

## Abused Women's Understandings of Intimate Partner Violence and the Link to Intimate Femicide

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**Key words:**

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**Abstract:** In this article, we explore how women survivors of intimate partner violence understand the abuse they endured and the possible link to intimate femicide. This is a qualitative study based on a feminist poststructuralist perspective. Seven South African women, aged 23 to 50 years, with a history of different manifestations of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) participated in open-ended interviews. The data was analyzed by means of discourse analysis. In their explanations, the women constructed gendered identities, which reflected contradictory and ambiguous subjective experiences. The women's understandings were filtered through the particular social context in which their abusive experiences occurred. The findings highlighted that contemplating femicide was too threatening, and consequently participants drew on discourses of femininity, romantic love, and others to justify their remaining in their violence-ridden relationships. It emphasizes the need for additional engagement in women's understandings of intimate femicide, as women who live in abusive relationships have largely been consigned to the periphery.

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## 1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is recognized as a severe medical and public health concern for women (BOONZAIER, 2008; TOWNS & ADAMS, 2009). The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined IPV as behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm such as acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors (WHO, 2012). The intention to do harm, the sense of entitlement, and the desire to control and dominate are defining features of IPV, as are the repetitive nature of the behavior and its tendency to escalate in severity (JOYNER & MASH, 2012). Globally, the majority of IPV is perpetrated by men against women (GASS, STEIN, WILLIAMS & SEEDAT, 2010). Preventing IPV is vital for ensuring the health, safety, and optimal well-being of women. [1]

IPV has been described as endemic to South African society and is the most widespread form of violence affecting women in South Africa (JOYNER & MASH, 2012; MOSAVEL, AHMED & SIMON, 2011; SHAMU, ABRAHAMS, TEMMERMAN, MUSEKIWA & ZAROWSKY, 2011). At least one in four women in South Africa has been in an abusive relationship at some point in their lives (LAU, 2009). [2]

A dominant factor contributing to the high IPV rate in South Africa is the fact that South African culture is to a large extent still regarded as patriarchal and hierarchical, where women are expected to be obedient and men are viewed as the disciplinarians in the family. Although these traditions are beginning to shift, socially dictated gender roles are pervasive and relate to the widespread manifestation of IPV in South Africa. Violence for men is normalized and thus asserting their masculinity through violence is seen as a socially acceptable means of exercising power over women (JEWKES et al., 2009). Consequently, IPV demolishes the idea of gender equality and social justice (ibid.). [3]

The murder of women by their intimate partners is linked to a history of IPV (CAMPBELL, 2012). In South Africa, many relationships comprising long-term physical abuse of the woman by a man end in mortality (GASS et al., 2010). Intimate femicide refers to the murder of a woman by an intimate partner, such as her "husband, boyfriend (dating or cohabiting), ex-husband (divorced or separated) or ex-boyfriend or a rejected would-be lover" (MATHEWS et al., 2008, p.553). According to RUSSELL and HARMES (2001), the term suggests that when women are murdered, femaleness becomes a risk factor, especially in intimate relationships. Therefore, the term was introduced to highlight the role of gender in murder cases. It emphasized the fact that the majority of murder victims are women and the majority of perpetrators are men (ibid.). [4]

Compared to the rest of the world, women in South Africa remain the most likely to be murdered by an intimate partner (JEWKES et al., 2009). South Africa has a female homicide rate six times the global average and half of murdered women are killed by an intimate partner (MATHEWS, JEWKES & ABRAHAMS, 2011).

Women are therefore more likely to be murdered by a known perpetrator than by an unknown perpetrator (MATHEWS et al., 2004). [5]

Given the magnitude of the problem, an in-depth exploration in South Africa is crucial to enhance our understanding of IPV and intimate femicide. Qualitative research provides the opportunity for researchers to gain a rich perspective that in turn enables the development of new understandings that have the potential to be responsive to complex problems in society (ULIN, ROBINSON & TOLLEY, 2005). However, intimate femicide has received very little attention and therefore, there is a dearth of research conducted in South Africa—a country which has one of the highest reported rates worldwide (GASS et al., 2010; MATHEWS et al., 2008). In particular, there is a lack of research focusing on women's understandings of intimate femicide and their level of risk while in an abusive relationship. Many studies on intimate femicide in South Africa have overlooked the voices of abused women (ABRAHAMS, MATHEWS, MARTIN, LOMBARD & JEWKES, 2013; MATHEWS, 2010; MATHEWS et al., 2004, 2008). Instead, these studies have focused on examining the patterns of intimate femicide (MATHEWS et al., 2008); the prevalence of intimate femicide in South Africa (ABRAHAMS et al., 2013; MATHEWS et al., 2004); and understanding intimate femicide from the perpetrator's perspective (MATHEWS, 2010). Although the previous studies conducted add vital information to the body of research, the necessity of this study lies in its ability to examine intimate femicide from the perspective of those most at risk of being murdered. [6]

To the best of our knowledge, no scholars have yet explored this area in the South African context and therefore it will be a valuable contribution as it illuminates the voices of women survivors of IPV and explores how women construct their understandings of IPV and their level of risk (FOX et al., 2007). This is especially valuable since women are largely not given a "voice" in mainstream research (BOONZAIER & VAN SCHALKWYK, 2011). It is critically important for informing strategies and programs to reduce the risk level of intimate femicide and ultimately to guide prevention policy to ensure the widespread safety of women. In this study, we employed qualitative methodologies to explore the discourses of women survivors of IPV drawn on to understand intimate femicide. [7]

The following sections will explore, in more detail, the conceptual framework, the study setting and methodology used. The study's findings will also be presented as well as suggestions for future research. [8]

## 2. Conceptual Framework

This article is informed by feminist poststructuralism. WEEDON (1987) defines feminist poststructuralism as "a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change" (pp.40-41). Feminist poststructuralism acknowledges that there are multiple truths, and that a person's interpretation of significant events is dependent on the social context that they are in (GOLDMAN & DU MONT, 2001). Therefore, there are many different understandings, meanings, opinions, and perspectives of intimate femicide, which can be explored and challenged (CARTER & LITTLE, 2007). These understandings of intimate femicide can be generated from drawing on the discourses in a particular social and cultural context that is available to women. A significant feature of post structural feminism is that it attempts to unpack how women's understandings of experiences and phenomena which affect them, are constructed within discourses and power relations (BEASLEY, 1999). [9]

## 3. Study Setting

We conducted this study in Cape Town, South Africa, a country that had 51 770 560 million people in 2011, according to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA). In 2011, the City of Cape Town reported Cape Town's population to be 3.5 million people comprising the following groups: Colored 42,4%, African 38,6%, White 15,7%, Indian/Asian 1,4% and other 1,9% (StatsSA, 2011)<sup>1</sup>. The City consists of approximately 1,068,572 households according to Census 2011, with nearly 36% of the households living below the poverty line of less than R 3,500 per month<sup>2</sup>. [10]

The main languages spoken in Cape Town are Afrikaans (34,9%), isiXhosa (29,2%) and English (27,8%). Cape Town is an important area in which to conduct research related to IPV and intimate femicide, considering that the region of Cape Town reportedly has the highest femicide rate in the country (MATHEWS, 2010; MATHEWS et al., 2011). Two Cape Town shelters offering short-term accommodation and assistance to women facing domestic violence issues were accessed for data collection purposes. The first shelter is located in a middle-class suburb of Cape Town, and the second shelter is located on the Cape Flats<sup>3</sup> in Cape Town. At both shelters, the social work team comprising

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1 The term "Colored" is used to refer to one of the many racial categories constructed by the Apartheid government of South Africa. However, although originally used as an Apartheid racial designation, this category is currently still used in South Africa. In particular, the term "Colored" is used to refer to a group of people who constituted one of the oppressed groups and who are of "mixed" ancestry (BOONZAIER & VAN SCHALKWYK, 2011). Moreover, my use of these racial terms is not intended to represent race as fixed or unchanging, as I acknowledge that it is as fluid, contradictory and unstable as gendered subjectivities (WEEDON, 1987).

