

The women were recruited in collaboration with the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT). I verbally advertised the study at the organisation's 'creative space' workshops with female sex workers, and allocated volunteers who met the criteria to the available time slots. Although a total of 25 women were set to participate, only 19 came to the focus groups. See Table 1 for the participant demographics.

### **Data Collection: Tools and Procedures**

I collected data through four semi-structured focus groups, comprising of four, five, three and seven women respectively. While individual interviews are commonly used in qualitative IPV research, this study looked at sex workers' discursive constructions of IPV. The discussion arising from a group dynamic was therefore more appropriate. Also, because

IPV and sex work are sensitive topics, I felt that talking in a small group about a common experience would be less threatening for participants. Focus groups allow participants to have more control over what they contribute to the discussion, directing pacing, content and the emotional tone of the talk (Kelly, 2011). Lastly, I was aware that sex workers' voices are often marginalised. As a white, middle-class, well-educated person, I felt that focus groups would place the women as central actors in the script, levelling the balance of power between them as a collective, and myself.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A for the schedule). In general, unstructured or semi-structured approaches are best for qualitative research, as they allow participants to communicate their experiences in ways meaningful to them. More natural conversation allows space for detail, inconsistencies and contradictions – all vital clues to the discourses drawn on by the participants (Holt, 2011).

The focus groups were conducted in a private room at SWEAT's premises. Each was about an hour and a half in length. I collected demographic data by asking the women to fill in questions written on the back of the consent forms. I recorded the discussions on a dictaphone and transcribed these soon after the focus groups. Immediately after the sessions, I wrote notes to supplement the audio-recordings. I also wrote down my general impressions of, and reactions to, the discussion, in order to help with the process of reflexivity.

### **Data Analysis**

I analysed the data using a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) technique which looks to deconstruct the discursive cycle of 'reality creation' in participants' talk. Therefore, it especially focusses on how broader discourses inform language, social attitudes and behaviour (Parker, 2005). It also interrogates how the utilised discourses enable certain 'subject positions', or 'ways of being, while preventing others (Holt, 2011). While FDA can extend to look at how discursive formulations inform institutional structures, this study limited itself to implications for participants' subjective experiences of their social realities. Thus, data analysis attempted to unpack participants' language, exploring how they drew on certain discourses to perform specific functions in the discussion and to position themselves in certain ways (Willig, 2008).

As with feminist research, there is no one method of FDA. In fact, as a general approach to research, it is often termed a 'theory method'. I chose to draw from Willig's (2008) interpretation of FDA.

Transcription was an important preliminary stage in and of itself, as it immersed me in the data and facilitated making initial analytic decisions. I then followed Willig's (2008) six stages of FDA:

1. I identified the ways in which IPV was constructed through language.
2. I determined the broader social discourses that these constructions alluded to.
3. I thought about the ways in which the various constructions functioned for the speakers in the discussion, and how they interacted with other constructions in the surrounding text.
4. I identified the 'subject positions' that this made available for the speakers.
5. I interrogated how the discourses enabled and limited what could be said and done by the subjects, and how this might feed, reproduce, or work against certain discourses.
6. I attempted to unpack the implications for what the participants and the group in general might think, feel and subjectively experience.

To complete the analysis, I organised my findings around the broader discourses I had identified, selecting particular pieces of text as supporting evidence for my findings.

#### **4. Ethical Considerations**

The study was granted ethical approval by the Psychology Department's Ethics Committee. Several basic ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the project.

Primarily, the welfare of the participants was prioritised. The focus groups were conducted in a safe, private room and the participants risked no physical harm. Because the discussions elicited painful issues, there was some risk of emotional upset. I worked to contain the discussions, and did not push participants to talk about anything they were not comfortable with. As the women were part of SWEAT, they had access to counselling if required. Participants were given refreshments and transport money to mediate any personal expenses.

Each participant signed a consent form, which stated that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any stage, and that the group interview would be recorded (see Appendix B for the form).

To keep participants' identities private, pseudonyms were used in official reports. The recordings were stored on password protected computers and only I and my supervisor had access to the data. Because participants spoke in group discussions, I could not guarantee that group members would keep what was shared confidential (Wassenaar, 2011). The consent form did note this, and I verbally impressed the need for confidentiality on each group.

While the participants were not individually debriefed, at the end of the discussions I asked them to reflect on their experiences of the group. This provided a forum to identify and manage any difficulties arising from the discussion.

## 5. Reflexivity

It is inescapable that the researcher always impacts the knowledge that research produces. In this study, the discourses identified from the data were shaped both by my presence in the discussions, and by my subjective viewpoint in the analysis (Willig, 2008). Although I re-examined the data for alternative explanations, Holt (2011) suggests that the findings will necessarily evidence some level of personal bias. Because I am an 'outsider' to sex work and to the experience of IPV, it is imperative to ask whether I have 'spoken for' the participants, instead of prioritising their first-hand knowledge. While qualitative approaches embrace the active contribution of the researcher, it is important to reflect on how my social context and personal engagement with certain discourses affected my findings (Holt, 2011; Kelly, 2011).

I approached this work with an understanding that sex work and IPV stem from similar, problematic patriarchal features of society. As such, I expected the sex workers' experiences of IPV to be particularly extreme, and to be linked to issues of gender and power and the conditions resulting from their sex work. Given this, it should be noted that research participants often display a version of themselves that is geared at their particular perceived audience (Parker, 2005). Because I was asking about abuse and sex work, the participants may have focussed almost exclusively on these aspects of their lives at the expense of alternative facets of themselves.

