

## **RESEARCH PROJECT: The myth of asexuality? Disability stigma as a barrier to sexual relationships in South Africa**

**Project website:** [www.disabilityandsexualityproject.com](http://www.disabilityandsexualityproject.com)

### **Background and Project Aims:**

There are many myths about the sexuality of people with physical disabilities. These are that they are not sexual, are not interested in sex, or cannot have sex. As a result, people with physical disabilities are often excluded from relationships, sex education, and sexual health care. This project aimed to explore what non-disabled South Africans feel about disability and sexuality. The project also aimed to explore issues of sexuality and disability from the perspective of persons with physical disabilities themselves.

### **Study Method:**

The project involved two studies:

- (1) A survey of societal attitudes towards the sexuality of people with physical disabilities in South Africa. The survey questionnaire was developed with the input of people with physical disabilities themselves. A total of 1990 people responded to the survey. Of these, 125 reported having a disability, and 1865 reported being non-disabled
- (2) An interview study exploring the experiences of 13 people with physical disabilities (7 men and 6 women) The interviews explored participants' experiences of their sense of sexual self, intimate relationships, and engagement with sexual and reproductive health care.

### **Results:**

*Survey study:* In the responses provided by non-disabled people to the survey, we found many positive attitudes. However, on average, people with disabilities were viewed as less sexual and having less sexual and reproductive health care needs than non-disabled people. There were also some reported feelings of discomfort about dating a person with a physical disability.

*Interview Study:* Participants spoke about their experiences around these 5 key themes: (1) Feeling different and excluded; (2) feeling that their sexuality was questioned by others; (3) how this impacted on their sense of femininity and masculinity; (4) finding a way to feel sexual and confident; and (5) barriers to getting sexual health care.

### **Conclusions:**

People with physical disabilities in South Africa face many negative attitudes from society about their sexuality, masculinity and femininity. More education and awareness is needed at schools and in media. There needs to be better access to sexual health care for people with physical disabilities.