



Domestic Violence and Family Stability among Married Couples in Nigeria

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Abstract

The integrity of the family unit as the foundational institution of Nigerian society is under serious and documented threat from the persistent prevalence of domestic violence within the institution of marriage. This paper examined domestic violence and family stability among married couples in Nigeria, with three specific objectives: to assess the nature and forms of domestic violence experienced by married couples in Nigeria; to examine the effects of domestic violence on family stability among married couples in Nigeria; and to identify strategies for addressing domestic violence and promoting family stability among married couples in Nigeria. The paper adopted feminist theory and social learning theory as its theoretical frameworks. A systematic literature review methodology guided by the PRISMA framework was employed, drawing on 54 peer-reviewed studies sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Findings reveal that domestic violence among Nigerian married couples manifests in physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and spiritual forms, sustained by patriarchal cultural norms and institutional failures. The effects on family stability are severe, encompassing marital dissolution, psychological trauma, compromised child development, and household economic disintegration. The paper concluded that domestic violence in Nigeria is a structurally embedded public crisis demanding an integrated, multi-level response. It was recommended that mandatory counselling programmes be institutionalised for couples, that the VAPP Act 2015 be universally domesticated and vigorously enforced, and that women's economic empowerment be integrated into the domestic violence response framework at community level.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Family Stability, Married Couples, Intimate Partner Violence.



1. INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence, broadly understood as a pattern of coercive and abusive conduct perpetrated by one intimate partner against another within a domestic or marital setting, constitutes one of the most pervasive violations of human rights across the contemporary world. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, and its consequences extend far beyond the immediate victims to affect children, extended family networks, and society at large. According to WHO prevalence estimates published in 2023, approximately 31.6% of women worldwide equivalent to 840 million women and girls have been subjected to either physical or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) or non-partner sexual violence at some point in their lifetime. Equally alarming is the pace of change: in the last two decades, the average annual decline in IPV has been only 0.2%, suggesting that despite the proliferation of international frameworks and national legislation, the global burden has remained virtually stagnant since the year 2000. These figures represent not merely statistical abstractions but lived experiences that corrode the foundational institution of the family, particularly within the marriage bond.

The consequences of domestic violence are not confined to individual suffering. In 2022 alone, an estimated 48,800 women and girls worldwide were killed by their intimate partners or other family members, which translates to more than five women or girls killed every hour by someone within their own domestic sphere. Beyond fatality, domestic violence significantly impairs the physical and mental health of those affected, with rates of depression, anxiety disorders, unplanned pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections considerably higher among women who have experienced intimate partner violence compared with those who have not. The reverberating effects on children exposed to such violence are equally well-documented, with research indicating that children who repeatedly observe interparental conflict are more likely to develop aggressive, antisocial, and delinquent behavioural patterns that persist into adulthood (Abdul-Sallam et al., 2024; Somefun & Odumosu, 2023).

Within the African regional context, the prevalence of intimate partner violence is disproportionately high relative to the global average. Estimates from low- and middle-income countries place the prevalence of IPV at 37.2%, with central sub-Saharan Africa recording 44% and eastern sub-Saharan Africa recording 38%. In sub-Saharan Africa broadly, approximately 33% of women experience intimate partner violence at some point in their lifetime, a figure that underscores the deeply structural character of the problem across the continent. Marital disruption, including divorce and separation, in these settings reflects not only the breakdown of spousal relationships but also signals deeper psychosocial and economic consequences for women and their families. Patriarchal social norms, poverty, inadequate legal enforcement, and limited access to support services combine to sustain high rates of domestic violence across African societies, rendering the family rather than a site of safety, one of the most dangerous environments for women and children (Ikuteyijo et al., 2025).

In Nigeria, domestic violence has attained alarming proportions and poses an acute threat to family stability among married couples. Despite national and international efforts to eliminate intimate partner violence, its prevalence in Nigeria in 2018 stood at 36%, significantly higher than the 25% recorded in 2013 suggesting a worsening trajectory rather than progress. In 2024, the National Human Rights Commission reported 84,187 cases of domestic violence, yet many victims did not report their experiences to formal services on account of fear, social stigma, and the absence of adequate support



systems. Research conducted in Kano State found that the overall prevalence of domestic violence among married women was 23%, with the rural figure considerably exceeding that of urban settings. In a study examining married primary school teachers in Delta State, 28% of Nigerian men and women reported having experienced either physical or sexual violence within the first twelve months of married life, and unattended intimate partner violence was found to result in separation, divorce, erosion of trust, and the absence of intimacy and sexual satisfaction within the marriage.

The Nigerian legal framework has attempted to address this crisis. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015 (VAPP Act) has extensively redefined the definition of rape, made provision for victim rights, and criminalised domestic violence; however, whilst laudable and timely, it suffers from certain inadequacies, including jurisdictional limitations to the Federal Capital Territory and slow dispensation of justice by the judiciary. Cultural attitudes also undermine legislative intent. Domestic violence in Nigeria is widely regarded as a private marital matter, and patriarchal norms normalise the physical discipline of wives in several communities (Logun et al., 2023). Domestic violence is also known as spousal abuse, battery, family violence, dating violence, and intimate partner violence, and it encompasses different patterns of behaviour used in the context of both intimate partner and non-intimate partner relationships (Dikko et al., 2023). Against this background, the stability of the Nigerian family unit as a social, economic, and child-rearing institution is under serious strain, warranting rigorous scholarly investigation.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The institution of marriage occupies a central position in Nigerian social life, serving as the primary unit of family formation, reproduction, economic co-operation, and socialisation of children. When domestic violence disrupts this institution, the consequences are felt not only by the immediate couple but by children, extended families, and the wider community. Yet, despite a growing body of evidence documenting the prevalence and consequences of intimate partner violence in Nigeria, the specific relationship between domestic violence and family stability among married couples remains insufficiently examined in the scholarly literature, particularly at the empirical level.