It is also significant to comment on the power dynamic between the participants and myself (Holt, 2011). Although both I and the participants are female, as a white, middle-class, 'academic outsider', I occupied a more powerful social location than the participants. This imbalance, and my lack of shared experience, may have limited what was said and understood in our interaction (Kelly, 2011). To some extent, this was countered through the

use of focus groups that positioned participants as being 'in the know'. Unexpectedly, the fact that I was younger than the participants also helped in this regard. In some ways, the groups became about them sharing their experiences with a 'young and inexperienced student'. At times, this meant that I had to work harder to assert myself in directing the discussions, but in general it facilitated the women sharing freely and comfortably.

## 6. Analysis and Discussion: Discourses of IPV

Data analysis revealed that the participants' talk drew on two broad discourses of intimate relationships: a *patriarchal discourse* and a *discourse of transaction*. In their engagement with these discourses and related sub-discourses, the participants formed varying subjectivities that reproduced or challenged them. This allowed the women to take up specific subject positions and to create new possibilities for change and action.

### **Patriarchal Discourse of Intimate Relationships**

In describing their experiences of IPV, the participants drew heavily on a *patriarchal discourse* of intimate relationships, and three sub-discourses of *women as objects*, *male jealousy* and the *patriarchal discourse as abusive and irrational*. The broad *patriarchal discourse* constructs intimate relationships in terms of traditional, heteronormative gender roles. Notions of masculinity are informed by the hegemonic dictate that men should be dominant and in control. Interestingly, under this *patriarchal discourse* femininity is defined via, and in compliment to, the dominant male gender. Accordingly, traditional ideas of femininity advocate that women should be passive, silent and submissive to their partners (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 1993). The *patriarchal discourse* is also inherently tied to the idea of male ownership. Women, and their bodies, are constituted as objects of male power (Boonzaier, 2008; Lau & Stevens, 2012).

Much of the literature has identified links between IPV and this ideology of male control and entitlement (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2004; Shefer et al., 2008; Towns & Scott, 2013). Significantly, abusive men have been found to use violence as a means of establishing authority in relationships (Sathiparsad, 2008). Under this *patriarchal discourse*, IPV forms part of men's inherent right to forcefully control what belonging to them. More than just physical abuse, this may manifest in ownership practices like possessive and controlling

behaviour, micromanagement and isolation of the woman, and verbal and emotional abuse (Towns & Scott, 2013).

The participants' stories were littered with partners' abusive behaviour exemplifying the *patriarchal discourse*. It was also clear that the participants were aware of the discourse and utilised it to explain their partners' attitudes towards, and treatment of them. This rises to the surface in Rabia's identification of the 'warning signs' of IPV. She perceives that her partner is controlling, and expects her to be silent and acquiescent to an unreasonable degree. She also links this to the beginnings of physical abuse when she attempts to break his authority through leaving<sup>1</sup>:

[Rabia]: ... I was physically and emotionally abused, so I know the signs, okay. And I've been divorced for eight years. And I met this guy now. And, um, it's, it's almost a month and he is showing signs of [pause] physical abuse. Like, he doesn't give me – I can't **voice** my own opinions, I can't speak and have a conversation with you without him being there and dictating over my shoulder what he thinks I should say. So it ends up me just keeping my mouth when it comes to us...Ja. I threatened to leave him a week ago, he actually **pushed** me. And I fell on the ground and he took me by the jacket...

[Focus Group 4]

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<sup>1</sup>In the transcriptions, ellipses indicate that text has been omitted for the sake of brevity, square brackets indicate additional information added by the researcher and bolded text indicates an emphasis by the speaker.

**Women as objects.** A salient feature of the participants' engagement with the *patriarchal discourse* was the sub-discourse of *women as objects*, or 'things to be owned and abused'. While the metaphor was used in describing various types of IPV, the idea of the woman's body as a physical object of abuse came through strongly:

[Felicia]: ...He tell me – 'If I beat you, I don't see you bleeding, I'm not gonna be happy. It's better I bleed you, I stab you, it come out blood'...

[Focus Group 2]

Felicia's description of her boyfriend's abuse demonstrates that her body is something for him to hurt as he sees fit. He chooses to spill her blood in order to feel satisfied when punishing her. This explicitly places her body as an object under his control. Rabia and Queenie also note that, because they are sex workers, their partners feel especially licensed to

use their bodies as sexual objects. This diminishes their personhood and results in their partners sexually abusing, and actually raping them:

[Rabia]: They want you to have sex with him whenever **they** want. Because they think you're a sex worker – that's what you're there for. They will then try to just **take**, whether you give your consent or not...

[Queenie]: They degrade you. They take you –

[Researcher]: They degrade you? What do you mean?

[Queenie]: They degrade you, like they, like they call you a slut to your face. Like a prostitute, ja. And they, they can **poke** you in any, any hole in your body.

[Researcher]: Ja,ja.

[Rabia]: And they feel entitled to it. They don't have respect.

[Focus Group 4]

Felicia and Gloria's talk expands on this attitude of male ownership, which extends to his controlling how they behave and possessively working to prevent other men from taking 'his woman' away from him:

[Felicia]: ...They believe that a, a woman must listen to her husband. So if a husband say to that women – 'Do this'. Then the women, they don't want to do, they deserve to get a hiding from that man. Because of what the man is the owner for that woman. So they believe that a, a black woman is a slave for that man. So that is why they treat women like this.

[Researcher]: Ja.

[Gloria]: And they want to mess you **up**, that another man, he can't look at you.

