

# Hardship and resilience: women's narratives of from a peri-urban township in South Africa: “You have to hold a knife through the blade”

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# Background

- One-third of women globally experience IPV in their lifetime
- This may be even higher in peri-urban settings characterised by high unemployment, poverty and entrenched gender inequality
- Studies show that women are often motivated to stay in violent relationship because of economic dependence on their partner
- However, little is known how this economic dependency dynamic works in migrant women's lives in resource-poor settings
- Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study to explore how women navigate poverty, migration, and violence in this context



# Methods: study setting

- Peri-urban settlement
- Housing: brick faced (electrified with running water) and zinc shacks communal taps and toilets
- Due to rapid urbanisation
- Population size: ~ 300 000
- High number of internal and cross-border migrants
- Characterised by high levels of unemployment & food insecurity

# Methods

- Qualitative: In-depth interviews with 19 women
- Purposive sampling of community mobilisers, volunteer activists and women who attended (Sonke CHANGE) workshops
- Interviews were predominantly conducted in English in a project office where auditory privacy and safety could be assured
- A research assistant assisted with translation (where required)
- Lasted 1-2 hours

# Methods

- All interviews were audio recorded with consent
- Follow up interviews were conducted with 3 women to clarify responses and deepen the exploration of topics

## Analysis

- Verbatim transcripts were analysed using thematic content analysis initial deductive codes were deepened with inductive fine coding



# Results: Who were the participants?

- The women were aged 24 to 41 years
- A few were employed full or part time, but majority were unemployed
- Most had one child
- All women had migrated to this peri-urban setting from rural areas in South Africa or neighbouring countries
- Motivation for migration varied
- Some accompanied a partner, some sought employment or better economic opportunities.

# Results: Perceptions of place

- Women perceived the environment to be dangerous with threats such as high levels of crime
- Linked to feelings of fear and anxiety

There is crime in [township], women get raped for instance when my husband is at work I hardly sleep till around 4 in the morning because I do not feel safe when I'm alone (Anna\* CAT 5)

# Results: Violence experiences across women's lives

*“Women hold the knife by the blade”*

**All women had experienced** gender-based violence (GBV) at some points in their lives

Experiences included **child sexual abuse & emotional, physical or sexual abuse** perpetrated by male intimate partners

Many experiences of violence occurred **after migration**, though for others the GBV in the peri-urban settlement was a **continuation of past violent relationships** with male partners

# Results: Violence experiences across women's lives

“Violence is very common. It is my mother’s **experience and it is my experience** too because when I was about four years I was raped by my uncle and you know it is kind of like, like I was brain washed up until 2012 when I recalled everything because **my life was never normal I was never a normal child** and then when I sit down and thought but why am I not like other children that is when I actually recalled that I was being abused, **I was raped and when we sat down and told the whole family** they didn’t believe it, they actually told me that, I was like no I cannot lie about something like that, that can never happen. They were like why didn’t you moan. I don’t know why I didn’t moan, but it happened to me” (Kentse\*  
volunteer activist)

# Results: Economic hardships were a fact of life

Women's lives were precarious

Commonly experienced **considerable anxiety** about meeting daily needs, including child care, education, transport and basic housing needs

Women found ways to make money despite the dangers and risks, demonstrating courage and resilience

# Results: Economic hardships were a fact of life

Livelihoods were gendered in nature

Women supported family through domestic work, hawking, transactional sex

Women borrowed money from neighbours or loan sharks, leading to debt

# Results: Economic hardships were a fact of life

“I am suffering because I have three children and I do not work, I am just living at home. I wait for the children’s [social] grant money. I only get money for two kids, the third one does not get money. Its R400 per child for grant. With the money I get for those two, I have to take out R300 for the child’s crèche. My child also goes for treatment in [clinic]. I have to pay R55. When the child goes to crèche, they have to have something to eat. Even the one who goes to school, they have to eat. The other R400 makes no difference, that is why I said I suffer. My youngest child cried yesterday because the child wanted an orange. I did not even have a mere R1 to buy an orange for the child. The lady next door, took out R1 so I can buy the child an orange so he can go to crèche with it. that is why I said I am suffering because that R800 does nothing” (Nosipho\*, Workshop Participant)

# Results: Resilience of women

In a violent context, with limited neighbourhood trust, women express different forms of resilience

Some women find support through trusted friendships

Some women join community-based groups

When I ask for money to go home and see the kids he refuses and when I want money to go do things with other women he refuses... I share my problems with friends that I trust. I do not just share with anyone I talk to a friend who also shares their problems with me so in that way our problems stay in between us. (Anna\*  
Workshop participant)

# Results: Women's agency

Some women were able to stand up despite the economic and relationship challenges they were experiencing

I left him because he hit me so hard that I could not see for a while. That's where I went to the police, that is when I decided to leave. I did not open a case, I just asked the police to escort me to get my things. I went to my aunt's shack after I took everything.  
Fatima\* workshop participant

# Results: Partnership as safety

In this particular context, women who were in a relationship had a partner from the same peri-urban neighbourhood

Male partners were mostly unemployed and were not able to provide financial support to the family

Several women described how they stayed in relationship for protection in what they perceived as a hostile environment

Women not partnered are at risk of being threatened, experiencing sexual violence, or being mugged

# Case study: Lerato\*

Young gender activist

Cross-border migrant from a neighbouring country

Life course interrupted when her father and caregiver (aunt) died in her final year of school forcing her to move to South Africa

Constant movement within the city: led to fear and safety concerns

She was unemployed and had not completed high school

# Lerato's experience

- Sexual violence was orchestrated by someone she trusted
- She experienced drug assisted corrective rape
- Her brother was involved

“he [Lerato's brother] asked me to come to his place, I went there, I do not know what he gave me, until today I cannot tell you what he gave me, I was still like feeling dizzy... he tell people that he tries a lesbian and that I did not have an answer for that...”