In Nigeria, 30% of women within the age range of 15 to 45 years have been reported to experience sexual abuse by an intimate partner, whilst 47% of Nigerians indicated in a national poll that violence against men by women is also widespread. These figures signal that domestic violence in Nigeria is a bidirectional and pervasive phenomenon that cuts across gender, class, educational attainment, and geopolitical zones. A cross-sectional study in Kano State by Hayatu et al. (2023) and Sambo et al. (2023) found an overall prevalence of domestic violence of 23%, with the rural figure considerably exceeding the urban rate, indicating that geographical location and access to resources shape exposure to violence in significant ways. Meanwhile, research conducted by Odini et al. (2024) found that psychological and emotional violence at 66.1% and physical violence at 47.5% were the most commonly reported forms, with 54.9% of respondents having been insulted and 36.6% having been slapped.

These figures are deeply troubling in their implications for family stability. Unattended intimate partner violence results in separation, divorce, lack of trust, infidelity, or the death of a spouse, whilst marital communication, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction are often rendered absent from the relationship. Research across sub-Saharan Africa confirms this pattern: intimate partner violence remains pervasive in the sub-region, and marital disruption, including divorce and separation, signals



deeper psychosocial and economic consequences for women and their families. The children caught within violent households are particularly vulnerable, as evidence from Nigeria and South Africa demonstrates that family instability driven by parental conflict is associated with delinquency, peer victimisation, and compromised academic outcomes (Somefun & Odumosu, 2023).

The legislative response in Nigeria has been inadequate in practice. The VAPP Act 2015, whilst criminalising domestic violence and extending victim rights, suffers from jurisdictional limitations and slow judicial enforcement, and has not been domesticated uniformly across all states. The absence of adequate shelters, limited specialised support services, low public awareness, and a deeply ingrained culture of violence collectively obstruct victims from seeking redress, particularly in settings where domestic matters are treated as private affairs. Furthermore, socioeconomic factors such as financial dependency, unemployment, and poverty intensify both the incidence of violence and the difficulty of exiting abusive marriages. Financial reliance on a partner has been identified as a long-term threat to employment and financial stability amongst women exposed to intimate partner violence, creating a cycle that traps victims within violent domestic arrangements with few viable alternatives.

Despite the foregoing, there is a notable paucity of localised, studies that specifically investigate the relationship between domestic violence and family stability as measured by marital cohesion, divorce rates, child welfare outcomes, and economic household functioning among married couples in Nigeria. Much of the existing literature addresses either the prevalence of intimate partner violence in clinical or community health settings, or the legal frameworks intended to curb it, without adequately engaging the sociological dynamics of how sustained domestic violence destabilises or dissolves the marital unit. This paper therefore sought to address that gap by examining domestic violence and its implications for family stability among married couples in Nigeria.

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this paper was to examine domestic violence and its implications for family stability among married couples in Nigeria. The specific objectives were to:

- i. Assess the nature and forms of domestic violence experienced by married couples in Nigeria.
- ii. Examine the effects of domestic violence on family stability among married couples in Nigeria.
- iii. Identify strategies for addressing domestic violence and promoting family stability among married couples in Nigeria.

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a systematic literature review methodology guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework as the primary approach for identifying, screening, evaluating, and synthesising relevant scholarly literature on domestic violence and family stability among married couples in Nigeria. The PRISMA framework was

selected for its capacity to ensure transparency, methodological rigour, and replicability in the literature search and selection process, and for its well-established utility in minimising selection bias whilst maintaining consistency in the appraisal of included studies (Moher et al., 2009). A systematic literature review approach was considered most appropriate for this paper given the breadth of the subject matter, the need to draw on empirical, theoretical, and conceptual literature from multiple



disciplinary perspectives including sociology, psychology, public health, law, and counselling and the importance of grounding the paper's findings, discussion, and recommendations in a rigorously assembled and critically evaluated body of evidence rather than a selective or convenience-based reading of the available literature.

The literature search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected on account of their broad and complementary coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the social sciences, health sciences, law, and interdisciplinary African studies. Each database was searched using Boolean combinations of keywords and subject terms directly relevant to the paper's topic and objectives. The primary keyword strings used included: "domestic violence AND Nigeria," "intimate partner violence AND married couples AND Nigeria," "family stability AND domestic violence AND Nigeria," "domestic violence AND marital instability AND Africa," "forms of intimate partner violence AND Nigeria," "effects of domestic violence AND family AND Nigeria," "intervention strategies AND domestic violence AND Nigeria," "feminist theory AND intimate partner violence," and "social learning theory AND domestic violence AND intergenerational transmission." All searches were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and edited academic volumes in recognition of the paper's commitment to drawing on the most current and traceable scholarly evidence available. Seminal theoretical works published prior to this period, specifically Bandura (1977) and Millett (1970), were included through backward citation analysis because they constitute the foundational intellectual basis of the theoretical frameworks adopted in this paper, namely social learning theory and feminist theory respectively, and could not be substituted by more recent publications without distorting the theoretical review.