[Focus Group 2]

Clearly, the woman is expected to listen to her partner both in terms of what he wants her to say (as in Rabia's earlier description), and in terms of the duties he tells her to perform. Felicia draws on the concept of a "slave" to describe this. As she is his rightful 'property', she should obey him. Thus, he should discipline her, or give her a "hiding", when he needs to assert his authority. Gloria adds an interesting secondary motive to his (physical) abuse – that he wants to "ruin" her beauty, so that other men leave her alone. Thus, his abuse functions to 'mark' and assert his ownership over her. Significantly, this demonstrates that he is less interested in what she has to offer him (here, her attractiveness), than in her as an object for him to have exclusive rights over.

Many women picked up on this idea that their partners did not want them for *them*, but because of the power and authority that ownership brings. Bernadette and Delilwe's

repetition that the man does not want his partner for her own sake reinforces this. Abongile adds that his ownership also encompasses physical possessiveness, containing her inside the house:

[Bernadette]: The man, hy doesn't want you.

[General agreement]

[Bernadette]: He wants to **abuse** you.

[Deliwe]: Ja.

[Bernadette]: He doesn't want you.

[Deliwe]: Like a punching bag.

[Abongile]: The only way I escape was through the, uh, uh, um, bedroom window.

That's how I got out of that house. I broke the window with my hands, and that is the way I got out.

[Focus Group 1]

While the talk of *women as objects* mainly referenced the idea of ownership for the sake of possession, some of the participants suggested that, as sex workers, they are seen as 'objects with a useful function', which men are entitled to exploit. Hanlie and Felicia jointly construct the idea that they are treated as 'money-making machines' by their boyfriends. Importantly, their partners feel entitled to exert their power by beating them if they don't make money:

[Hanlie]: They [the men] don't want to work.

[Felicia]: They, they are broke. So us, we must make money for them. [Pause]. That's why they cannot ever take a girl that doesn't want to work on the street...

[Researcher]: But they also abuse you.

[Murmurs of agreement]

[Felicia]: Ja, I know that they abuse us because of what, they force us for them to make money because of then they don't abuse us and beat us.

[Focus Group 2]

By drawing on a *patriarchal discourse* of intimate relationships in their talk, the participants demonstrated that their partners' rely on and reproduce it in their treatment of them. However, it was clear that the women by no means endorse the discourse they describe. The last section will expand on the counter-discourse that emerged from their constructions of their partners' subjectivities. It is, however, significant to unpack the subject positions made available for the participants who engaged with ideas of traditional gender roles and male ownership. This discourse may perhaps help the women to explain the IPV that they

have experienced as something that was somewhat depersonalised. If male violence can be seen as directed at a 'female object' or 'slave', for the sake of control and possession, this view may act to lessen the trauma and personal meaning the women attach to the violence.

**Male jealousy.** The sub-discourse of *male jealousy* was a significant aspect of the *patriarchal discourse*. It has already been seen that an important aspect of hegemonic masculinity is the idea that the man controls the woman as his possession, preventing her from being taken by another. Interestingly, this was exacerbated by the participants' positions as sex workers, which was sometimes seen as a direct threat to their partners' ownership, prompting abuse:

[Nomathemba]: ... When we sleep, then he sommer say now – something is foking me next to him, and things like that. But that's nothing happened! We lying next to each other. It's like something get to the brain...

[Queenie]: You can't say that's **possessive**, or what... Yeah no no he's acting like that, because you can't accuse your partner that. And he's like one... if he can sit the whole time in my **face**...

[Focus Group 4]

[Mara]: [Translating an Afrikaans sms from Queenie's partner] I, I [pause] it's like – 'You N [nigger]. You prostitute bitch. Where are you?' It's like that. And – 'On which penis are you hopping now?'

[Focus Group 4]

In both of the above excerpts, the women highlight the fact that their partners express an intense jealousy, paranoia and rage about their sexual activities with other men. This results in them (often, falsely) accusing the women of sexual engagements, wanting to keep tabs on them – "sit the whole time in my face" - and becoming extremely verbally abusive. As such, these stories work to demonstrate the affront their partners feel when the women break away from the confines of their possession and are 'unfaithful' through their sex work.

Foucault (1977) suggests that we should understand gendered controlling practices as discursive expressions of power. As such, the *patriarchal discourse* encourages, reproduces and enforces male power in intimate relationships. Women's awareness of this ideology often results in their self-regulation and submission, limiting the man's need to enforce his control (Towns & Scott, 2013). While the participants' talk evidences their awareness of the *patriarchal discourse*, their sex work may indicate defiance and lack of self-regulation. Thus the *patriarchal discourse's* disciplinary power fails, necessitating jealousy, punishment and

possessiveness in the man's attempt to re-assert authority (Starks, 2007 as cited in Towns & Scott, 2013).

**Patriarchal discourse as abusive and irrational.** The participants almost unanimously positioned the *patriarchal discourse* as intrinsically connected to male abuse, which is wrong and also irrational. This applied for their general descriptions of how their partners see them, and for their specific focus on *women as objects* and *male jealousy*. In the previous section, Nomathemba's evidences her partner's 'deluded' fears that she is with a client, while actually sleeping next to him. A further example of this is the following construction of Charlene's husband's anger and abuse when he came home to find that she hadn't got the house in order:

[Charlene]: Saturday, like maybe he comes 12 o'clock on a Saturday. He comes like come. Now **I** must be cross because **you** sleep out.

[Abongile]: Ja! And he's more cross than you are.

[Charlene]: That person is more cross than you are.

[Abongile]: Yes.

[Charlene]: And the swearing start... from four to six. And ya,ya,ya,ya [indicates with her head and her tone that this is boringly familiar]. From four to six the swearing start.

[Everyone makes noises of agreement]

[Abongile]: Even, when he comes home, you expect... **ayyy**... I must get myself ready.