2 Using the average exchange rate for 2015 of 1 ZAR = 0.081 USD, the South African poverty line of R3500 equates to USD 283.50.

3 The Cape Flats is located on the outskirts of Cape Town and was established by the apartheid government to house the non-white population. It is generally a dreary place with high unemployment and low education levels.

social workers and psychologists provide counseling to the women, regardless of race or religion. [11]

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Sampling and data collection**

Since this study sought to explore how women survivors of IPV understand intimate femicide and their level of risk in a violent relationship, an exploratory qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate to meet its aim. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour each, were conducted with women who had experienced IPV, about their understanding of intimate femicide and level of risk. Once ethical approval was received from the Senate Higher Degrees Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape, the first author, a master's student, proceeded to phone organizations that provide shelter to women who have experienced IPV. The first author introduced herself to the social workers and asked whether they would allow her to conduct research at their organization. Once she obtained their permission, she proceeded to explain the aim of the study and provided them with the selection criteria. The selection criteria for this study were twofold. Since this study was specifically interested in exploring how women who were previously in abusive heterosexual relationships understand intimate femicide, it was vital that only women who matched these criteria were recruited from the shelters. Women who were currently staying at the shelters as a result of abuse experienced from fathers or brothers, for example, were not eligible. Purposive sampling was used to generate a sample of women who had experienced IPV at the hands of their intimate male partners (LEWIN, 2005). The second criterion was related to the issue of language. The issue of language cannot be ignored as it is central in discourse analysis (GAVEY, 2007; PARKER, 2005). Since the intention of analysis was discourse analysis, we decided that only women who were comfortable with the English language would be considered. The rationale for this was based on the fact that the analysis of understanding is rooted in language (GAVEY, 1989; WEEDON, 1987). In addition, the emphasis on the subtle nuances of language as part of discourse analysis could potentially have been lost in the process of translation from another language (WILLIG, 2008). Therefore, if we had encountered prospective participants who were not able to speak English, they would have been excluded. Fortunately, all the women who volunteered were able to speak English. [12]

Each social worker set up suitable dates and times for the first author to go to the respective shelters to conduct the interviews. At each shelter, the interviews were conducted in a safe, quiet and private room. Great emphasis was placed on confidentiality and anonymity and each participant was informed that counseling would be provided should they feel a need for support after the interview. This was done through the social worker at each shelter. [13]

We developed a semi-structured interview guide for use with the participants, based on the literature reviewed. While the guide was semi-structured, the

questions were framed in a way that enabled flexibility and exploration where needed. This approach encouraged participants to speak freely about their understandings regarding the complex relationship between IPV and intimate femicide. It also allowed for flexibility in order to ask new or follow-up questions as needed. MORGAN (2007) posits that individual interviews can encourage participants to share more information about sensitive issues because of the confidential nature of the conversation. FARQUHAR and DAS (1999) point out that confidentiality can also become an issue when conducting focus groups on personal and sensitive topics if the location of the participants is not taken into consideration. Therefore, because the women whom we interviewed lived with each other, we felt that the best way to ensure confidentiality was to conduct individual interviews. Our concern and decision to conduct individual interviews was later confirmed in an interview, when one of the women commented that she would not speak about her abuse in front of the other women, because they all lived together and she would have to see them every day. Furthermore, the use of a flexible interviewing approach afforded the first author the opportunity to be able to listen to the women's understandings from their own vantage point, using their own words, as the purpose of open-ended questions is to encourage participants to express their way of understanding in their own words (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2003). Hence, the interview schedule merely acted as a guide to what was discussed. [14]

Seven participants volunteered to participate in the study. Five of the seven women came from one Cape Town shelter for abused women and the last two women came from a different Cape Town shelter. The reason for this was that the first shelter only had five women available to be interviewed, as it was quite a small shelter. Therefore, the first author reached out to a second organization to interview two more women. The first author also served as the sole interviewer during data collection. The second author assisted and advised the first author throughout the research process. On average, two interviews were conducted in one day. All interviews were carried out in either the first or the second shelter, depending on which shelter the women were living in. [15]

The mean age of the participants was 38 years. Only one woman was married to her abusive male partner at the time of the interview, one woman was currently in the process of getting a divorce, and one woman was already divorced from her abusive ex-husband, while four women were at the shelter as a result of abuse experienced at the hands of ex-boyfriends. On average, the women in this study had three children. Only two of the participants were employed at the time of the interview. Six of the participants were "Colored" (see Note 1) and one participant was "Black." The sample consisted of seven women because we were unable to access more participants due to time constraints. Pseudo-names are used, after the interviews were conducted, the first author listened to the recordings and transcribed the interviews. The recorded interviews were checked against each transcribed interview a few times to ensure that it was done without error (CRESWELL, 2007). We paid close attention to ethics during the whole of our study. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Senate Higher Degrees

Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape. The shelters also approved all components of the study. [16]

#### 4.2 Data analysis

The data in this study lent itself to discourse analysis, which is in keeping with the theoretical framework of the study, namely feminist poststructuralism (GAVEY, 2007; PARKER, 2005; WEEDON, 1987). Discourse analysis is an approach to the analysis of talk and other forms of discourse that emphasize how versions of reality are communicated through language (BRYMAN, 2012). In discourse analysis, the focus is on language and how an individual's understanding of experience is constructed through language (WILLIG, 2008). [17]

The discourse analysis in this study translated into analyzing the texts of women survivors of IPV, and unpacking the discourses they drew on to understand intimate femicide. It involved examining how these discourses assisted or hampered their understanding of intimate femicide, specifically in the context of an abusive relationship. Discourse analysis was conducted in the following way, based on the suggestions proposed by WILLIG:

- The first author immersed herself in the data by transcribing each interview and then thoroughly reading and re-reading transcripts. She also listened to the tapes while reading the transcripts, which led to getting a better grasp of the participants' accounts as well as to the words that were spoken, as well as to *how* they were spoken.
- Deconstructing the dominant discourses in the analysis involved the following:
  - Identifying the different ways in which the discursive object, namely intimate femicide, was constructed in the transcripts. This was done by highlighting all references to intimate femicide. Both implicit and explicit references were noted. The fact that there was often no direct reference to the discursive object provided great insight into the way in which it was constructed. For example, many of the participants referred to intimate femicide without directly naming it. Here, reference to "it" or "that" constructs the discursive object (i.e., intimate femicide) as something unspeakable and perhaps also unknowable. The focus was also on areas of the conversations where silences emerged and attempts were made to understand why there was a silence or why a specific question was not answered.
  - Once all the parts of the transcript that contributed to the construction of intimate femicide were identified, we focused on the differences between these constructions. This was done since what appears to be one and the same discursive object can be constructed in very different ways.
  - Thereafter, we attempted to locate the discursive constructions of intimate femicide within wider discourses. The coding of the transcripts was guided by the objectives of this study. In addition, the coding was guided by what emerged from the data, as opposed to previous literature indicating what should emerge. This was done as we wanted new categories of

understanding to emerge (ibid.). We thus listened to what the women themselves highlighted as important. In an attempt to identify the discourses, we noted the types of discourses that women drew on and the ways in which they adopted or resisted these discourses. We also highlighted aspects of the transcripts where we observed how these discourses reproduced or challenged existing gender relations, specifically in the context of a violent relationship, while also noting the social and economic context and relations of power in South Africa. For example, in the interviews, the women drew on a religious discourse when they explained that they should always forgive their intimate male partners. Few of the women resisted the religious notion of forgiveness.

