

THE SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING INDIVIDUALS TO STAY IN ABUSIVE MARRIAGES AND THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

BAAMSHAL ISABEL

Abstract

This study examines the sociocultural factors influencing individuals to stay in abusive relationships and the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence in Nigeria. A qualitative approach was employed to gather data on the experiences and perceptions of individuals in abusive relationships. The results show that cultural expectations, family and community pressure, economic dependence, stigma and shame, and religious beliefs are significant factors influencing individuals to stay in abusive relationships. Additionally, the study shows that domestic

violence is often transmitted from one generation to the next, with children learning violent behaviours from their parents. The findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to address domestic violence in Nigeria, including cultural sensitisation, economic empowerment, and support services for victims.

Keywords: Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, Sociocultural, Intergenerational, children.

Introduction

Domestic violence is a pervasive issue affecting individuals worldwide, with far-reaching consequences for victims, their children, and society as a whole. Domestic violence and partner violence can seriously affect individuals regardless of race, age, gender or socioeconomic status. Domestic violence, also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, dating abuse, and intimate partner violence (IPV), is a pattern of behaviour which involves the abuse by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, cohabitation, dating or within the family. Domestic violence can take many forms, including physical aggression or assault (hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, restraining, slapping, throwing objects, battery), or threats thereof, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, controlling or domineering, intimidation, stalking, passive/covert abuse and economic deprivation. It is perpetrated by, and on both men and women. According to the World Health Organisation (2015) approximately 30% of women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. In the United States the center for disease control and prevention (2020) 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men experience severe physical violence by an intimate partner.

It is becoming clearer now that the definition of 'partner violence' is not limited to physical violence only; it also includes psychological, emotional, financial, and

sexual abuse (Kirkwood, 1993; Rhatigan, Moore & Street, 2005). Domestic violence is therefore a mix of physical and coercive behaviours designed to manipulate and dominate another competent adult or adolescent, to achieve compliance and dependence. The term intimate partner violence (IPV) is often used synonymously with other terms have include wife beating, wife battering, man beating, husband battering, relationship violence, domestic abuse, spousal abuse, and family violence with some legal jurisdictions having specific definitions. Intimate partner violence is gender based and is a serious public health problem that cuts across nations, cultures, religion, and class. Laws on domestic violence vary by country. While it is generally outlawed in the western world, this is not the case in many developing countries. For instance, in 2010, the United Arab Emirates' Supreme Court ruled that a man has the right to physically discipline his wife and children as long as he does not leave physical marks. The social acceptability of domestic violence also differs by country. While in most developed countries domestic violence is considered unacceptable by most people, in many regions of the world the views are different (Adebayo, 2014)

Domestic violence can have devastating effects on the mental health of victims. Survivors of domestic violence may experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health conditions. The constant fear, stress, and trauma of living in an abusive relationship can lead to long-term psychological harm. Additionally, domestic violence can erode a victim's self-esteem and sense of self-worth, making it difficult for them to seek help or leave the abusive relationship (Bonomi et al, 2017). One common concept of domestic violence is the cycle of violence,

Centre for Conflict and Peace Management University of Jos
baamshali@unijos.edu.ng; benib331@gmail.com

Corresponding Author
BAAMSHAL ISABEL
E-mail: baamshali@unijos.edu.ng

which consists of three phases - tension building, acute violence, and honeymoon. In the tension building phase, the abuser becomes increasingly agitated and aggressive, leading to verbal threats, intimidation, and minor acts of violence. This tension eventually culminates in the acute violence phase, where the abuser lashes out physically, emotionally, or sexually. The cycle then repeats itself, with the abuser showing remorse, apologizing, and promising to change during the honeymoon phase. This cycle can make it extremely difficult for victims to leave the abusive relationship, as they may believe that the abuser will change or that the abuse is their fault (Walker, 2019).