4.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were selected for inclusion in this review on the basis of the following criteria: (A) the article was published in a peer-reviewed journal, edited academic book, or book chapter with the exception of foundational theoretical works identified through backward citation analysis; (B) the article addressed one or more of the paper's three core objectives the nature and forms of domestic violence, the effects of domestic violence on family stability, or strategies for addressing domestic violence among married couples as a substantive rather than incidental focus; (C) the article was grounded in clearly articulated empirical, theoretical, or conceptual methodology, including quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, mixed-methods designs, systematic reviews, or conceptual frameworks; (D) the article was written in English and the full text was accessible through the selected databases or via direct institutional library access; and (E) the article pertained to the Nigerian context or, where Nigerian data were unavailable on a specific dimension, to the sub-Saharan African or broader Global South context in ways directly transferable to the Nigerian setting.

Articles were excluded from the review on the following grounds: (A) the article was published in a newspaper, blog, organisational website, or non-peer-reviewed practitioner publication without an identifiable academic author and scholarly methodology; (B) the article addressed domestic violence only in passing and did not substantively engage with its relationship to marital or family outcomes; (C) the article was a duplicate of a study already included, exhibiting substantial overlap in data source, sample, or findings; (D) the article was published in a predatory or non-indexed journal, as assessed against the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and Beall's List of Predatory



Publishers; and (E) the full text of the article was unavailable despite repeated attempts at retrieval through institutional and open-access channels.

4.2 PRISMA Article Selection Process

The article selection process followed the four stages of the PRISMA flow diagram as described below.

Identification: An initial database search across Scopus ($n = 74$), Web of Science ($n = 61$), PubMed ($n = 53$), and Google Scholar ($n = 79$) generated a total of 267 potential references relevant to the paper's topic and objectives.

Screening: Removal of 61 duplicate records yielded 206 unique titles and abstracts for further screening. Two independent reviewers assessed each record against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, with inter-rater agreement determined using Cohen's Kappa statistic ($K = 0.79$), indicating substantial agreement between reviewers. Discrepancies between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus. Of the 206 records screened, 118 were eliminated for insufficient relevance to domestic violence, family stability, married couples, or the Nigerian and sub-Saharan African context, leaving 88 articles eligible for full-text review.

Eligibility: Full-text review of the 88 eligible articles resulted in the exclusion of 34 further articles on the following grounds: absence of clearly defined research methodology, including editorial and opinion pieces ($n = 11$); exclusive focus on domestic violence in non-marital or adolescent dating contexts without relevance to married couples ($n = 9$); publication in non-indexed or predatory journals ($n = 8$); and inaccessibility of full text ($n = 6$).

Inclusion: A final sample of 54 articles met all eligibility criteria and were included in the thematic synthesis that underpins this paper. In addition, four foundational theoretical works identified through backward citation analysis specifically Bandura (1977), Millett (1970), hooks (1984), and Moher et al. (2009) were included to provide the theoretical and methodological context for the review. These foundational works did not pass through the systematic search protocol and are listed separately in the reference section.

4.3 Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of each of the 54 included studies was assessed using an adaptation of the Quality Assessment Criteria developed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007), rated on a three-point scale (0 = no; 0.5 = partial; 1 = yes) across six dimensions: (A) clarity of research objectives; (B) appropriateness of research design to the stated objectives; (C) rigour of data collection procedures; (D) adequacy of data analysis methods; (E) validity and reliability of reported findings; and (F) relevance to the paper's three research objectives. Articles scoring below 3.0 out of 6.0 were considered for exclusion, though all 54 articles in the final sample achieved scores of 3.5 or above, with a mean quality score of 4.5 ($SD = 0.68$). In terms of methodological distribution across the included studies, quantitative methods were employed in 22 studies, qualitative methods in 16 studies, mixed-methods designs in 10 studies, and conceptual or theoretical frameworks in 6 studies.

4.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted from each included study using a standardised extraction template that captured the following elements: author(s) and year of publication, study location, research design, sample size



and sampling technique, data collection methods, theoretical framework, key findings relevant to the paper's objectives, and limitations acknowledged by the authors. Following extraction, a thematic synthesis was conducted using the three-stage process developed by Thomas and Harden (2008), comprising line-by-line coding of relevant textual content, identification of descriptive themes corresponding to each of the paper's three objectives, and the development of analytical themes that integrate and interrogate the evidence across studies. This approach allowed for the systematic identification of convergences, divergences, and gaps in the existing literature on domestic violence and family stability among married couples in Nigeria, and provided the evidential foundation for the paper's conceptual review, empirical review, theoretical framework, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

4.5 Limitations

This paper, been a systematic literature review, is subject to a number of inherent limitations that must be acknowledged in the interest of scholarly transparency. Firstly, despite the structured search protocol adopted, it is possible that relevant studies were inadvertently omitted from the review owing to the restriction of the search to four databases and to publications available in English, which may have excluded valuable contributions published in other languages or in less widely indexed Nigerian and African academic journals.

Secondly, the geographic scope of the empirical literature reviewed is uneven, with a disproportionate concentration of studies drawn from southern Nigerian states particularly Lagos, Delta, and Ogun relative to northern and north-central states, which means that the findings may not fully capture the regional variation in the nature, prevalence, and cultural dynamics of domestic violence across Nigeria's diverse geopolitical zones.

Thirdly, the reliance on self-reported data in the majority of the primary studies included in this review introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, whereby respondents may have underreported their experiences of domestic violence on account of the stigma, shame, and fear that the literature consistently identifies as barriers to disclosure in the Nigerian context.

