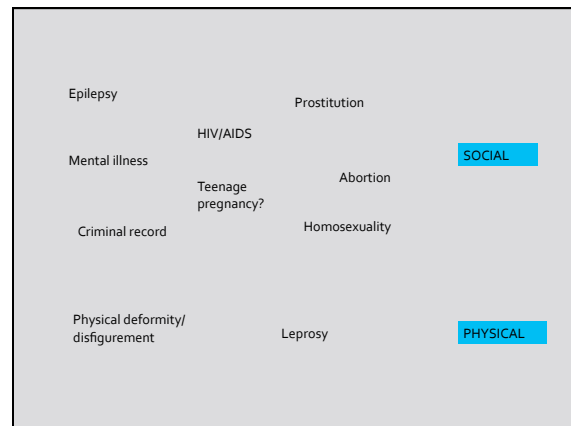


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## Stigma



### Definition

- An attribute that negatively changes the identity of an individual to a tainted or discredited one (Goffman 1963)
- Inferior to ideals of womanhood: female sexuality solely for procreation, the inevitability of motherhood and instinctual nurturance of the vulnerable (Kumar, Hessini & Mitchell 2009)

### Taint – dirty work

- Physical
  - Materially offensive – fetal body parts
  - Noxious conditions – “back street” connotations, anti-abortion harassment/violence
- Social
  - Contact with women who feel stigmatised
- Moral
  - Equating abortion with murder

### Who can become stigmatised?

- Women who have abortions
- Health professionals – especially those who work solely in abortion care
- Those who support women who have abortions



## Framing discourses

Discourse = written or oral communication that intends to shape public opinion

- Service providers being called abortionists
  - Bolivian expression "saving women"
  - Bangladeshi "menstrual regulation"
- Overemphasis on fetus: fetal personhood ("unborn child"), sentience, 4D scanning

## Structural

- Law
  - classification as a crime – reinforces stigma, as per reckless transmission of HIV
  - compulsory notification
  - licensing of premises
- Foreign policy – global gag rule

## Organisational

- Separation from other health services
- Negative provider attitudes – punitive management in extreme cases
  - Con Todo al Aire, Argentina (Steele & Chiarotti 2004)
  - Delays in treating post-abortion cases in Gabon (Mayi-Tsonga 2009)
- Absence from training programmes
- Indicators such as repeat abortions
- Exclusion from insurance policies

## Community

- Judgemental attitudes linking women having abortions to traits e.g. promiscuity, irresponsibility, selfishness and lack of compassion for human life
- Rejection
- Exclusion
- Discrimination
- Mythology – woman possesses evil spirits that can potentially harm others

## Individual (internalisation, self-stigma)

- Guilt
- Shame
- Feeling judged
- Secretiveness (fear of disclosure) – can involve seeking clandestine services
- Keeping the above to herself over time can lead to psychological distress

## Secrecy



Top drawer stuff that you tell anyone

Middle drawer stuff that you might tell your close friends

Bottom drawer stuff that you tell no-one: I've had an abortion

This was a study of women who had undergone abortion. The same sentiment applies to providers – tendency to be selective who you discuss your work with.

Astbury-Ward, Parry & Carnwell J Sex Med 2012

## Perpetuation of stigma

- Systems of unequal access to power and resources
- Narrow and rigid gender roles
- Systematic attempts to control female sexuality
- Inadvertent: by policy makers or health professionals

## Stigma resistance

- Reframing
  - Supporters treat abortion providers as heroes
  - Job satisfaction working with a woman during an intense transition in her life
- Recalibrating
  - Magnifies the redeeming qualities of abortion work and focuses for example on its role in vulnerable groups
- Refocusing
  - Avoids negative aspects of work
  - Pleasure of working with like-minded colleagues

## Ways to reduce stigma

- Apply considerable understanding resulting from HIV, mental illness and leprosy research that is applicable
- Abortion-specific research needed – sociologists have started this
- Multidisciplinary approaches
- Rigorous scientific approach to abortion care: evidence-based medicine
- Self-help e.g. ExhaleProVoice, WoW I Had an Abortion Project, My Abortion My Life