[Charlene]: And then the swearing start. And then here from eight o'clock the violence start. [Deep breath in]. And then you must just shut up and...

[Focus Group 1]

While Charlene's husband is angry because she has not 'done as she was told', the women are quick to point out that his reaction is unreasonable. Because he has been away from home all night, Charlene has a better reason to be angry. Together, the women also construct his behaviour as predictable and stupid – "ya,ya,ya,ya". Although, interestingly Charlene describes herself as conforming to his ownership at the moment of abuse – "then you must just shut up" - it seems that they both feel that the *patriarchal discourse* wrongly informs his actions. Lindiwe goes so far as to turn her partner's 'irrationality' into a humorous story:

[Lindiwe]: My brother fight with him [her boyfriend]. 'Okay then', he said to my brother. 'You come to take the part of your [offensive Afrikaans term for prostitute] sister?

[Group intake of breath]

[Lindiwe]: It's so stupid man! My brother said – 'But what do you want with her if she's a prostitute?'

[Group laughter].

[Focus Group 3]

The fact that Lindiwe portrays her partner's attitudes as 'stupid' is an important clue. This does not act to trivialise the abuse. In fact, she goes on to describe how her partner reacted by seriously burning her with hot coffee. However, it seems as if the women are setting up an alternative account of resistance to the *patriarchal discourse*. By speaking of their partners' subjectivities in ways which cast them as abusive and illogical, the participants make a powerful united stand. This refutation of their status as objects for men to own makes an alternative, more agentic position available. More than just for them as individual women, sex workers and partners, this also serves to make space for alternative discourses of male and female roles in intimate relationships.

### **Discourse of Transaction in Intimate Relationships**

The participants also drew on a *discourse of transaction* in their descriptions of intimate relationships and IPV. This focusses on traditional ideas of 'exchange' in intimate relationships between women and men. As such, the man is commonly expected to provide for his partner, in return for her sexual availability and reproductive and domestic duties (Shefer et al., 2008). Although this has been challenged by modern non-traditional gender roles and newfound economic opportunity for women, recent literature has identified that SA still has a ubiquitous discourse mandating that men should be 'breadwinners' (Hunter, 2002; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Riley, 2010). For example, Bhana and Pattman's (2011) study in a Durban township found that girls' ideals of love were tied to their partner's financial provision, and, conversely, that boys were interested in girls as sexual partners. There is an argument to be made that this transactional element is inherent in many intimate relationships in sun-Saharan Africa, evolving from the practice of Lobola and male-headed early 20<sup>th</sup> century homesteads (Hunter, 2002). The notion of women's sexuality as being open to commodification is deeply ingrained in this social structure. Furthermore there seems to be a

links between this *discourse of transaction* and the activity of sex work, where the woman overtly sells sex to the man.

As the participants framed their experiences of IPV in relation the *discourse of transaction* in intimate relationships, they often constructed their partners' lack of provision as a form of abuse. At other times, they challenged the discourse by suggesting that sex work allows a new *discourse of female economic agency*, helping them to escape IPV by earning their own money.

**Lack of male support constructed as abuse.** Most notably in their talk of IPV, many women drew primary attention to the fact that their partners are not financially supportive of them and their children. In fact, they reproduced the *discourse of transaction* to demonstrate that their partners do not do what they 'ought' to do in an intimate relationship. Although the IPV literature speaks about financial abuse as a means of controlling women, the idea of abuse as a 'lack of support' is relatively unique (Matjasko et al., 2013).

Firstly, the link between a 'good partner' and money was made very clear throughout the focus groups. For some women, there was good reason to leave a partner who did not buy them enough – "Why must I stay there? I don't have **no** new clothes" (Lindiwe). More than this, in differentiating between the initial loving stages, and subsequent abusive times in their relationships, provision was often used as a marker:

[Lindiwe]: It's very nice...

[Jasmyn]: - It's nice, nice, nice... everything... then you see... his true colours.

[Lindiwe]: One minute he give you **everything** you want. Like that one, who stab me like that [pause] even buying me gold chains, gold earrings I can hang, **everything** I want.

[Focus Group 3]

Here, 'good times' in the women's relationships are linked to their partners' financial generosity. Lindiwe specifically contrasts her partner's pleasing initial displays of affection through material gifts, with his subsequent stabbing of her (and, presumably, the drying up of his giving). Jasmyn's mention of the man's "true colours" also alludes to the fact that she perceives an abusive man's real nature to be in opposition to his gift giving.

This link between love and money was so strongly rooted, that the fact that financially unsupportive partners do not adhere to the 'natural' way of things, was constructed as *abusive*. Indeed, this often came before mention of other types of IPV they had experienced. One can see this in Queenie's introduction to her relationship:

[Queenie]: ... My husband signed, um [pause] on a customary **marriage**... But we didn't get anything from him, from his family. So-

[Researcher]: You didn't get anything from his family?

[Queenie]: Yeah nothing [pause] like, uh, what do you call it? **Lobola**...

[Focus Group 4]

By positioning her husband as acting against traditional values and practices of Lobola, Queenie insinuates something about his approach to the relationship. Although she went on to talk about his physically, emotionally and sexually abusive behaviour, for her, his lack of provision is a clear sign that he is not a good partner.

This was also clearly caught up with their subjective experiences of being sex workers. Thus, participants drew on the *discourse of transaction* to reference their partner's financial 'abuse' as something that explains, justifies and necessitates their sex work:

[Charlene]: As long as a man can get you, he's gonna promise you a lot of things.

[Abongile]: Lots of things, ja.