Fourthly, the exclusive focus on married couples means that the findings of this paper cannot be generalised to cohabiting, separated, or divorced populations, whose experiences of domestic violence and family instability may differ in important respects from those captured by the reviewed studies.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings of this paper remain grounded in a rigorously assembled and quality-assessed body of scholarly evidence and offer a substantive contribution to the understanding of domestic violence and family stability among married couples in Nigeria.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Domestic Violence

The concept of domestic violence has been subject to varied scholarly interpretations, reflecting the breadth of abusive behaviours it encompasses and the different disciplinary perspectives from which it is examined. Oriola et al. (2022) defined domestic violence as a form of abuse expressed in physical, sexual, and other extremely abusive conduct, and noted that it is also variously referred to as spousal



abuse, battery, family violence, dating violence, and intimate partner violence, encompassing different patterns of coercive behaviour within intimate and non-intimate partner contexts. This conceptualisation draws attention to the breadth of the phenomenon, suggesting that domestic violence is not reducible to physical assault alone but extends to patterns of control and intimidation that may not leave visible injuries.

Tan and Haining (2023) further clarified that domestic violence encompasses any form of violent behaviour directed towards family members regardless of gender, resulting in physical, sexual, or psychological harm, and includes acts of threats, coercion, and the deprivation of liberty, whilst emphasising that domestic violence occurs within the family unit and is distinct from, though related to, intimate partner violence, which refers more specifically to violent and controlling acts perpetrated by one partner against another. Aye et al. (2024) offered a clinically grounded definition, describing domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence as any kind of sexual, physical, emotional, or psychological violence or abusive behaviour which occurs within an intimate partner relationship between adults or adolescents, stressing that it is widespread across all countries, including Nigeria, yet significantly under-reported owing to socio-cultural hindrances such as stigmatisation and victim-blaming.

For the purposes of this paper, domestic violence is therefore adopted as a systematic pattern of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse perpetrated by one spouse or intimate partner against the other within a marital relationship, sustained through coercion, power imbalance, and social or cultural permissiveness, with demonstrable consequences for the health, dignity, and stability of the family unit.

Family Stability

Family stability as a scholarly concept has attracted considerable attention in social science research, though its definitional boundaries remain a matter of ongoing scholarly deliberation. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024) asserted that family stability is a critical factor for the socioeconomic development of any society, arguing that raising family stability is crucial and is highly linked to community socioeconomic development, and that the foundation of all human development begins within the family before extending to the state and region. This understanding positions family stability not merely as a relational quality between spouses but as a socioeconomic and developmental resource, the erosion of which has consequences that extend beyond the household into the wider community.

Dikko et al. (2023), as engaged by other scholars, identified that issues such as financial hardship, unemployment, marital conflict, poor communication, changing gender roles, and exposure to psychosocial stressors frequently erode family stability, suggesting that stability is not a static condition but one that is continuously negotiated against structural and interpersonal pressures. From a psychological perspective, Okojide et al. (2023), found that psychological well-being is a meaningful predictor of marital stability among women, pointing to the interrelationship between individual mental health outcomes and the capacity of the family system to remain cohesive and functional over time.

Abreu-Afonso et al. (2022) similarly argued that high rates of divorce are related to low marital satisfaction levels, and that communication patterns, couple cohesion and flexibility, and motivation for conjugality are important determinants of whether a couple's relationship endures across the



family life cycle. These perspectives together reveal that family stability is a multi-dimensional phenomenon encompassing emotional, relational, economic, and social dimensions, and that its disruption particularly through domestic violence generates cascading effects on children, community belonging, and social functioning. For this paper, family stability is therefore defined as the sustained capacity of a married couple to maintain emotional cohesion, functional role performance, economic co-operation, and mutual respect within the household, in a manner that promotes the welfare of all family members and resists disintegration through divorce, separation, or chronic conflict.

Couples

The concept of couples within the scholarly literature is broadly understood to refer to two individuals bound together in an intimate, committed relationship, most commonly within the institution of marriage, though the term has increasingly been applied to cohabiting and non-married dyads in contemporary research. Abreu-Afonso et al. (2022) examined couples as relational units whose satisfaction, stability, and resilience are shaped by communication patterns, cohesion, and flexibility within the dyad, as well as the stage of the family life cycle at which the couple finds

itself, suggesting that couple functioning is dynamic and developmental rather than fixed.

Aye et al. (2024) specifically addressed married couples as the primary unit of concern in studying intimate partner violence, noting that intimate partner violence is a serious health issue among couples, particularly among married partners, and is frequently under-reported due to shame and sociocultural stigma. This framing foregrounds the institutional character of the couple relationship within the context of marriage, wherein legal, religious, and cultural expectations shape both the experience of violence and the barriers to seeking help.

Akeredolu et al. (2024) argued that the resilience and psychological well-being of couples become essential factors influencing families' ability to remain functional and cohesive in the face of adversity, thereby positioning couples not merely as two individuals but as a functional and interdependent unit whose relational quality directly determines the stability of the wider household system. Sulaiman (2024) further contributed to this conceptualisation within the Nigerian context by examining how the form of marriage contracted whether statutory, customary, or Islamic shapes the experience of intimate partner violence among married people in north-central Nigeria, demonstrating that the category of couples is itself differentiated by cultural and legal frameworks that determine power relations, rights, and vulnerabilities within the relationship. Whilst each of these authors captured important elements of what constitutes a couple relational, psychological, institutional, and cultural none fully addresses the intersection of couplehood with violence in the specific Nigerian marital context.

For the purpose of this paper, couples are therefore defined as legally or customarily married male and female partners residing together in a shared domestic arrangement, whose interpersonal dynamics, relational quality, and mutual obligations form the structural core of family life and are therefore directly implicated in the relationship between domestic violence and family stability.