- The next part of the analysis involved a closer investigation of the discursive contexts within which the different constructions of intimate femicide were being employed. For example, we asked certain questions such as, what is gained from constructing intimate femicide in this kind of way? For instance, it could be that the women's use of a religious discourse allowed them to attribute responsibility for their staying in the abusive relationship so long, to the religious notion of forgiveness. This focus allowed us to gain a clearer understanding of what the different constructions of the discursive object are capable of achieving in the text.
- Having identified the numerous constructions of intimate femicide in the text, and having located them in wider discourses, we then proceeded to explore the subject positions that they offered to these women, noting contradictions and inconsistencies. We were mindful that subject positions are not static or fixed, but changing, fragmented, and inconsistent (GAVEY, 1989).
- Thereafter, we engaged in an exploration of the ways in which discursive constructions and the subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action. By constructing certain versions of the world, and by positioning subjects within them in specific ways, discourses limit what can be understood. Therefore, we asked specific questions such as: What are the possibilities for action as provided to women when drawing on a religious construction of the relationship? What can be said and done by the subjects (i.e., the women) positioned in them? Constructions of marriage as "religious and holy arrangements" and their subject positions of responsible wives require women positioned in them to act in a responsible and Godly way with consideration for her husband and for the consequences of her actions. Therefore, by drawing on this discourse, would a woman in an abusive relationship leave her husband out of a risk of being murdered? Would she rather remain in the marriage in order to abide by her marriage vows?
- The final stage in the analysis involved the exploration of the relationship between discourse and subjectivity. Discourses make available certain ways of understanding the world, and construct social as well as psychological realities in which discursive positioning plays a vital role. Once a woman adopts a particular position as her own, she inevitably begins to understand her experiences from the vantage point of that



position, and in terms of the images, metaphors, story lines and concepts, which are highlighted in the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. This stage also involved exploring how these positions affect how she feels, thinks and understands from various subject positions. Therefore, the types of questions that were asked included; what kinds of subjective experience may be made available to women by constructions of abusive relationships as "forgive-able" and their subject positions of responsible, Godly women/wives? Moreover, what kind of psychological reality may be constructed by a romantic discourse that positions women as needing men in order to be complete? [18]

As previously stated, the objective of this study was to investigate the discourses that women survivors of IPV draw on to understand intimate femicide. From this investigation, the following discourses emerged. [19]

## **5. Discourse Analysis of the Understanding of Intimate Femicide**

### **5.1 Hegemonic gender discourses**

In the interviews, participants' stories were embedded in gendered discourses. When talking about a woman's role in the relationship, they explained:

"... Well, to honor her husband and know that he's the head of the house" (Mellissa). [20]

Implicit in the traditional gender role discourse is the notion that women need to adopt a subject position that embodies submissiveness, passivity, and selflessness (BOONZAIER, 2005). Consequently, these discourses provide men with the subject position of dominance in the household (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2004). Traditional patriarchal gender discourses position men as being in control and holding an authoritative position, and women occupying a submissive and subservient position (JACKSON, 2001; TOWNS & ADAMS, 2000). In addition, the traditional patriarchal gender discourse presents these positions as natural and as the way it should be (WOOD, 2001). As stated by Sheila:

"He must be, like they say, he's the roof" (Sheila). [21]

Many of the participants mentioned that one aspect of the man's role in their intimate relationship was to protect his wife and family. This was tragically ironic as the women were in shelters because of the abuse they had experienced at the hands of their intimate partners:

"um, he must protect the family and to see the family safe" (Jamie). [22]

Many women are socialized to believe that the man is in charge, and women need to be appropriately deferential (WOOD, 2004). Women might "accept" that a man has the right to control or discipline his partner (ibid.). As Sheila explains:

"For me, I *thought* that that is the way [that a man has the right to control a woman or to discipline a woman using violence]<sup>4</sup>. Yes it *was* okay" (Sheila). [23]

Sheila's use of the words *thought* and *was*, in other words, her speaking in the past tense, can indicate that she no longer believes abuse is acceptable. In addition, the fact that she now stays at a shelter may also highlight her belief that abuse is unacceptable. Overall, the participants' explanations of what constitutes a woman and man's role reflect the South African patriarchal society in which we live. Women face the societal expectation of filling a compliant and subordinate role (DAGEID & DUCKERT, 2008), whereas men fulfill the societal position of the authoritarian and controller (JEWKES et al., 2009). According to JEWKES et al., many South African men across different cultural groups are raised to see themselves as superior to women, and are taught that men should be respected by women. With most men believing that women should submit to their control, physical violence is often used against women to demonstrate their power. Unfortunately, the use of such violence often ends in murder (MATHEWS et al., 2004). [24]

## 5.2 The patriarchal family discourse

As part of the traditional gender role discourse, we found a dominant patriarchal family discourse, which emerged in some of the participants' stories. In westernized societies, the dominant family discourse prescribes that a traditional two-parent, nuclear family is the norm, and perhaps the best family structure for the well-being and development of children (HETHERINGTON & STANLEY-HAGAN, 1999; LUBBE, 2007). This discourse is also evident in South Africa, which has a family-based society with a culture that values the traditional family (LUBBE, 2007). The traditional nuclear family—widely accepted to mean a legally married, two-parent, heterosexual couple—has been the norm and benchmark against which other types of family arrangements have been measured (ibid.). Families that are different from this norm, such as single parent families, are positioned as deviant or unfavorable for the well-being of children. In addition, in this dominant patriarchal family discourse, children are positioned as needing their biological fathers as father figures (HETHERINGTON & STANLEY-HAGAN, 1999). HETHERINGTON and STANLEY-HAGAN explain that in the patriarchal family discourse, fathers are positioned as possessing an essential quality that only they can provide to their children and which mothers are unable to provide. As Mellissa explains:

"You as a mother don't have the right ways to tell a boy, then the father can come in there" (Mellissa). [25]

The participants positioned their intimate partners, the biological fathers, as critical to child rearing, as a result of the absence of a father in their own childhoods:

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4 Brackets are used to give insight into the context of the excerpt which is taken from a longer conversation or to explain the participant's use of incorrect language.