[Charlene]: But at the end of the day, this is for you, **forget** about that.

[Abongile]: Mmm.

[Charlene]: By the end of the day you have to struggle to get out of that [pause] and make a **u-turn** to **do** things right so that he mustn't know. That's also a tricky part, because by the end of the day some of your friends and some people are **still** gonna judge.

[Deliwe]: Mmm!

[Charlene]: Then how and what you're gonna say and what you're going to do...

[Deliwe]: - open book -

[Abongile]: But most of all...

[Charlene]: And there's also a-

[Bernadette]: In the sex work industry that I know, you meet people, most of the women in the sex work **was** abused...

[Focus Group 1]

In this excerpt, the participants dialogically position their sex work as something understandable, given the unfair position within which they have been placed by their partners. Charlene and Abongile draw attention to the fact that men fail to deliver on their promises of support, which means that the onus falls on the woman to look after herself. Although people disapprove of their sex work, this is positioned as an uncharitable reaction which does not acknowledge that they have been the wronged party. Bernadette summarises

this by saying that women end up in sex work because of abuse. This, again, links their partners' lack of provision to the concept of abuse, and positions them, as female sex workers, as victims of unfair relationships.

Almost all of the participants' reasons for entering sex work were linked to financial need. This finding is in alignment with other studies that have identified poverty as the major reason for entry into sex work in SA (Halland, 2010; Wojcicki & Malala, 2001). In the present study, the participants explained this in relation to their partners' lack of support, which manifested in their lives in three different ways. A minority of the participants had left financially supportive partners because of IPV, and now needed to support themselves. Many participants did sex work because their partners did not support them. Others were coerced into sex work in order to support their partner. Significantly, all three of these scenarios were constructed as unnatural and unfair. The last instance - where the woman supports her partner through sex work - was framed as a complete inversion of normal relationship economics:

[Jasmyn]: And I talk to him, okay – '**Stand** for the meat, **stand** for the veg'.

[Researcher]: Ja.

[Jasmyn]: 'I'll stand for the groceries and everything'.

[Researcher]: Ja.

[Jasmyn]: Doesn't happen like that. [Smacks her hands].

[Jasmyn]: It's like I support – I must [pause], I'm, I'm, I'm his husband, he's my wife.

[Lindiwe]: Yes! Uh...

[Focus Group 3]

Initially, Jasmyn seems happy to have a more progressive, egalitarian financial arrangement with her husband, where they share the cost of living. However, this viewpoint descends back to a reiteration of the *discourse of transaction* when her partner refuses to stand for anything. She sees him as becoming like the woman in the relationship, where she (as the provider) has to occupy the role of the man.

It has been shown that the participants drew on, and reproduced the *discourse of transaction* to demonstrate the 'wrongness' of their intimate partners not fulfilling the traditional role of financial provider. Their conversation works to discursively present themselves as 'abused' when they are not supported, or when they have to take on the male provider role. It also links lack of provision to other instances of IPV. In some ways, this approach shuts down their ability to act, positioning them as passive victims of fundamentally 'bad partners'. Significantly, this also functions to make their sex work an acceptable and

available avenue for action. Thus, the fact that the participants discursively constructed lack of male provision as abuse was intrinsically tied to their identity as sex workers. Because of the financial need arising from their partners' abusive treatment of them, their sex work is cast as an understandable necessity. In the next section, I discuss how it becomes seen as admirable, in taking ownership of their income.

**Counter Discourse of Female Economic Agency.** Although the participants drew on, and aligned themselves with notions of the male breadwinner, they also offered a counter *discourse of female economic agency*. The subject always has the ability to disrupt dominant discourses and to draw on alternative discourses (Willig, 2008). As such, individual's positions in relation to discourses like the traditional *discourse of transaction* can be contradictory or ambiguous (Gavey, 1997). As seen earlier, sex work was sometimes framed as a forced-option as a result of the bad male provider. Conversely, sex work was often suggested as an agentic way for the woman to escape an abusive intimate partner:

[Bernadette]: [Talking about sex work]. It makes us a little stronger. By earning our own money in **separate**, different ways, without men.

[Loud noises of agreement].

[Abongile]: Ja! Ja! Without them supporting you, without men supporting **you**.

Umm [pause] how can I say?

[Bernadette]: You can say you don't have to [pause] rely on a man, because there's no man in sight [pause] there's no man [pause] with you, and which you have to support. There's other things you can do now. Like you think about yourself, you have to think about your kids. You don't have to worry about the man no more, because that man doesn't **exist** to you.

[Deliwe]: Mmm.

[Bernadette]: Because, you can get yourself **out** of the abuse, and try to find yourself another page. To create yourself another creation.

[Focus Group 1]

This conversation positions sex work as a way for the women to end IPV and take control of their lives, which is constructed as something strengthening and empowering. The economic freedom that sex work brings is able to eliminate the negative influence of an abusive partner to the extent that he ceases to "exist" to her. Abongile points out that sex workers do not have to "rely" on a man's support. Bernadette qualifies that they also do not have to support their partners. This allows them to escape financial abuse as well as other

types of abuse that they would otherwise have to put up with. The sex worker's economic separation and agency brings choice and freedom to prioritise her interests as well as her children's. Although this does not advocate a full reversal of the *discourse of transaction* (ie: a switch of partner's roles), it suggests an alternative *discourse of female economic agency*. This counter-discourse also provides a type of justification for sex work in relation to IPV, but comes with ideas of empowerment, instead of victimhood.

Significantly, however, participants' discursive presentations of themselves as empowered, or as victims (as in the previous section), were sometimes at odds with each other in the conversation:

[Charlene]: You feel powerful.