The Nature and Forms of Domestic Violence Experienced by Married Couples in Nigeria

Domestic violence among married couples in Nigeria manifests across a wide spectrum of forms, each rooted in distinct mechanisms of power, control, and cultural legitimisation. The literature consistently identifies physical, psychological or emotional, sexual, economic, and spiritual forms of



abuse as constituting the primary dimensions of domestic violence within Nigerian marriages, though these forms frequently co-occur and are mutually reinforcing rather than discrete (Sambo et al., 2023; Logun et al., 2023). Understanding each form in the specific Nigerian context is essential for appreciating the full extent of the harm perpetrated within domestic settings and its implications for family life. They are as identified and discussed as follows:

i. ***Physical violence***

Physical violence remains the most visible form of domestic abuse and has received the greatest attention in Nigerian empirical research. It encompasses slapping, hitting, kicking, punching, burning, strangling, and the use of objects or weapons against a spouse. A study conducted in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, involving married working women found that 50.5% of the women had experienced physical violence, 33.8% had been exposed to sexual violence, whilst 85% had experienced psychological or emotional violence, with lower educational status of partners and daily alcohol intake identified as key risk factors. These figures are significant not merely for their magnitude but because they reveal that physical violence rarely occurs in isolation, it is typically embedded within a broader pattern that includes psychological and sexual abuse.

A widely documented case in Nigeria that illustrates the lethal dimension of physical domestic violence is the 2021 murder of gospel singer Osinachi Nwachukwu, allegedly battered to death by her husband, Peter Nwachukwu, in Abuja. Although this case came to public attention in 2022, it underscores the escalatory trajectory of unchecked physical violence within marriage in Nigeria. In the case of FCT v. Basil (2022), the defendant was charged under the VAPP Act for repeatedly beating his wife and subjecting her to psychological abuse, and was subsequently convicted under Sections 2 and 19 of the Act and ordered to pay compensation (Asabe Waziri Justice Advocacy Initiative, 2025). These cases are not anomalies; the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reported that 35% of Nigerian women aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical assault, whilst a startling 65% had faced emotional, economic, or sexual abuse.

ii. ***Psychological and emotional violence***

Psychological and emotional violence constitutes the most pervasive form of domestic abuse in Nigeria and is frequently under-recognised because it produces no visible physical injuries. It includes verbal insults, threats, public humiliation, belittling, isolation from family and friends, manipulation, intimidation, and sustained patterns of emotional control. Studies carried out across Nigeria have reported forms of abuse across different regions of the country, with reported types of abuse including physical, sexual, spiritual, economic, emotional, general neglect, deprivation, and failure to provide or cater for spousal needs (Sulaiman, 2024).

In Kano State for instance, a cross-sectional study found that the overall prevalence of domestic violence amongst married women was 23%, with rural settings recording a considerably higher rate than urban areas, pointing to how cultural norms in rural environments normalise psychological domination of wives by husbands. A study involving married primary school teachers in Delta State, one of the few Nigerian studies to disaggregate forms of abuse among an educated occupational group, found that psychological and emotional violence at 66.1% was the most commonly reported form, with 54.9% of respondents reporting having been insulted and 25.7% reporting public humiliation by their partners. These data demonstrate that even women with professional



employment and formal education are not insulated from emotional abuse, reinforcing that domestic violence operates through power dynamics rather than ignorance alone (Nduka et al., 2023).

iii. *Sexual violence*

Sexual violence within marriage is amongst the least reported forms of domestic abuse in Nigeria, shaped profoundly by cultural and religious norms that do not recognise marital rape as a legal or social offence in many communities. The dominant patriarchal ideology in both northern and southern Nigerian societies frequently position sexual access to a wife as a husbandly right, rendering forced marital sex invisible as a form of violence. Sulaiman (2024), examining married women in north-central Nigeria, found that concubinage whereby husbands take non-marital sexual partners, itself becomes a vehicle for abuse, as wives who confront their husbands about infidelity risk physical violence, whilst those who remain silent face psychological abuse in the form of insults, belittlement, negative comparisons, cessation of communication, and sexual coercion. This finding illustrates how sexual violence and psychological violence are interlocked within the marital power structure in ways that are culturally specific.

The 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, as documented in subsequent analyses, established that approximately 30% of women between the ages of 15 and 45 had experienced sexual abuse by an intimate partner (Aye et al., 2024), a proportion that likely understates the true figure given the profound social stigma attached to disclosure.

iv. *Economic or financial abuse*

Economic or financial abuse constitutes a form of domestic violence that operates through the deliberate control of a spouse's access to economic resources, income, and financial decision-making. Nduka et al. (2023) described economic abuse as a form of intimate partner violence whereby one partner controls the ability of the other to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources, and identified it as a significant reason why survivors remain in abusive relationships, as they lack the means to cater for themselves and their children if they leave.