"I didn't wanted [didn't want] to raise my kids without a father because I never had a father that raised me.... So I wanted to give my kids the best" (Mellissa). [26]

Mellissa explains that she wanted to remain in the relationship, albeit abusive, as she believed that for her children to be able to grow up with a father was the "best" she could give them. The logical conclusion to this is that children must be reared by biological fathers who are present in the home. This could be indicative of why women often remain in abusive relationships to adhere to society's description of what it considers to be an ideal family. The dominant view in this regard is that the most favorable child-rearing environment occurs in nuclear families. Many women continue to believe that the nuclear family structure is necessary for successful child development and that the absence of the father would have serious adverse consequences (ibid.). However, the presence of a violent father in a conflictual, non-divorced family can be more destructive than the absence of a father in a mother-headed home, especially when children witness physical violence (ibid.). As Sheila explains:

"He [her ex-husband] just strangles me and I um couldn't get breath and my daughter of six years old was also there in my room, but she's used to that" (Sheila). [27]

Many women believe it is better to remain in an unsatisfying, conflict-ridden marriage for the sake of the children, than leave the relationship. Although growing up in a home where both parents are present can be beneficial for the children, it can be adverse in cases where the father is abusive (ibid.). Children who grow up in families where there is abuse and high marital conflict, exhibit many of the same adjustment problems as children from divorced families (ibid.). Many women can remain in an abusive relationship to give their children what they themselves have missed. However, this focus on and desire to uphold the traditional two-parent, nuclear family, could cloud their ability to understand intimate femicide and to understand that they are at extremely high risk of femicide. In fact, HETHERINGTON and STANLEY-HAGAN argue that physically abusive, conflictual situations are the most harmful to children, and suggest that divorce should be the most frequently selected option, rather than remaining in a violent marriage. [28]

### **5.3 Dominant prescriptions of femininity**

The participants' stories were also rife with an internalization of dominant prescriptions of femininity. As Jamie explains:

"For me it was like, I had two children but it was like um having three children, because I had to pamper them, I had to pamper him, I had to see that he is happy, I had to see that they're happy" (Jamie). [29]

According to BOONZAIER and DE LA REY (2004), the line between "wife" and "mother" is often unclear. Positioning the self as the mother is associated with traditional feminine practices where nurturance and selflessness are underscored. Alternatively, by constructing their partners as childlike and needing

support, women simultaneously construct themselves as stronger. Although empowering, representing the man as needing care contributes to keeping women in their abusive relationships based on feelings of concern for their partners (ibid.), which might ultimately serve a fatal function. In addition, many women have been taught to "stand by their man" regardless of how men treat their women (TOWNS & ADAMS, 2000). Mellissa explained that she believed she had to remain in her marriage:

"... Through thick and thin" (Mellissa). [30]

Many women can remain with their partner in spite of physical abuse, not realizing that they are at risk of femicide. They could therefore remain in the relationship until they become a victim of intimate femicide (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2003). [31]

#### **5.4 Discourses of the "good wife"**

In line with the notion of femininity, a woman can believe she needs to adopt the feminine construction of the "good wife," as a "good" wife should accept a caring role regardless of her partner's abusiveness (ibid.). Evident in the participants' stories was an internalization of the expectation that they should love their partners even if they are abused by them. Adhering to dominant prescriptions of femininity can serve as a trap to women in abusive relationships by normalizing dominance and violence in men, and vulnerability in women (BOONZAIER, 2008). According to WOOD (2001), this relates to women positioning themselves as responsible for changing their partners' violent behavior. As the women explain:

"Well ... I thought I could change him" (Evelyn and Jamie). [32]

Many of the participants believed that their partners could change. and therefore did not want to be responsible for sending their abusive partners to prison. For example, Waseema spoke about her previous abusive relationships and explained:

"First of all I didn't want to make cases against anybody because I didn't want to put anybody in jail" (Waseema). [33]

Sheila explained her inability to report her ex-husband to the police as something she did not want to have on her conscience:

"If I'm going to the police, I would visit him because my conscience is gonna, you see? I did locked him up and that will stay in my brain" (Sheila). [34]

Sheila explaining that she does not want her husband's imprisonment on her conscience evokes a sense that the punishment of prison might be too much for him to pay for the abuse he perpetrated, thus minimizing the severity of the abuse. This positions the experience of incarceration as more damaging and far

worse than the abuse she experienced. In contrast, Evelyn's story highlights the conflict many of the participants experienced between wanting protection and being a "good wife," as dictated by the dominant discourses of the "good wife":

"I said to him 'I'm gonna go to the police station, I'm gonna report you.' I went to the police station. I was sitting there like, literally crying, and I had a black eye and I just walk out again because I felt ashamed, and I went back and I said 'you'll change you will change.' I thought I could change him" (Evelyn). [35]

There is a sense of responsibility for the man's well-being conveyed in the discourse of the "good wife," which positions the woman as a "bad wife" if she sends him to jail. This notion once again highlights that many participants in this study might not fully understand the strength of the IPV and intimate femicide relationship (ABRAHAMS et al., 2013). In addition, research has found that few women take out protection orders against their partners and tend not to report them to the police (JACKSON, 1997). According to MATHEWS et al. (2004), the conviction of a man for the murder of his intimate woman partner is more likely if there is a history of reported IPV. [36]

### **5.5 Resistance to discourses of femininity**

Some of the participants resisted traditional constructions of passive femininity and authored a more active discourse, which offered a position of empowerment (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2004). For instance, these participants would take on an active role by drawing on the police services for help and assistance. However, the participants' stories regarding the police mainly highlighted their loss of faith in the police system. Elizabeth said:

"I phoned for the cops, but the cops they didn't come ... They said they coming but they didn't come. I went there [to the police station] and then I tell the police but ... they said I must sit there. I was sit there about four hours, I don't get help" (Elizabeth). [37]

Waseema's story further highlights how the police often do not take women's abusive situations seriously:

"When I called the police they said this is a domestic problem, they can't do anything" (Waseema). [38]

Whereas, Mellissa openly expressed her loss of faith in the police:

"I ran to the police station and I made a case against him [her ex-husband] and what really disappointed me is that the police even failed me because they didn't do their jobs well... because the police promise you all the things when you tell them [about the abuse] but it's like, they doesn't take it real seriously, you know. The cops can't help me" (Mellissa). [39]

Abuse subjects women to an illegal action and forces them to confront their own helplessness and powerlessness, and in so doing also requires them to engage

in actions aimed at protection and resistance (HYDÉN, 2005). Therefore, by phoning the police for help, these participants indicate their belief in themselves as having agency and ability to do something to alleviate their abuse. Their accounts present a discourse of shifting positions between powerlessness and agency, which could indicate a move towards drawing on a feminist discourse that promotes the empowerment of women (ibid.). However, the participants' stories also highlight the insensitivity of the police to the needs of women who experience IPV. Their stories indicate that the police often do not regard IPV as a crime. The contemptuous treatment of women by the police can result in a reluctance to turn to the police for help (JACKSON, 1997), which may prevent women from drawing on the police as a source of knowledge and information about IPV and intimate femicide. In addition, few abusive perpetrators are punished effectively, and women often have little faith and recourse in the system (JEWKES et al., 2009). As a result, the realization that the police cannot or will not protect them, might compel women to reappraise the situation, which could result in fewer women reaching out and seeking help. [40]

### **5.6 Resistance to traditional religious discourses**

The desire for greater agency was accompanied by a tendency to resist traditional religious discourses. We found that many of the participants vacillated between wanting to save their relationships or marriages and wanting to leave their intimate partners, which created feelings of guilt for the women who valued their religious beliefs. The participants described their internal conflicts about trying to uphold religious values in contrast to their desire to leave their abusive relationships. For example, after first positioning herself in traditional religious discourse by going to the pastor for help and advice about her abuse, Sheila then begins to position herself outside of the religious discourse by saying:

"My aunt, she phoned me and said my husband said the pastor wants to have a chat with me and he wants to pray for our marriage and I said no. He can pray for my husband but he must leave me alone" (Sheila). [41]

By saying that the pastor must "leave me alone" Sheila is highlighting her sense of "giving up" on the pastor's ability to help her, as a representative of religion. In contrast, Jamie appears to position herself outside of the religious discourse by stating that she does not believe a woman who is abused should remain in a relationship to abide by a commitment she has made to the Lord:

"There was times when I was in church and the priest would talk about like if, um, two people did get married, you made a commitment to God and that you would stay by your husband through everything, a wife should stay with her husband no matter what he does. But I don't think that in my situation I could've done that" (Jamie). [42]

Women in abusive relationships could make significant strides in understanding intimate femicide when they begin to recognize the limitations inherent in religious discourses, and explore new subjectivities that confront issues of power and control in intimate relationships. However, although there was a tendency among

the women to position themselves outside of the religious discourse, it was not uncommon for some of the women to accept and abide by these religious discourses. [43]

### **5.7 Positioning within religious discourses**

Religion is often supportive of traditional roles and strictly advocates adherence to these roles (AHMED, REAVEY, & MAJUMDAR, 2009; BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2003, 2004). As Mellissa explains:

"According to the Word of God, I can only speak to you in that line, is the husband is the head of the house" (Mellissa). [44]

The participants' decisions to remain in abusive relationships were often tied to religious constructions of the sanctity of marriage, and to their religious beliefs that marriage is sacred and eternal (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2004). As Mellissa explains:

"I was like God wants me to be here [in the abusive relationship] and I need to pray and I need to trust God" (Mellissa). [45]

Tied to religious constructions of the sanctity of marriage is the notion that men should be helped to stop drinking and doing drugs, as opposed to assisting them with the ending of the abuse. This finding is similar to GIESBRECHT and SEVCIK (2000) who found that it is not uncommon for religious leaders to deny the severity of the abuse. As Sheila explains:

"He [the pastor] spoke to my husband 'why don't you stop the things that you doing, drugs and drinking.' I did ask him many times for advice [about the abuse]. I also spoke to the pastor, I said 'this guy he's not even long out of jail so just speak to him because see what he did' and my face was standing out here and he said he's going to speak to my husband. But I can't say you anything, I never see the pastor speak to him about it [about the abuse]" (Sheila). [46]

Sheila explained that the pastor was willing to help her husband to stop his drug and alcohol abuse, but he was not as forthcoming in assisting with the IPV. Sheila explained that the pastor knew about the abuse, yet recommended she remain with her husband. The pastor would see the marks on Sheila's face but would still offer to pray for her marriage. The observation in this study that religious leaders were reluctant to condone divorce and rather supported reconciliation is consistent with the finding by LEVITT and WARE (2006):

"They [religious leaders] told me to stay in the relationship and give it another try" (Waseema). [47]

The religious leaders appear to draw on a conservative religious discourse. This is demonstrated by their reluctance to condone divorce and support reconciliation, which also reinforces religious constructions of the sanctity of

marriage and a husband's authority in the household. It is also argued that it can be disempowering for abused women to be confronted with a religious discourse from religious leaders that supports forgiveness (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2003, 2004). Related to the religious notion of forgiveness, was the women's belief that they had to stay in relationships where men were physically violent to demonstrate that they were abiding by the Lord's word (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2004). Women in abusive relationships might not realize that their religiosity could prove fatal. We found that religiosity significantly influenced how some participants understood the issue of abuse and intimate femicide. Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge the religious identities of women and how such identities affect their understanding of abusive relationships and intimate femicide. [48]

### **5.8 Resistance to discourses of heterosexuality**

According to CHUNG (2005), many women believe in the notion that a man's behavior directly mirrors the woman partner's identity. This interdependence of identities potentially traps women into speaking about and presenting their partner's behavior in a way that does not tarnish their own identities. It could explain why many women are reluctant to speak of their partner's behavior as violent or abusive (*ibid.*). In the sample of women that were interviewed, we found that this was not always the case. For example, Sheila and Jamie were not ashamed or embarrassed to share their stories with their friends, as they argued that the majority of their friends were also in abusive relationships:

"They [friends] always said 'oh why are you going through that'—um—'he's doing that to you, did you hear that he's doing like that to me'. We'd share our stories and my neighbors they can hear—on that side [in the area where she stayed]—they used to that because they also got that bad experience, like if my husband goes on like this and their husband also, it's like they [the men] are challenging each other. So everyone is dealing with the same thing" (Sheila).

"My one friend she is still married and she also went through abuse and she stuck with her husband through everything, and I always looked up to her, and I told myself, well, maybe it should be like that, you know? And then I also fell into that. They [her friends] were in the same situation that I was in. So it just had to be so, you know, everyone around me was in abusive relationships" (Jamie). [49]

Alternatively, Evelyn was unable to tell her friends about the abuse. She explained that for her to be honest and share her story with friends, she first needed to be honest with herself, which she was unable to do.

"You don't want to admit to people like you in this [abusive relationship] because, you lie to yourself. Firstly, you lie to yourself, cause then [being honest meant] I'd also have to face my own demons inside. I knew I had to leave but I was still trying, saying to myself—lying to myself—'ag, he won't do it' [murder]" (Evelyn). [50]

Carol explained that she would not tell her friends and family about the abuse to protect her husband's reputation as he was a police officer:



"He would keep the gun to my head several times but he was in the police force. I didn't want his name to be smattered around at work also because he can lose his job" (Carol). [51]

Stories of police officers assaulting their partners are sadly far from unique. According to VETTEN (1995), policemen are more likely to kill their women partners than men employed in other occupations. A study conducted by the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD) in 2009 indicated that in 2007 the ICD recorded 24 femicides by male South African Police members accounting for 40% of femicide deaths (BRUCE, 2010). In addition, the ICD found that a substantial number of femicide cases involved South African policemen using service pistols to murder their partners (BRUCE, 2010). Many women might not realize that South Africa has one of the highest rates of intimate femicide and firearm-related deaths (ABRAHAMS, JEWKES & MATHEWS, 2010). As a result, they might rather attempt to "protect" their partners from the same law that fails to protect them in order to prevent them from losing their jobs (JEWKES et al., 2009). [52]

Finally, the fact that the majority of the participants were not ashamed or embarrassed to share their abusive stories with friends, as IPV is normalized and legitimized in certain communities, reiterates the finding that South Africa has one of the highest rates of IPV (SHAMU et al., 2011; THALER, 2012). [53]

## **5.9 Romantic discourses**

The women's accounts of their relationships were infused with romantic discourses. The romantic discourse emerged in two forms. The first was the fairy tale romance discourse, which involved an idealized form of romantic discourse. The second was the dark romance discourse, which was the malevolent form of romantic discourse (WOOD, 2001). [54]

### *5.9.1 Romantic fairy tale discourse*

Romantic and fairy tale love has a powerful influence on how women attempt to make sense of their relationships (JACKSON, 2001; WOOD, 2000, 2001). The participants drew on the following discourses in their attempts to simultaneously maintain the romantic fairy tale ideal and understand intimate femicide. [55]