[Bernadette]: But if you ask them – ‘**Why** are you here? **Why** are you doing this?’.  
‘Because I was abused’ [the hypothetical sex worker's answer].

[Focus Group 1]

This contradictory presentation of sex work has implications for the amount of power that sex work is able to offer a woman who has experienced IPV, and underlines the debate in the literature about sex workers as victims or agentic agents (see Strega et al., 2014). The fact that Charlene and Bernadette feel free to offer this ambivalence in conversation may also show that it is possible for them to contain both subject positions, and to draw on them in relation to different aspects of their experiences of IPV and sex work.

This duel-positioning continued in conversation when I suggested that sex work, although offering an escape from abusive intimate partners, is itself still a form of financial dependence on a man (Niemi, 2010). In some ways, the idea of female economic agency through sex work may subtly reinforce the gender roles inherent in the *male breadwinner discourse*:

[Researcher]: But sex work still involves men, you know what I mean?

[Bernadette]: Yes!

[Abongile]: But it's also not easy. The sex work is not easy.

[Bernadette]: But this is not a man whose gonna abuse you. It's a man which you gonna [pause] and getting money, and that's that.

[Focus Group 1]

Abongile and Bernadette have quite different responses to the question. Abongile makes the qualification that sex work is not easy. This resonates with the stories of horrific client abuse that emerged throughout the focus groups. As such, their interactions with men are ‘what makes sex work difficult’. Bernadette's response focuses on the more contained

form of financial relationship that she can have with a client, as compared to an abusive partner. A client will not abuse her, and the relationship extends only so far as his payment of her. Although she still depends on him for income, in many ways he is reduced to only being a source of money. Many of the participants mentioned that they 'know how to handle clients' (as opposed, implicitly, to an intimate partner). Thus, sex work is framed as an 'uncomplicated' and 'agreeable' version of a transaction between her and a man.

This shift between the disagreeable abusive intimate relationship and easier client relationship was evidenced in the strong ambiguity expressed by some of the women around how they feel towards their abusive partners. This is evident in Lindiwe and Khanyiswa's talk about finding that their partners have been unfaithful to them with other sex workers:

[Lindiwe]: My guy did have another one in, in [pause]. He was a **real** client with the girls.

[Researcher]: Ja.

[Jasmyn]: Ja.

[Khanyiswa]: That's why I'm saying if he wants to do [pause] if he want to sleep with me, if he want to have sex with me, I say – 'Pay me'.

[Focus Group 3]

In some ways, Khanyiswa's demand that her boyfriend pay her for sex is a reaction to his buying sex from other women. In other ways, her wish to transform her problematic boyfriend into a paying client is significant. Firstly, she is using her status as a sex worker as a form of power, reducing him to the status of a paying client who is easier to deal with. Secondly, by asserting herself in this way, she reconstitutes her position to the idea of transaction between men and women and, actually officialises the *discourse of transaction* in her intimate relationship. By demanding that he formally pay her for sex, she is empowered and male payment is constructed as something that she can control to her own advantage with her sexual body.

Overall, the data indicated that participants relied heavily on the *discourse of transaction* to construct and frame their experiences of their intimate partners, IPV, and sex work. Most frequently, they engaged with and reproduced the discourse to evidence their own abuse and their subsequent need to enter sex work because of their partners' wrongful lack of provision. At other times, however, they challenged the discourse by presenting an alternative *discourse of female economic agency* through sex work, allowing them to escape IPV by taking ownership of their income.

## 7. Limitations of the Project

The data obtained by this study were limited by the issue of language. The findings may have been impoverished to some extent by the fact that the focus groups were conducted in English. While all of the participants spoke at least two languages, they tended to have Afrikaans or Xhosa as a first language, with English as a second language. Because I only speak English, and could not access a translator, the groups unfortunately had to be conducted in English. As such, some of the participants' meaning and natural expression may have been lost through their being forced to use a language that was not entirely 'their own'. Furthermore, when they reverted to their first languages occasionally, I was not able to follow what was being said, and this was lost from the analysis. However, with this said, the participants were still remarkably expressive, and often translated important things that had been said in another language for me.

## 8. Summary and Conclusions

While the findings of this study cannot be indiscriminately generalized, it is significant that this particular group of female sex workers drew heavily on the *patriarchal discourse* and the *discourse of transaction* when constructing their intimate relationships, experiences of IPV and sex work. Firstly, the analysis found that the women drew on a *patriarchal discourse* to frame their abusive partners' attitudes and treatment of them, constructing their partners as seeing them as objects to be possessed and controlled. Each group also collectively problematised their partners' hegemonic ideologies and ownership practices. The women evidenced that their sex work challenged their partners' ownership of them, and, furthermore, discursively portrayed their partners' use of the *patriarchal discourse* as incorrect and irrational.

Secondly, the participants both endorsed a *discourse of transaction* in intimate relationships and advocated for an alternative *discourse of female economic agency* through sex work. On one hand they used their partners' lack of provision to evidence what they saw as an abusive and fundamentally unnatural relationship. Furthermore, 'victimhood' through IPV - whether through financial abuse or other abuse - justified their sex work as an understandable economic necessity. On the other hand, they suggested sex work as an agentic and safe form of financial transaction with men. Importantly economic agency through sex work was linked with their ability to escape IPV.

These focus groups gave evidence of how singular selves and groups are able to take up a variety of subject positions in relation to discourse (Willig, 2008). In general, the women's talk functioned to confront their partners' abusive attitudes and practices explained their sex work. Although they sometimes framed themselves as powerless, this ability to selectively position themselves demonstrated a notable level of agency and discursive power.