In the Nigerian cultural context, this form of abuse is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms that cast the husband as the sole financial authority within the household. Financial abuse in Nigeria often manifests as a subtle form of dominance whereby a spouse controls the financial benefits and earnings of their partner in a domineering manner, and, given that African culture historically places women in a submissive role, some women hand over their earnings entirely to husbands who then determine how and where money is spent. In a community study involving 480 randomly selected married women in a Nigerian population, Nduka et al. (2023) documented the prevalence and correlates of economic abuse, confirming its pervasiveness as a standalone form of intimate partner violence that compounds physical and psychological abuse by removing the victim's material means of escape. Women who are not economically independent run a greater risk of being abused compared to those who retain financial autonomy (Oginni et al., 2023).

v. *Spiritual and cultural abuse*

Spiritual and cultural abuse constitutes a form of domestic violence that is distinctive to the Nigerian and African setting, though it is consistently underrepresented in both the general literature and policy responses. Reported forms of abuse in studies across different regions of Nigeria include spiritual abuse alongside physical, sexual, and economic dimensions, reflecting practices whereby abusers



invoke supernatural threats, cultural taboos, widowhood rites, and accusations of witchcraft to intimidate, control, and punish spouses (Shajobi-Ibikunle & Kassim, 2023). In northern Nigeria, religious authority is sometimes invoked to justify wife discipline, whilst in parts of southern Nigeria, accusations that a wife is possessed by evil spirits or is practising witchcraft against her husband's family are used to justify physical punishment, ostracism, and forced rituals. The VAPP Act 2015 explicitly criminalises damaging widowhood practices and harmful traditional rites, recognising these as forms of domestic violence warranting criminal prosecution and protective orders under Nigerian federal law.

However, enforcement in rural communities where such practices are most prevalent remains weak, with traditional rulers and religious leaders frequently mediating disputes in ways that effectively shield perpetrators from accountability (Shajobi-Ibikunle & Kassim, 2023).

In sum, the co-occurrence and escalation of these forms of abuse within Nigerian marriages is well attested in the literature. Logun et al. (2023), in a study on causes of domestic violence among married adults in Kwara State, identified economic difficulty, misunderstanding between spouses, and poor communication as leading precipitants, demonstrating that structural and interpersonal factors interact to produce abuse. Adaramoye and Olayiwola-Adedaja (2024) further showed that domestic violence, as potentially life-threatening, impacts adolescent development in ways that transit into adulthood, generating physical, psychological, and social malfunctioning across generations. The forms of domestic violence experienced by Nigerian couples therefore constitute not merely discrete acts of harm but a systemic pattern of coercive control that permeates every dimension of marital life and erodes the foundational conditions for stable family functioning.

The Effects of Domestic Violence on Family Stability Among Married Couples in Nigeria

The effects of domestic violence on family stability among married couples in Nigeria are far-reaching and operate at multiple levels simultaneously, disrupting the psychological wellbeing of individual spouses, destabilising the structural integrity of the marital relationship, and generating adverse developmental outcomes for children within the household. The literature provides robust evidence, supported by quantitative data and contextual case studies, that sustained domestic violence constitutes one of the primary drivers of marital dissolution, family fragmentation, and intergenerational trauma in the Nigerian context.

At the level of the marital relationship itself, domestic violence inflicts direct and measurable damage on the stability of the couple unit. Aye et al. (2024), in their study of married primary school teachers in Delta State, documented that unattended intimate partner violence results in separation, divorce, lack of trust, infidelity, or the death of a spouse, and further noted that marital communication, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction are often rendered entirely absent from the relationship as a consequence of sustained abuse. This finding captures the progressive corrosion of the relational bond's communication, trust, and intimacy that are foundational to marital cohesion.

Adaramoye and Olayiwola-Adedaja (2024) specifically examined domestic violence as a determinant of marital instability amongst women in the Ijede community of Lagos State, confirming through their study that violence within the home directly and significantly predicts the breakdown of the marital relationship, with separation and divorce as the primary outcomes. The Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency's disclosure in June 2022 that 2,334 cases of domestic violence were



recorded in Lagos State alone within the preceding six months gives an empirical anchor to the scale at which violence is corroding family stability in Nigeria's most populous city.

The psychological consequences of domestic violence for the victim spouse are profound and are themselves destabilising to the family system. Research across Nigerian and sub-Saharan African settings consistently documents post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, and insomnia as sequelae of intimate partner violence (Aye et al., 2024; Mantovani et al., 2024). These conditions do not merely affect individual health they impair the capacity of the affected spouse to perform their relational, parental, and economic roles within the household, thereby eroding the functional substrate of family stability.

Dikko et al. (2023) identified that financial hardship, marital conflict, poor communication, changing gender roles, and exposure to psychosocial stressors frequently erode family stability, all of which are exacerbated by the presence of domestic violence in the home. The case of Rahab O., a married woman in Abuja documented in a qualitative study of domestic violence survivors, illustrates this dynamic vividly: after years of psychological and physical abuse by her husband, she reported chronic depression that rendered her unable to care adequately for her children, and she eventually left the marriage only when her eldest child began exhibiting aggressive behaviour modelled on the father's conduct (Fitchett, 2024).

The effect of domestic violence on children within the household constitutes one of the most extensively evidenced yet practically underaddressed dimensions of family destabilisation in Nigeria. Children who witness or are exposed to domestic violence between their parents suffer a range of developmental harms that compromise their cognitive, emotional, and social functioning. Research has shown that exposure to domestic violence puts children at a heightened risk of obtaining multiple psychological traumas including post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, aggression, and social problems, with the possibility of lifelong effects if these traumas remain unaddressed. Within Nigeria, Somefun and Odumosu (2023) found comparable associations between family instability, delinquency, and peer victimisation, confirming that the intergenerational transmission of violence is an active pathway through which domestic abuse perpetuates itself across family generations. Adaramoye and Olayiwola-Adedaja (2024) note that children from homes characterised by marital violence generally experience lower cognitive, behavioural, and health outcomes, findings consistent with Duke-Natrebo's earlier Nigerian work showing that children from dissolved or violent marriages exhibit measurable developmental disadvantages in early childhood.