#### 5.9.1.1 Dual masculine identities

The romantic discourse constructs men as having dual identities: the beast and the prince. The man is depicted as behaving in an abusive manner to his woman partner (as a "beast") and then behaving in a prince-like manner by showing his softer side (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2003). In the interviews, many of the women invoked dual masculine identities in speaking about their partners:

"He just took out this cutting knife and he just started cutting me and I didn't go to the doctor, he doctored it himself. He bathed me and literally pick me up and put me in the water and I said to myself 'he must really care for me, he loves me'" (Evelyn). [56]

In Evelyn's extract, her ex-boyfriend is first viewed as a "beast" when he abuses her and afterwards her view of him changes when he "doctors" her and looks after her. The splitting off of the good from the bad is evident in Evelyn's extract. This dual construction or "splitting" has previously been observed by BOONZAIER and DE LA REY (2003), JACKSON (2001), TOWNS and ADAMS (2000), and WOOD (2001). The finding is also consistent with cultural resources located in the romantic fairy tale discourse that represents men as embodying a dualism, such as in the *Beauty and the Beast*<sup>5</sup> (JACKSON, 2001; TOWNS & ADAMS, 2000). In addition, the fact that Evelyn ends up identifying with the "good," the notion that he really loves and cares for her illustrates that the overarching romantic fairy tale discourse is so embedded that it presents the idea of the good, prince-like qualities of the man conquering his violent beastly qualities (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2003; WOOD, 2001). Moreover, portraying the abusive man as a "beast" and then as a "prince" can hamper women's ability to understand the many complex and often manipulative factors affecting abusive relationships that serve to keep both parties trapped in the cycle of violence. This understanding masks the insidiousness of the situation and thus results in risks of femicide not being acknowledged or engaged with. [57]

#### 5.9.1.2 Minimization

The romantic fairy tale discourse also proposes that love can conquer all. In this discourse, the abuse is seen as acceptable because it is not as bad as it could have been. Women in violent relationships minimize the abusive behavior by believing that the abuse is not as bad as that experienced by other women (WOOD, 2001). As Sheila explains:

"One lady she's got a terrible life, and she's not from Cape Town she's from P.E. [Pietermaritzburg, Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa] so she don't have any family here, she's got it very bad" (Sheila). [58]

Engaging in minimization can be incredibly "dangerous" to women in violent relationships if they view their own abuse as less serious than that experienced by other women, as they would be unable to realize the severity of their situation and comprehend their level of risk. This also indicates their lack of understanding of the femicide phenomenon and the robust relationship between IPV and intimate femicide (GASS et al., 2010; JEWKES et al., 2009). Minimizing or denying the gravity of the abuse is often employed by women in violent relationships as a way to cope psychologically with the reality of the situation (KELLY, 1988; WALKERDINE, 1996). Romantic discourses provide women with a discursive framework where the man's abuse is almost viewed as excusable because it is not as bad as the abuse inflicted by other abusive men. A fairy tale

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5 An adaptation of the classic fairy tale about a monstrous prince and a young woman who fall in love.

romance is thus maintained in a psychological discursive framework, as women attempt to make sense of IPV by adhering to beliefs that bolster the romantic fairy tale discourse (WOOD, 2001, 2004). [59]

### 5.9.1.3 Rationalization

Many women also tend to construct the violence by dissociating the abuse from the "real man" and attributing it rather to factors that he does not have control over, such as substance and alcohol abuse and his own early childhood abuse. By attempting to understand the abuse in a romantic fairy tale discourse, these women resist positioning their partners as criminals or abusers.

"It was because of the drugs. But I mean sometimes he's a cool outjie!" (Sheila). [60]

Sheila positioned her husband as someone who was generally not violent, by stating that the abuse was because of the drugs and not because of him as a person. Thus, she viewed the abuse as not caused by "him," as he is often a "cool outjie" (cool guy), but as a result of his drug use. This conclusion is consistent with BOONZAIER and DE LA REY's (2003, p.1012) finding that women create a split between the "sober/good husband" and the "drunk/beast" when talking about the abuse received when the man is under the influence of either drugs or alcohol. In addition, TOWNS and ADAMS (2000) proposed that women rationalize their partners' abusive behavior by creating a split between the good and bad persona. These characterizations place the blame on the drug or alcohol intake and not on the men. As Jamie explains:

"He would grab me by my hair, he would drag me outside and he would hit me, but he would be under the influence of drugs" (Jamie). [61]

In the above extract, Jamie's use of the word "but" acts as means to use drugs as a justification for the violence.

"I just stayed in the relationship and I accepted it was part of, you know, whenever he would drink he would hit me, the next day he would apologize, it was part of our life" (Jamie). [62]

Jamie believed it was almost normal ("accepted," "part of our life") that her boyfriend would hit her when he drank alcohol, as if consuming alcohol and abuse naturally go together. Moreover, participants would go so far as to provide their partners with money for drugs. Some of the participants succumbed to doing drugs with their partners, thinking that by giving them money or doing drugs with them would stop the abuse:

"By supporting his drug habit and by giving him money and I made the choice to smoke with him. I just said to myself perhaps if I smoke with him, things will change, we used to tik [do methamphetamine] together. It never crossed my mind [the possibility of murder]. No, I weren't thinking actually like he's um, he's going to murder me, that time. That didn't cross my mind. I just made excuses for him 'it's the

drugs', 'it's because he's on a trip now, he's high, um that's why he's going on like that'" (Evelyn). [63]

The participants' stories indicate an unawareness of substance and alcohol abuse as a factor that increases the risk of intimate femicide (ARETAKIS, 2008; SONIS & LANGER, 2008; WEIZMANN-HENELIUS et al., 2012; WHO, 2012). Research has found that men are more likely to be violent if they abuse substances (ABRAHAMS et al., 2013). In addition, perpetrators are often found with high blood substance and alcohol content at the time of a crime (MUFTIC & BAUMANN, 2012). Sadly, the participants were unaware of what an immensely significant risk factor drug and alcohol abuse is for intimate femicide. [64]

#### 5.9.1.4 Intergenerational transmission of abuse

In investigating the intergenerational transmission of abuse, a plethora of studies have found that witnessing or experiencing physical abuse in the family-of-origin appears to be a significant factor for the later perpetration of IPV in intimate relationships (BOONZAIER & DE LA REY, 2004; CORVO & CARPENTER, 2000; CUI, DURTSCHI, DONNELLAN, LORENZ & CONGER, 2010; EHRENSAFT et al., 2003; SAPPINGTON, 2000). The intergenerational transmission of abuse is frequently explained from a social learning perspective (CORVO & CARPENTER, 2000). Social learning theory posits that children observe and learn that abuse is an acceptable way of dealing with conflict from their parents, which increases the likelihood of them modeling and repeating the abusive behavior in later relationships (CORVO & CARPENTER, 2000; EHRENSAFT et al., 2003). Furthermore, having witnessed or experienced violence in childhood might result in more acceptance of violence (ABRAHAMS et al., 2013). In the interviews conducted, the participants often drew on psychological discourses of intergenerational transmission of abuse to understand their partners' violence. By drawing on this discourse, men were positioned as victims of the abuse they experienced as children and not as perpetrators of the abuse they inflicted. As Sheila explains:

"He [her ex-husband] also came out of an abusive childhood. His father also abuses his mom so I've got a soft spot for him" (Sheila). [65]

These participants also drew on their own childhood experiences to explain why they had initially entered into the relationship.