FDA understands 'text', or 'talk' as something containing complicated systems of meaning which act to construct the speakers' social and psychological realities. However, Willig (2008) suggests that this discursive 'reality creation' might be shaped and limited by material reality to some extent. While the participants demonstrated a notable level of discursive empowerment, this would perhaps be greater if they were not constrained by such significant material marginalisation. This work has highlighted the fact that female sex workers are confronted with pervasive gender-based violence and discrimination. They endure extreme physical, sexual, emotional, verbal and financial abuse from their male partners, which is often exacerbated by the fact that they do sex work. Most of the participants entered sex work out of dire financial need, to escape IPV, or because they are forced to make money for their partners. Although the analysis did not focus on client-abuse, it was also made abundantly clear that the women encounter violent and emotionally damaging abuse through their sex work. Thus, from an intersectional feminist understanding, these women are inherently marginalized by various material forces of gender, race, class and socio-economics. Although they occupy some encouraging positions of power in their talk, their capacity for action and their ability to discursively 'create' their realities may be limited in some ways.

With that said, the participants' alternative suggestions in the face of traditional patriarchal social ideologies create space for discursive and material change. Their suggestions certainly point out ways in which normative discourses about heterosexual relationships need to be challenged and re-shaped. Feminist research goes hand in hand with a call to activism (Yllo, 1990). This study attempts to do this by working to deconstruct problematic discourses and to suggest more helpful ways to reconstruct our social language and practices (Gergen, 1985). In line with other literature, the findings have shown that there are still problematic hegemonic ideologies that inform South African, and, specifically, sex workers' intimate relationships. However we have also been alerted to a range of alternative possibilities, specifically in the form of a *discourse of female economic agency* and the abandonment of the *patriarchal discourse* as something abusive and irrational. As Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (2010) point out, the challenge now is to find innovative ways to spread and

exploit these new ideas, in order to affect change. While this study itself goes some ways in changing predominant discourses, real change will require widespread discursive advocacy for female empowerment. More than this, intersectional theory reminds us that it is not helpful to address *only* gender-based discourse and practice. Many other systems of oppression serve to maintain IPV and also need to be addressed.

Beyond offering some suggestions towards wider discursive change, this study acts to better inform current conceptions of IPV as a phenomenon. It has also identified specific avenues for change to be targeted and support strategies that may be helpful for women, and especially sex workers, who experience IPV. Firstly, the findings serve to confirm and reinforce the links made in recent IPV literature between patriarchal gender roles, male coercive control and IPV (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2013; Johnson, 2011). By drawing on the *patriarchal discourse*, the participants highlighted the fact that, as females, they are expected to be passive, silent 'objects', under the control of the dominant male. Thus, in line with other authors, I suggest that preventative strategies should be aimed at creating new discourses of femininity and masculinity in the context of heterosexual relationships - re-empowering and prioritising the interests of women (Lau & Stevens, 2012; Sathiparsad, 2008; Towns & Scott, 2013). Interestingly, the WHO, (2008) has recently identified that a change in attitudes and practices of hegemonic masculinity in intimate relationships should be specifically aimed for in the fight against IPV. Although women who experience IPV should be introduced to new conceptions of gender roles and femininity in relationships (and this study demonstrates that this is already true of this sample of women), this kind of attitude-change should also be directed at men who perpetrate abuse. While it might be difficult to access the male partners of sex workers, this should, at the very least, be targeted at South African males living in low socio-economic areas.

Secondly, the findings suggest that abuse can take the form of a 'lack of provision' or of 'using' a partner to make money in an extreme or unreasonable way (for instance, by forcing a woman to do sex work). Thus far, the literature seems to have discussed financial abuse mainly as a partner's controlling the couple's finances in order to make the other partner financially dependent and unable to leave (Johnson, 2011; Matjasko et al., 2013). While this relates to notions of male control, it is different to what this study's participants constructed as abuse due to lack of provision for themselves and their children. Some might argue that casting this as 'abusive' advocates the old-fashioned and gender-role prescriptive idea that men 'should' be providers. Indeed, this would not be very helpful. However, it is salient to recognise that extreme non-provision by the male, or, unreasonable attempts to

'force' her financial support should be considered as an addition to the way IPV is defined. This may be especially relevant in contexts such as the South African one, where poverty and unemployment are major factors. Beyond adjusting the definition of IPV, also it seems reasonable to suggest that economic considerations form a major part of a support strategy for women, and especially South African sex workers, who encounter IPV. This could come in the form of financial assistance, housing, child support or legal aid to procure paternal child maintenance.

This study has unpacked female sex workers' co-constructions of IPV, and discussed the positions that are made available for them. It has also offered some new insights into our theoretical understandings of IPV as phenomenon, and how it ought to be addressed, both at the level of broad scale discursive change and at the level of strategic support and prevention.

In recognising that these findings come from a singular engagement with female sex workers in relationships with men, future research should engage with the experiences of male, transgender or lesbian sex workers – especially given the additional discrimination and marginalization these groups might encounter. Furthermore, given this study's participants' emphasis on problematic notions of masculinity, engaging with female sex workers' male partners' discursive constructions of IPV should be a priority for future research.