Domestic violence is a pervasive issue in Nigeria, with far-reaching consequences for children who grow up in abusive environments. Research has shown that domestic violence can be transmitted across generations, perpetuating a cycle of violence that is difficult to break (Akinola et al., 2023). Domestic violence is a significant problem, with many individuals staying in abusive marriages due to various sociocultural factors. This paper explores the sociocultural factors influencing individuals to stay in abusive marriages and examines the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence. The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to explore the sociocultural factors influencing individuals to stay in abusive marriages and the generational transmission of domestic violence. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who have experienced domestic violence in their marriages. Snowball sampling was employed to reach more participants who otherwise were difficult to access. Discourse analysis was adopted to examine the communication patterns used by participants, assessing the social and cultural context used to understand power dynamics, social relationship and cultural norms.

Sociocultural Factors Influencing Individuals to Stay in Abusive Marriages

In Nigeria, sociocultural factors such as cultural expectations, family and community pressure, economic dependence, stigma and shame, and religious beliefs can influence individuals to stay in abusive marriages (Adeyemi et al., 2020; Bamidele et al., 2022). These factors can be particularly strong for women, who may be socialised to prioritise their husbands' needs over their own (Eze et al., 2023). Similarly, men may feel pressured to maintain their masculine identity and avoid seeking help or leaving the marriage (Akinola et al., 2020). Children are often cited as a reason why individuals stay in abusive marriages (Bamidele et al., 2022). The decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship is

complex and influenced by various factors, including the well-being and safety of children (Eze et al., 2023).

Fear of Losing Custody

One of the primary concerns for parents in abusive relationships is the fear of losing custody of their children (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Abusers may use custody threats as a means of controlling their partners, making it difficult for victims to leave the relationship.

Emotional Attachment and Responsibility

Parents may also feel emotionally attached to their children and responsible for their well-being, thereby leading them to stay in the abusive relationship (Okafor et al., 2024). This sense of responsibility can be particularly strong for mothers, who may prioritise their children's needs over their own.

Financial Constraints

Raising children can be expensive, and individuals in abusive relationships may feel financially trapped (Adeyemi et al., 2020). The financial constraints of raising children alone can be daunting, leading some parents to stay in the abusive relationship.

Cultural Expectations, Masculinity and Patriarchal Norms

In Nigeria, traditional patriarchal norms emphasise women's subordination to their husbands (Adeyemi et al., 2020). These expectations can make it difficult for women to leave abusive marriages, as they may feel obligated to prioritise their husbands' needs over their own. Similarly, traditional masculinity norms emphasise men's strength, courage, and authority (Adeyemi et al., 2020). These expectations can make it difficult for men to admit to being victims of domestic violence or to seek help. Men may feel that seeking help or leaving the marriage would compromise their masculinity.

Stigma and Shame

Domestic violence is often stigmatised in Nigerian society, and men who experience abuse may feel ashamed or embarrassed (Bamidele et al., 2022). This stigma can prevent individuals from seeking help or disclosing their experiences to friends, family, or authorities.

Economic Dependence

Many Nigerian women are economically dependent on their husbands, making it difficult for them to leave abusive marriages (Eze et al., 2023). Women may fear that leaving the marriage would compromise their

financial stability or ability to provide for their children. In many Nigerian households, men are expected to be the primary breadwinners (Eze et al., 2023). In an instance where the woman is also providing, the men who experience domestic violence may feel economically trapped, fearing that leaving the marriage would compromise their financial stability or ability to provide for their families.

Family and Community Pressure

Nigerians may face pressure from their families and communities to maintain the marriage, regardless of the abuse (Ibrahim et al., 2022). This pressure can be intense, particularly if the spouse's family has invested significant social capital in the marriage.

Lack of Support Services

Nigeria has limited support services for victims of domestic violence (Okafor et al., 2024), especially male victims. Individuals may not know where to seek help or may be unaware of the available resources, making it more difficult for them to leave abusive marriages.

Traditional and Religious Beliefs

Traditional and religious beliefs in Nigeria often emphasise the importance of marriage and the need to maintain family unity (Akinola et al., 2020). These beliefs can make it difficult for individuals to justify leaving an abusive marriage, even if it means prioritising their own well-being.