"The time when I grew up, my mom was drinking and I just get involved with this boyfriend, like now my husband, because just to get out of the house. Life was tough" (Sheila). [66]

In addition, there was a tendency for the participants to draw on family members to understand the abuse. For example, Elizabeth explained that after her ex-husband attempted to burn her house down with her and her children inside, her ex-husband's mother blamed Elizabeth when the police went looking for him.

"They [police] went to his parents, they going to fetch him. And his mother, the way she was shouting and then she said [to her son] 'I told you about this woman, you must leave this woman, you see now, you're going to prison! You're going to prison, you going to die now in prison.' She blamed me" (Elizabeth).

"His [ex-boyfriend's] mother was always protecting him. 'Yes, but you must remember Evelyn, he grow up in an abusive environment because the daddy used to beat the mommy.' And he's just now doing it to me" (Evelyn). [67]

The use of the word "just" indicates that the mother of Evelyn's ex-boyfriend viewed the abuse Evelyn was experiencing, in a sense, as a natural part of the cycle. The participant's interviews highlighted that advice from family could be dangerous if that advice serves to normalize the abuse. Drawing on this discourse could hamper abused women's ability to confront the possibility of intimate femicide and subsequently to understand their level of risk:

"The first time he did it [abuse] I made a case against him. Then, his whole family came to my doorstep and they were threatening me that if I don't pull the case back they were gonna burn our place down, his sisters was going to stab me. And I was scared you know and then I went and then I pulled the case back" (Jamie). [68]

Jamie's initial intent to file a case against her boyfriend indicates her desire to position herself in a rights-based discourse which supports women's rights against violence. However, Jamie was eventually coerced to withdraw the case after his family pressured her. By demanding that Jamie withdraw the case against her abusive boyfriend, his family can be positioned as complicit in his abuse of her (HYDÉN, 2005). In addition, the pervasive nature of a dominant familial discourse appears to take precedence over the less dominant discourse of women's rights. This might indicate that the women's rights discourse and the support structures around it are not strong enough or dominant enough to supersede the familial discourse, with which the woman is confronted. Moreover, Jamie simultaneously draws on two discourses: one which positions her as powerless and another which positions her as having agency. Although these discourses are not mutually exclusive, it appears that they present two distinct types of positions, one which is active and the other passive. However, it is not only the advice from the men's family that serves to normalize the abuse and to keep the women in their relationships:

"My mother also witnessed the abuse and she was actually the one that always told me that 'no, stay in the relationship because of the sake of your kids' and then she would tell me 'what are you going to do if the man is gonna leave you?' and I would listen to the things that she say" (Jamie). [69]

These women are faced with pressure from family to forgive and remain with their abusive partners. This finding is similar to a study conducted by HYDÉN who found that women often have mothers and mothers-in-law who appear to be "co-offenders" of the abuse, as they convince the women to forgive the violence and to remain with their abusive partners. In addition, the women's stories also

indicate the widespread community or societal acceptance of abuse (JEWKES et al., 2009). This can also allude to the enormity of the lack of awareness and knowledge around IPV and intimate femicide. [70]

In sum, by continuing to draw on the fairy tale romance discourse, women view their men as having dual identities (the beast and the prince), positioning men as blameless and attributing their abuse to drugs and alcohol; or because of their partners' negative childhood experiences. The participants also highlighted the role family members play in the cycle of violence. These discourses serve to maintain and dictate the nature of intimate relationships for many women which make it very difficult for women to understand the real possibility of being murdered. However, when a fairy tale romance was not possible to uphold, dark romance discourses were drawn on. [71]

## **5.10 Dark romance discourses**

### *5.10.1 Normalization*

The dark romance discourse offers an alternative discourse and insists that men are occasionally violent, that abuse is a normal part of a relationship, and an invalid reason to leave the relationship (WOOD, 2001). The position provided to women is one of acceptance of IPV:

"I thought that, the abuse, that maybe it's part of life and I'd told myself, 'well, maybe it should be like that'" (Jamie).

"I just took a knife and I just stab him and they [the hospital staff] said to me 'you could have killed him' and I said 'there's nothing wrong with it. He did it to me so I just did it back to him.' It [the abuse] was normal for me that if there's arguments you like just like hit it right or you fight it out" (Evelyn). [72]

Evelyn highlights the stark reality where so many people believe that conflict can be resolved by violent, coercive or power-based behavior (EHRENSAFT et al., 2003). According to JEWKES et al. (2009), social norms support the use of violence and in doing so, desensitize us to the use of violence and render the use of violence in many circumstances as legitimate. The widespread use of violence against wives and girlfriends has created a society where these behaviors are widely viewed as normal (ABRAHAMS et al., 2013; JEWKES et al., 2009). However, defining a high risk (in terms of femicide) relationship as normal, could contribute to women remaining in the relationship, thereby increasing their risk of being murdered (MATHEWS et al., 2004). In addition, the finding that South Africa has one of the highest rates of femicide, could also point towards our society's desensitization of, and acceptance of violence in intimate heterosexual relationships (ABRAHAMS et al., 2013). [73]

### *5.10.2 A woman needs a man to have value*

The dark romance discourse insists that a woman needs a man in order to have financial value (WOOD, 2001). As Carol explains:

"I was scared if I lose him [her ex-husband], I'm gonna lose out on a lot of things, financially I'm gonna lose out. What am I gonna do? I'm gonna go down, I'm gonna lose everything I have...and who's gonna help me? Who's gonna support me?"  
(Carol). [74]

Many women in abusive relationships rely on men for their financial contribution to the relationship or to the household (ABRAHAMS et al., 2009). This is tied to the reality that many South African women are in a disadvantaged position, earning on average less than half of the wages of men (BOOYSEN & SUMMERTON, 2002). The majority of the participants were either unemployed or in low-income jobs. Unemployment and low income have consistently been identified as risk factors for intimate femicide (ARETAKIS, 2008; CAMPBELL, 2004; MATHEWS et al., 2004; WEIZMANN-HENELIUS et al., 2012). A lack of economic power enables the widespread abuse of women as society has constructed a situation where many women are dependent on men for economic stability (BOOYSEN & SUMMERTON, 2002). In a cross-sectional retrospective national mortuary-based study in South Africa conducted by MATHEWS et al. (2008), it was found that 60.6% of intimate femicide victims were unemployed. As is evident in the extracts, unemployment and poverty can make it more complicated for women to leave abusive relationships (SONIS & LANGER, 2008). Moreover, women who are financially not in a position to leave could be at an increased risk of being murdered, and the longer they remain in their abusive relationships, the higher their risk of being murdered (ABRAHAMS et al., 2009; JEWKES et al., 2009). [75]

### *5.10.3 I allowed or deserved it*

In the dark romantic discourse, many of the women believed that if they could find what they were doing wrong, they could make amends and stop the abuse (SMITH & RANDALL, 2007). The women tended to blame themselves for their partner's violence, and accepted their partners' blaming of them (WOOD, 2001):

"I was more blaming it [the abuse] on myself, well he says that, it's because of me that he's beating me and I was blaming myself, well maybe it's me, maybe I should listen to him more, you know things like that, so, yeah, I blamed myself actually"  
(Jamie). [76]