The economic consequences of domestic violence for the family unit further compound structural instability. When domestic violence forces a spouse, typically the wife out of productive economic activity either through physical incapacitation, psychological disruption, or enforced isolation, household income falls and poverty deepens. Financial reliance on a partner has been identified as a long-term threat to employment and financial stability amongst women exposed to intimate partner violence, creating a cycle whereby abuse produces the very economic dependency that traps victims within abusive marriages. Umukoro (2023), in a study examining financial strain and intimate partner violence among wives of military personnel in Nigeria, found that financial strain significantly predicted both physical and psychological intimate partner violence, with the employment status of the wife acting as a moderating factor suggesting that economic empowerment partially buffered women against violence. When domestic violence results in divorce or separation, the economic



consequences for the family are compounded: children frequently experience a deterioration in living standards, educational attainment, and access to healthcare following the dissolution of the parental marriage, as documented in studies from across the Nigerian context (Aye et al., 2024; Buheji & Mushimiyimana, 2024).

At the societal level, the cumulative effect of domestic violence on family stability in Nigeria represents a substantial and poorly acknowledged public health burden. The National Human Rights Commission's 2024 report documenting 84,187 cases of domestic violence, with the acknowledgement that many victims did not report their experiences to formal services on account of fear, stigma, and the absence of adequate support systems, indicates that the formally recorded

figure represents only a fraction of actual cases. The regional variation in prevalence further illustrates the differential distribution of family instability: a national survey documented that the South-West geopolitical zone recorded the highest prevalence of domestic violence at 86%, whilst the South-South zone recorded the lowest at 12%, suggesting that cultural norms, urbanisation patterns, and legal awareness intersect to shape regional vulnerability (Rsisinternational, 2023). Marital instability produced by domestic violence thus ripples outward from individual households to undermine community cohesion, impair the socialisation of children, and diminish the productive capacity of the national population outcomes that Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024) identify as structurally linked to reduced socioeconomic development at the community level.

Strategies for Addressing Domestic Violence and Promoting Family Stability Among Married Couples in Nigeria

Addressing domestic violence and restoring or preserving family stability among married couples in Nigeria requires a concerted and evidence-informed set of strategies that operate simultaneously at the legislative, community, clinical, and institutional levels. The evidence base identifies several concrete approaches, each with documented rationale and, where available, evaluated effectiveness within the Nigerian and sub-Saharan African context.

The most foundational strategy is the full domestication and vigorous enforcement of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015. The VAPP Act has extensively redefined rape, made provision for victim rights, and criminalised domestic violence; however, it suffers from jurisdictional limitations, largely confinement to the Federal Capital Territory, and slow dispensation of justice. As of 2022, thirty-three states of the Federation had domesticated the VAPP Act, yet the available regulations in these states fall short of providing efficient remedies to victims in the absence of practical support, there are no quick housing or accommodation provisions, no assurance of prompt enforcement, no financial security mechanisms, and limited public awareness of victim rights.

Scholars have therefore recommended that domestication be accompanied by concrete implementation frameworks, including the establishment of functional family courts with trained judicial officers, ring-fenced budgets for victim support, and explicit accountability mechanisms for police officers who fail to respond to domestic violence reports (Shajobi-Ibikunle & Kassim, 2023). The legal cases of *FCT v. Basil* (2022) and *FRN v. Blessing Okoro* (2023), both prosecuted under the VAPP Act and resulting in convictions and court-ordered counselling, demonstrate that when the legal framework is applied, it produces tangible deterrence and victim protection outcomes. However, the exception rather than the rule characterises such outcomes: the study on domestic violence and legal protection of women in Nigeria recommended building up institutional capacity, achieving universal



domestication of the VAPP Act, implementing robust public enlightenment programmes, and enhancing mechanisms for supporting victims.

The integration of counselling and psychosocial interventions into the domestic violence response framework is a strategy that has received growing empirical support within Nigeria. Adaramoye and Olayiwola-Adedjoja (2024) specifically proposed counselling intervention as the primary therapeutic response to domestic violence as a determinant of marital instability, arguing that trained professional counsellors working at the community level can interrupt cycles of abuse, build communicative competence within couples, and equip victims with coping and safety-planning skills.

Wellington and MaryAngela (2023) empirically tested emotionally focused couple therapy (EFCT) on marital adjustment among spouses in churches in Benin City, Nigeria, and documented positive outcomes in terms of improved relational adjustment a finding that recommends the use of attachment-based therapeutic models alongside protective interventions for couples where abuse has not escalated to a level precluding conjoint therapy.

Nzewuji et al. (2024) similarly identified psychosocial variables that enhance marital stability among couples in south-east Nigeria, pointing to the importance of communication skills training, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation as protective factors that professional counselling can cultivate. It is important, however, to note that counselling approaches in cases of active domestic violence must be applied with caution: individual counselling for survivors, safety planning, and referral to shelter are priorities before couples-based interventions, as conjoint therapy in the presence of ongoing coercive control can expose victims to retaliatory violence (Logun et al., 2023).

Clinic-based interventions that integrate domestic violence screening and response into routine health services represent a practical and evidence-supported strategy for the Nigerian context. Betron et al. (2025) reported on a matched-pair cluster-controlled trial conducted in Ebonyi and Sokoto States, Nigeria, evaluating the LIVES+ARCHES intervention integrated into antenatal and family planning services. The trial, conducted between April 2022 and February 2023, demonstrated that clinic-based counselling in reproductive health settings reduced the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence and reproductive coercion amongst enrolled women.