“that person asked me do you have a boyfriend Lerato? I said why are you asking me, he said your brother asked me. So when that happened, **he left me with a question mark and then bad-mouthing me that I am a lesbian**, telling people Lerato is a lesbian, I had a question mark, I fell pregnant”

# The impact of violence on Lerato's journey

Impact on her mental health with suicidal thoughts

Fear of relationships: "hates men"

Joined Sonke Gender Justice "community action team" where she found informal support

"I think the depression that I had was when I was pregnant ja, because I think it did effect my son, I think, he has that anger management, because 3 months he was attending a psychologist because of his anger management.. I went to counselling, then they asked me what happened and then I told them.. maybe for him, he has changed, but for me, I tried to commit suicide but I...I...thought, now I have got my son and my son needs me, so no, let me stop it"

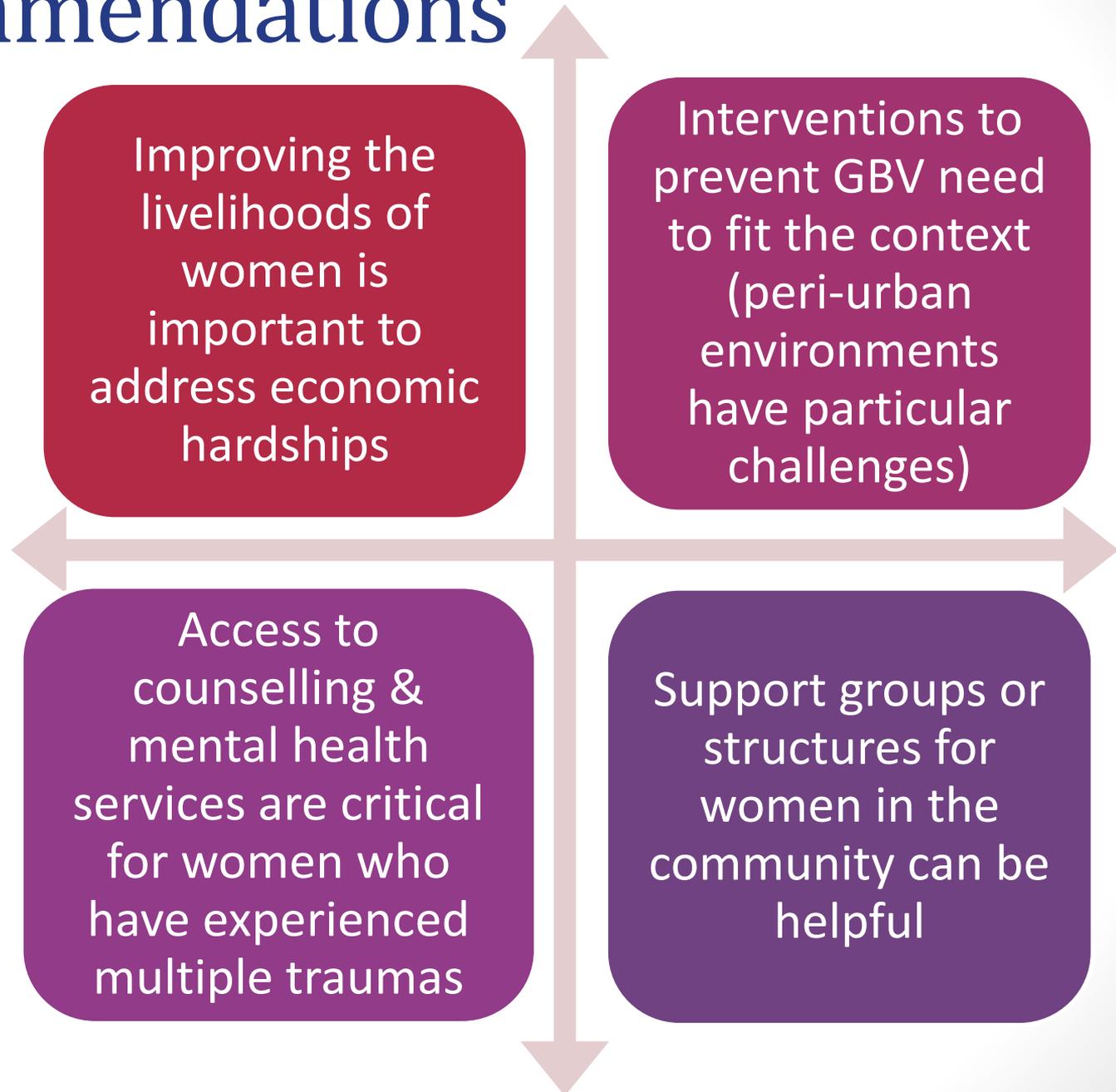
# Conclusions

Women experience **high levels of GBV** in peri-urban settings, often as **continuation of violent** relationships that started before migration & life course

Women **manoeuvre** around poverty and safety constraints in perceived **unsafe** peri-urban environments, often placing themselves at **greater risk** at the hands of violent men

Relationships provided some protection for women in the light of safety concerns & strong social norms for women to be partnered

# Recommendations



# Limitations

All participants were involved in the project staff, volunteer activists, or intervention participants

May be over emphasising resilience

These women may have been motivated to get involved with the intervention because of some level of awareness, consciousness based on their experiences

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