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Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Length of Time as a Sex Worker	Type(s) of (Abusive) Relationship(s)	How long ago was (were) the relationship(s)?	Current Relationship Status	Level of Education	Number of Children
Abongile	40s	20 years	Husband	2 years	Single	-	2
Bernadette	35	16 years	Husband	2 years	Boyfriend	Grade 11	5
Charlene	51	16 years	Boyfriend	25 years	Single	Grade 11	1
Deliwe	35	20 years	Boyfriend	6 months	Single	Grade 12	3
Esme	31	10 years	Boyfriend	5 years	Married	Grade 8	1
Felicia	23	3 years	Boyfriend	Current	Boyfriend	Grade 9	0
Gloria	37	11 years	Husband	6 years	Single	Grade 11	3
Hanlie	37	2 years	Boyfriend	6 months	Single	Grade 12	4
Irene	40	10 years	Husband	4 years	Single	-	2
Jasmyn	50	22 years	Boyfriend Husband	- years Current	Married	Grade 6	2
Khanyiswa	62	Long time	Husband	30 years	Single	Grade 8	2
Lindiwe	48	30 years	Boyfriends	-	Boyfriend	Grade 9	3
Mara	36	2 years	Boyfriend	Current	Boyfriend	Grade 9	2
Nomathemba	29	1 year	Boyfriend	Current	Boyfriend	Grade 8	1
Odette	32	12 years	Boyfriend	1 year	Single	Grade 12	3
Phelisa	37	8 years	Boyfriend	Current	Boyfriend	Grade 12	2
Queenie	38	7 months	Husband	Current	Married	Grade 12	0
Rabia	40	9 years	Husband Boyfriend	8 years Current	Boyfriend	Grade 10	2
Sindiswa	36	3 years	Boyfriend	Current	Boyfriend	Grade 12	0

*Note:* A dash indicates a lack of response to a particular question.

## **Appendix A**

### **Semi-structured Focus Group Schedule**

Brief welcome, information about proceedings, introductions and consent and demographic forms filled out.

Introduce the discussion and IPV as a topic. Explaining what an intimate partner means (boyfriend or husband, or someone you may be emotionally and physically close to).

1. Tell us a bit about what it is like for you to have an intimate partner, or what it has been like in the past.
2. Tell us about violence in relationships. How does this happen? What types of behaviour fall under 'partner abuse'?
3. Tell us a bit about your experiences of intimate partner violence. This doesn't have to be a personal experience necessarily – how have you seen IPV occurring amongst other sex workers, friends and family?
4. Do you think that your job makes you more vulnerable to intimate partner violence? In what ways?
5. What kinds of situations do you think make intimate partner violence more likely?
6. What do you think can be done about intimate partner violence? What needs to change?
7. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of intimate partner violence as a sex worker? What do you think is important for us to know?
8. How has your experience of this focus group been? Have you felt unhappy or uncomfortable about anything? Do you feel that you have had to space to share your thoughts and experiences in a real way? If not, what was holding you back?

**Appendix B**  
**Informed Consent Form**

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

**Sex Workers Talk About their Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence**

**1. Invitation and Purpose**

You are invited to participate in this research, which will look into how sex workers talk about their experience of intimate partner violence. I am an honours student from the Psychology Department of the University of Cape Town.

**2. Procedures**

If you take part in the study, myself and a fellow student will conduct a focus group with you and about five other female sex workers. These focus groups will deal with how you, as sex workers, speak about any intimate relationships that you have had, what you understand intimate partner violence to be and on how you have experienced intimate partner violence. This should take about an hour and a half.

Please note that participation in these focus groups is completely voluntary. You are free to leave the group at any time with no penalty or consequences.

**3. Risks, Discomforts & Inconveniences**

Because this research will solely comprise of group discussions, there is very little risk involved for you. However, speaking about intimate partner violence on a general or personal level may be emotionally distressing. It is up to you as to what you would like to bring up or speak about during the focus group and you do not have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable. If you do feel upset or distressed by anything brought up in the focus groups, you should ask SWEAT for support. You will also be given a referral list of counsellors and organisations which may be able to help you further. The only other inconvenience to you is the hour or hour and a half of time that you volunteer to give up for the focus group.

**4. Benefits**

This study gives you an opportunity to express your ideas and feelings around having intimate relationships and around any intimate partner violence that you may have encountered. This allows you to raise peoples' awareness about a difficult problem that sex workers can face and, also, will hopefully help organizations like SWEAT to

implement programmes to help sex workers who experience intimate partner violence. You will also be provided with R40 for transport, and refreshments during the group.

### **5. Privacy and Confidentiality**

The focus groups will take place in a quiet, private room, and any thoughts or information shared will remain strictly confidential between those present. Anything you say that is used in the study will be presented anonymously and you also have the right to request that any information that you give is removed from the study. A tape recorder will be used during the focus group, and the researchers may also take notes. If you would like something not to be written down, or for the tape recorder to be switched off, you may request this. Nobody but myself and my research supervisor will listen to or have access to the recordings taken. It is not possible for the researchers to guarantee that other members of the focus groups will keep what you say confidential. We will tell everyone that the information discussed shouldn't be shared outside of the group, but you should also be aware that what you say cannot be guaranteed to be confidential in this regard.

### **6. Contact Details**

If you require any further information about the study or have any concerns, please contact Amy Gorven on 082 756 6476 or at grvamy001@myuct.ac.za or Dr Floretta Boonzaier at the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town on 021 650 3429 or at floretta.boonzaier@uct.ac.za.

### **7. Signatures**

\_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name) has been informed of the nature and purpose of the research procedures described above, including any potential risks involved in their participation. She has been allowed to ask questions, which have been answered to the best of the researcher's ability. A signed copy of this consent form will be made available to the participant.

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature      Date

I have been informed about this study and understand its purpose, potential risks and benefits. I agree to participate in this research. I understand that I am free to withdraw this consent and leave the study at any time, and that I will incur no consequences by doing so. I also understand that the focus group discussion will be recorded, but that I have the right to ask that certain recorded information is not used.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature      Date