Transmission of Domestic Violence

Another dimension to domestic violence is the transmission of violence. This refers to the cycle of abuse being passed down from one generation to the next. Children who grow up in households where domestic violence occurs are more likely to become abusers or victims themselves in their adult relationships. This is often due to the normalisation of violence in the home, as well as the lack of healthy relationship models and coping mechanisms. Breaking this cycle requires intervention and support for both victims and perpetrators to address the root causes of the violence (Edleson, 2019). Children who witness domestic violence are at risk of experiencing a range of negative effects, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Research has also shown that children who grow up in abusive environments are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems, including aggression and delinquency (Okafor & Nwoke, 2024) and substance abuse (Akinola et al., 2019). For example, a study conducted in Ibadan, Nigeria

found that children who witnessed domestic violence were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviour, including theft and vandalism (Ogunbiyi et al., 2020). Furthermore, domestic violence can have a negative impact on children's academic performance and social development, with affected children often struggling to form healthy relationships with peers and authority figures (Eze & Adebayo, 2025) and experience social isolation (Bamidele et al., 2020). A study conducted in Kaduna, Nigeria found that children who witnessed domestic violence were more likely to experience academic difficulties, including poor grades and absenteeism (Eze et al., 2022). Children who witness or experience domestic violence may suffer physical injuries, including bruises, cuts, and broken bones (Bamidele et al., 2020). For example, a study conducted in Lagos, Nigeria found that 60% of children who witnessed domestic violence reported physical injuries (Okafor et al., 2018).

The intergenerational transmission of domestic violence refers to the process by which violence is passed down from one generation to the next (Akinola et al., 2023). This can occur through various mechanisms, including social learning, emotional regulation, and attachment styles. Children who grow up in abusive environments may learn that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts, leading them to perpetuate the cycle of violence in their own relationships (Bello & Ajayi, 2021). Furthermore, children who experience domestic violence may struggle with emotional regulation, leading to increased aggression and conflict in their own relationships (Ogunbiyi & Akinwunmi, 2022).

The sociocultural factors influencing individuals to stay in abusive marriages intersect with the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence in complex ways. For example, cultural expectations around marriage and family can make it difficult for individuals to leave abusive relationships, increasing the likelihood that children will grow up in violent environments and perpetuate the cycle of violence (Adeyemi et al., 2020). Similarly, family and community pressure to maintain the marriage can lead to a lack of support for victims of domestic violence, making it more difficult for them to leave the relationship and break the cycle of violence (Bamidele et al., 2022).

Findings

1. Contrary to common assumptions, physical violence while it may be more visible and attention grabbing, the reality is most individuals suffering from intimate partner violence are actually victims of emotional

abuse. This insidious form of abuse can be just as debilitating and traumatic as physical violence, yet it often remains hidden and underestimated, emotional abuse can take many forms including verbal belittling, gas lighting, isolation, and control all of which can erode a person's sense of self-worth, autonomy, and dignity.

2. Participants reported that they feared not being believed or taken seriously while others expressed a deep-seated fear of the unknown, stemming from a lifetime of socialisation that emphasised marriage as the ultimate goal, having been groomed for marriage at a young age, they struggle to envision a life beyond their current circumstances. The prospect of leaving their abusive marriage is daunting as they wonder: "what else is out there, is there more to life?" This sentiment reflects the limited life options and lack of exposure to alternative lifestyles, leaving them feeling stuck and uncertain about the future.
3. Culture, religion, stigma, shame, economic dependence all amount to reasons why people endure abusive marriages but majority of participants reported staying in abusive marriages ostensibly for the sake of their children. Fear for what their children may feel, how they will provide for them or possibly losing them in a custody battle. All which are legitimate reasons, unaware that the children being the most vulnerable victims, suffer severe and long-lasting consequences of domestic violence. By staying in abusive relationships parents may inadvertently perpetrate a circle of harm, exposing their children to traumatic experiences that can have enduring effects on their emotional, psychological and social well-being.

