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## **Intimate partner violence can lead to traumatic brain injury – UCT study**



Approximately 81 women aged 18 and older participated in Caron Zimri's master's research, most of whom live in low- to-middle income communities, as well as shelters and safe havens for women and girls across Cape Town. Photo: Supplied

A study by a University of Cape Town (UCT) masters student, Caron Zimri, has revealed that intimate partner violence (IPV) can lead to traumatic brain injury.

Reading heart-wrenching stories in the news that highlight the IPV scourge that incessantly plagues women and girls in South Africa is tragic, disturbing and cuts deep. But nothing compares to hearing these experiences first-hand.

And these stories were a crucial component of Zimri's master's research. So, she put on a brave face, pulled up a chair and listened attentively as dozens of IPV survivors openly shared their stories of enduring unimaginable pain at the hands of someone they once

loved. Zimri said her research undertaking served as an eye-opener on the true scourge of IPV in South Africa and the trail of physical, psychological and emotional destruction it leaves behind.

“We read and hear about incidents of domestic abuse every day. But sitting across from someone and listening to their stories reveals the true magnitude of this scourge. We all know that IPV is a problem in South Africa, but as I gathered literature for my research, I realised how bad it really is. There’s so much we don’t know; there are so many untold stories; many, many cases that are not reported. What’s clear from my research is that South African women are in pain,” she said.

Zimri’s research forms part of the Unsettling Knowledge Production on Gendered and Sexual Violence in South Africa project – an initiative of UCT’s Department of Psychology. The project aims to conduct varied research that relates to all cis, queer, and transgender men and women, as well as marginalised genders, including non-binary people.

### **Two-part research undertaking**

Her research area straddles two spheres of psychology: social psychology – Zimri studied the lived experiences of women who have endured IPV and those who have not; and neuropsychology – she used quantitative data to analyse whether these lived experiences have contributed to a traumatic brain injury (TBI). In the second component of Zimri’s research, she used qualitative data to understand the impact that IPV and a possible TBI have had on the lives of these women. Ultimately, she said, the aim of her research was to get survivors and victims of IPV to share their stories; and to use these experiences to shine a spotlight on the possible long-term physical effects of abuse.

“I’ve always been fascinated by how the brain works and with my research I want to draw fellow researchers, healthcare workers and civil society to one thing – social issues like IPV and other forms of domestic violence cannot be separated from the field of neuropsychology. It’s all interrelated because there are so many factors that take place socially that can impact and impair the brain,” she said.

Because the scourge of IPV is complex, multifaceted and involves a lot more than just physical abuse, Zimri said she wanted her research to demonstrate that IPV can cause major long-term neurological defects like a TBI because of trauma to the head, face and neck.

### **IPV begets TBI**

Approximately 81 women aged 18 and older participated in Zimri’s research, most of whom live in low- to-middle income communities, as well as shelters and safe havens for women and girls across Cape Town. Most participants were not aware that IPV can lead to a TBI, and that some of their current physical symptoms indicate a possible TBI as well.

“IPV affects women in ways we can’t even imagine – on an emotional and psychological level and on a physical level too. My research indicates that in certain cases IPV can lead to a TBI. And the effects are far-reaching. If you think about women with TBI alone – how are they expected to perform daily tasks optimally if no one knows about it [TBI] and how to help them? It leads to endless challenges,” she said.

“We need to have more robust discussions around IPV and other forms of violence to really get to the root of this societal problem. It will assist us with coming up with the solutions we desperately need to change lives and save lives”.

## **Long-term plans**

Zimri hopes her research will shed light on the seriousness of IPV and its effects, and spark researchers, government and civil society into action – to work together to change the trajectory for women and girls in South Africa. More than that, she said she hopes her work will encourage victims of sexual and domestic violence to ask for help and share their stories.

As she concludes her master's programme and starts thinking about the likely next step in her academic journey, Zimri said developing a rehabilitation programme aimed at victims of IPV and other forms of abuse is on the cards. Her goal with the programme is to create a safe space to assist women and girls during their stages of healing, help them identify the tell-tale signs of a TBI and encourage them to seek help.

"Meeting and connecting with women who have experienced IPV has been an extraordinary experience. They are bold, talented and selfless and have so much to contribute. We need these women; South Africa needs their contributions. But not while they are in pain, while they heal. So, we need to do right by them," Zimri said.

*Story by Niémah Davids, UCT News*

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