In this dark romantic discourse, the women positioned themselves as being to blame for, and deserving of, the abuse, which could be dangerous as a woman's self-blame can act as a factor to keep her in an abusive relationship (EISIKOVITS & WINSTOK, 2002). In this dark romance discourse, the man is positioned as a perpetrator in the relationship, only because the woman "allows" him to be abusive. Drawing on the notion that the women allowed the abuse further serves

to position the woman as both responsible for acting in ways that brought on this violence and as having the power to "cure" the man (TOWNS & ADAMS, 2000). This once again relieves the man of blame for the IPV, and instead positions women as being accountable for the violence and in so doing places women as a type of "co-offender" of the abuse (HYDÉN, 2005). In order for women to understand the complexities of intimate femicide, it is crucial that they first learn to deal with and overcome self-blame, and realize that they are not responsible for the abuse, and that the abuse is out of their control (JACKSON & MANNIX, 2004; SMITH & RANDALL, 2007). [77]

### 5.11 Discourses of perfect love

According to TOWNS and ADAMS (2000), included in the perfect love discourse is possessive love.

"I mean he got so obsessive that he told me that, if he can't have me no one can and if I ever leave him one day, he will kill me! He was more possessive of over me" (Jamie).

"It was like he was obsessed with me. I was scared because I was never alone he was always there where I am it's like he was thoroughly watching me what I'm doing, watching what's my next move" (Melissa). [78]

According to TOWNS and ADAMS, this possessive love refers to instances where the man 'loves' the woman so much that the idea of another man having her or the idea of her leaving him can drive him crazy and lead to violence. Women's resistance against the violence to which they are subjected (by leaving) can be analyzed by FOUCAULT's analysis of power relationships (HYDÉN, 1999). According to HYDÉN, resistance is always present in dominated people, but they seldom dare show it openly. Therefore, we might assume that the oppressed accept the dominance of their "superiors." However, when the abused woman leaves her intimate partner, the resistance is expressed clearly and openly. She has fractured his sphere of dominance (ibid.). Many researchers have found that a woman leaving a relationship is at significant risk of intimate femicide (ARETAKIS, 2008; DIXON, HAMILTON-GIACHRITSIS & BROWNE, 2008; GOUSSINSKY & YASSOUR-BOROCHOWITZ, 2012). When battered women take the initiative to leave their abusive partners, the act of leaving is viewed as a key act of resistance because ending an abusive relationship means dissociating powerfully from the violence. The act of leaving does not necessarily always meet with success and may have serious consequences if a man attempts to prevent the woman from leaving him. Men often become more violent after the separation (HYDÉN, 2005). However, many women use aspects of romantic love to divert attention away from behaviors that could be interpreted as a man's control, favoring interpretations of jealousy, love and commitment (CHUNG, 2005). In the interviews, I found that many participants interpreted jealousy as an expression of the man's love. As Evelyn explains:



"You just walking in the road and just greeting another person, but to him you like making eyes for the other person, they [men are] possessive some of them. Like he [ex-boyfriend] controlled me. I had to stay at home the whole day. I couldn't go out, when he came from work, then he would ask me 'where were you, what were you doing' and 'why do you dress up, you going nowhere'. And I was basically wearing for like six years, just tracksuit pants and takkies [trainers]. It made me feel good [his jealousy] and I just said to myself, 'he must really, really care about me, he wants me for himself'" (Evelyn). [79]

Understanding jealousy as an expression of the man's love could encourage women to stay in the abusive relationship (TOWNS & ADAMS, 2000). Therefore, drawing on the perfect love discourse would prevent women from accurately understanding their relationship and their level of risk. [80]

## 6. Future Research

Intimate femicide is not an intractable social problem or an inevitable part of the human condition. We can do much to address and prevent it. Concerning future research, we recommend conducting more South African research into problematizing dominant discourses that constrain abused women's possibilities and choices in relation to violent men. Additional research into the creation of new discourses in South Africa that contribute to disrupting the power of dominant patriarchal discourses will be invaluable. Attempts at problematizing hegemonic discourses and developing alternative and much more empowering discourses for women that consider the specific South African context, may be beneficial. We suggest the creation of texts, including films, novels, comic books, and fairy tales that challenge dominant concepts of gender as presented in South Africa, which can enable women to take up new subject positions and draw on discourses that encourage resistance against violence against women (BURNS, 2009). PARKER (2005) suggests some discourses that are open to change and revision, which should consist of exploring how discourses and texts could change oppressive gender relation. This should include the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses and investigating possibilities for change within these discourses (ibid.). [81]

Western culture's traditional ideology is woven seamlessly into discourses that women in abusive relationships draw on to understand both IPV and intimate femicide. Central to traditional gender ideology is the notion that women need to be subservient. This has led to the authorization of men's violence. As currently crafted, these discourses encourage women to tolerate horrifying abuses (WOOD, 2000). These discourses are in desperate need of revision. We argue here that revision—even of powerful and long-held narratives—is not merely a hypothetical possibility. There is evidence that change has occurred frequently in human history. One of the main ways we reinvent who we are is by creating new discourses, which we are able to use to make sense of our lives. For example, feminists produced a new narrative of sexual harassment when they coined the term in the early 1970s, which has subsequently gained both social and legal standing (GAVEY, 1989). [82]

FISHER (1987) insists that people are not limited to simply accepting the stories already established in a given culture. Human beings have the ability to create and adopt new discourses that better account for their lives (ibid.). Discourses are rooted in and thus supported by, the larger culture. Therefore, cultural structures and practices must work hard at authorizing new discourses for women to draw on—ones that report violence as unacceptable, ones that represent women as complete with or without a man, and ones that narrate men as responsible for their actions. In order to formulate new discourses and to discredit ones that condone abuse, it is vital that institutions operate together. Families, schools, universities, and the workplace must place power on new narratives and diminish the acceptability of harmful ones (WEEDON, 1987). [83]

The media is another cultural institution that has a great deal of power in rewriting toxic discourses, which women draw on to explain why they remain in abusive relationships which have the potential to become murderous. It is often the case that the media reproduce dangerous gender and romance narratives. For example, CUKLANZ (1996) points out that movies frequently present romantic endings as the resolution to an abusive relationship. However, in reality this is more than often not how abusive relationships end (ABRAHAMS et al., 2013; GASS et al., 2010; JEWKES et al., 2009; SEEDAT, VAN NIEKERK, JEWKES, SUFFLA & RATELE 2009). In sum, it is vital to remember that the discourses authorized by a culture are not permanent or fixed. Narratives are constantly revised as individuals and institutions decide that existing ones are insufficient to explain and direct our lives (GAVEY, 1989; WEEDON, 1987). Fortunately, the human capacity for recreating the social world means that not only is it possible to imagine new narratives, but that it is therefore also possible to bring into existence new discourses that allow a better understanding of IPV and intimate femicide. [84]

## 7. Conclusion

This article makes a vital contribution to research in the area of intimate femicide. We strongly believe this study endeavors to provide insight into the discourses that restrict women's perception and understanding of their situation, thus keeping them in place and hindering their striving for change. Further, intimate femicide is the most serious form and consequence, not only of IPV, but also of gender inequality. To eradicate these crimes, our society desperately needs to place a much higher value on women's lives. [85]

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