Also, children who grow up in abusive households are more likely to perpetuate violence in their own relationships (violent role modeling). Some children may adopt the abusive behaviours they witnessed while others may develop negative attitudes towards the opposite gender (trauma inheritance) perpetuating a cycle of violence and mistrust. This finding underscores the need for parents, policy makers and practitioners to reassess their priorities and develop strategies that prioritise the safety, wellbeing and long-term interest of children.

4. Alarmingly some individuals experiencing domestic violence suffer in silence, choosing not to disclose their situation to anyone. Those who do confide in family and friends, often receive inadequate support. They are frequently advised to pray or be patient and strive to please their abusive partner. The common

refrain "no marriage is perfect" minimises the severity of the situation, discouraging victims from seeking help. As a result, these cases often go unreported and the affected individuals fail to receive the needed assistance. This is reflected in the finding that only 29% of participants sought professional help, highlighting the need for more effective support systems and awareness-raising efforts to combat domestic violence.

5. Participants reported employing a range of coping mechanisms to manage the emotional and psychological distress associated with domestic violence. Positive coping mechanisms like exercise, hanging out with friends and family, mediation, prayers, watching movies and engaging with social media while some turn to negative coping mechanism which is substance abuse. While positive coping mechanisms can provide temporary reprieve and promote resilience, negative coping mechanisms like substance abuse can exacerbate problems and lead to further harm.

Based on this research paper, here are some recommendations:

1. Individual recommendations
 - Seek professional help: individuals experiencing domestic violence should seek professional from counselors, therapists, support groups and non-governmental organisations.
 - Develop a safety plan: victims of domestic violence should create a safety plan, including identifying safe places to stay, having an emergency fund and having a support network.
 - Practice self-care
2. Policy Recommendations
 - Develop and implement national policies: The Nigerian government should develop and implement national policies to prevent domestic violence and protect victims, including children.
 - Establish domestic violence courts: Specialized courts should be established to handle domestic violence cases, ensuring swift justice and support for victims.
 - Increase funding for support services/provide training and resources: The government should allocate funds to support services, such as counseling, shelters, and education programs for victims of domestic violence; provide training and resources to practitioners, including law enforcement health care providers and social workers to help them identify and respond to

domestic violence.

3. Recommendations for Practitioners

- Provide trauma-informed care: Healthcare providers, counselors, and social workers should receive training on trauma-informed care to support victims of domestic violence.
- Establish referral pathways: Establish referral pathways to connect victims of domestic violence with support services, such as shelters, counseling, and education programs.
- Engage people in prevention efforts: Engage individuals in prevention efforts, promoting positive attitudes and behaviours towards each other and especially towards children.

4. Community-Based Recommendations

- Community sensitisation programs: Organise community sensitisation programs to raise awareness about domestic violence, the dangers and the dangers and the importance of breaking the circle of violence, and also create awareness of the support services available to Nigerians.
- Support groups for victims: Establish support groups for victims of domestic violence, providing a safe space for sharing experiences and receiving support including financial assistance and legal aid.
- Collaborate with traditional leaders and religious leaders: Engage traditional leaders, religious leaders and community influencers to promote positive attitudes, behaviours, promote healthy relationships by modeling respect, empathy and effective communication.

5. Recommendations for Researchers

- Explore culturally specific interventions: Investigate culturally specific interventions that can be effective in preventing domestic violence and supporting victims in Nigerian communities.
- Develop and validate assessment tools: Develop and validate assessment tools to measure the prevalence and effects of domestic violence on children in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The sociocultural factors influencing individuals to stay in abusive marriages and the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence are complex and interconnected issues. Addressing these issues require a comprehensive approach that involves challenging

cultural and societal norms, providing support and resources for victims of domestic violence, and promoting healthy relationships and conflict resolution skills. By working together, we can break the cycle of violence and create a safer, more supportive environment for all.

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