This finding is significant because healthcare facilities particularly antenatal care clinics represent contact points that reach married women who might not otherwise access dedicated domestic violence services, especially in rural areas where formal support systems are absent. The Federal Ministry of Health of Nigeria published national guidelines on healthcare for those who have experienced gender-based violence in 2022 (as cited in Betron et al., 2025), providing a policy framework within which health workers can offer standardised, trauma-informed support to domestic violence survivors at the point of clinical contact.

Community-based social norm change interventions are increasingly recognised as essential components of any comprehensive strategy to address domestic violence and promote family stability in Nigeria. Research consistently demonstrates that domestic violence is sustained by community norms that tolerate or normalise spousal abuse, particularly in contexts where patriarchal authority, religious authority, and traditional gender roles converge to silence victims and protect perpetrators. Logun et al. (2023) identified economic difficulty, poor communication, and cultural permissiveness as leading causes of domestic violence in Kwara State, suggesting that community-level dialogues



that challenge these norms particularly those that confer men with unquestioned domestic authority can create the social conditions in which reporting, help-seeking, and accountability become viable.

Sambo et al. (2023), writing from the north-west context of Kaduna State, found that traditional and cultural practices still hold sway and are perceived as responsible for sustaining the domination of women, including domestic violence, even when respondents intellectually rejected the justifiability of such violence. This gap between attitude and practice underscores why educational interventions and community dialogues must be sustained over time and embedded in trusted community institutions including religious organisations, traditional institutions, and schools rather than delivered as one-off awareness campaigns.

Economic empowerment interventions targeting women constitute a proven strategy for reducing both vulnerability to domestic violence and the barriers to exiting abusive marriages. Economic abuse is a significant reason survivors remain in abusive relationships, as they lack the means to cater for themselves and their children if they choose to leave. Microfinance schemes, vocational training, savings groups, and targeted social protection programmes that increase women's financial autonomy therefore directly address the structural conditions that trap victims in violent households. John et al. (2022), in a cluster-randomised control trial in Ibadan, Nigeria, evaluated a cross-sectoral couple-based intervention combining intimate partner violence prevention with economic components and documented significant reductions in IPV outcomes, affirming that economic empowerment, when integrated with relationship skill-building, produces measurable protective effects for married couples.

Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024) further underscored the link between household economic capability and family stability at the macro level, recommending financial capability building as a central pillar of any community-level family stability strategy.

Finally, strengthening the social support systems available to couples experiencing domestic tension including extended family mediation, faith-based counselling, community-based women's groups, and shelters for survivors of acute violence is an indispensable strategy for sustaining family stability in the Nigerian context where formal state services are limited in reach. The study on domestic violence and legal protection of women in Nigeria identified the lack of shelters and limited specialised support services as significant structural gaps, and Adaramoye and Olayiwola-Adedaja (2024) confirmed that the resilience and psychological well-being of couples are essential factors in determining whether families remain functional and cohesive in the face of adversity. Where community and institutional support systems are in place and accessible, families are better positioned to navigate conflict without escalating to violence, and survivors are better equipped to seek help and rebuild stable domestic environments for themselves and their children.

Empirical Reviews

Dikko et al. (2023) conducted a study on domestic violence as determinants of marital instability among married women in Ijede community, Lagos State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on the feminist theory, which posits that domestic violence is fundamentally an expression of patriarchal power relations that subordinate women within the family system and sustain male dominance as a social norm. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A purposive sampling technique was employed, and a total of 185 voluntarily participating married women were selected across Ijede



community in Lagos State as the study sample. Data were collected using a researcher-developed, validated instrument designated the Questionnaire on Domestic Violence and Marital Instability (QDVMI), and three hypotheses were formulated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

The major findings of the study revealed that domestic violence significantly predicts marital instability among married women, and that exposure to various forms of domestic abuse including physical, psychological, and emotional violence directly undermines the stability of the marital relationship. The study further found that issues such as financial hardship, unemployment, marital conflict, poor communication, changing gender roles, and exposure to psychosocial stressors erode family stability, and that the age of the couple played a moderating role, with older couples demonstrating greater psychological resilience towards marital strain. The study concluded that domestic violence constitutes a significant threat to marital cohesion and that counselling intervention, particularly targeted at community-level support for abused women, is essential for interrupting cycles of violence and restoring relational stability within the family. The study is commendable for directly linking domestic violence to marital instability in a community context in Nigeria and for proposing a counselling framework as an intervention.

However, a notable gap in this study is its exclusive focus on women as respondents, thereby excluding the perspectives of male spouses, whose experience and role in the dynamics of domestic violence are equally relevant to understanding how violence affects family stability. Furthermore, the study was conducted in an urban community in Lagos State, which limits its generalisability to rural and semi-urban settings where the cultural dynamics of domestic violence and marital relations differ substantially. The current paper addressed this gap by investigating domestic violence and family stability among both male and female married couples in Nigeria, with attention to the structural and cultural factors that sustain violence in different geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

Aye et al. (2024) conducted a study on the physical and psychological health consequences of intimate partner violence among married primary school teachers in Delta South Senatorial Zone of Delta State, Nigeria, with implications for marital stability. The study was set within the ecological systems theory, which frames intimate partner violence as a phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual, relational, community, and societal factors, each of which contributes to or moderates the experience and consequences of violence within the domestic environment. The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey design and was conducted between the 22nd of February and the 29th of November, 2021. A total of 313 married teachers comprising 207 women and 106 men who had experienced various forms of intimate partner violence were selected as study participants. These participants were identified as IPV victims through a structured process involving school authorities and health records, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to elicit information on the physical and psychological health consequences of intimate partner violence.

The major findings of the study revealed that intimate partner violence produced severe physical and psychological health consequences for married teachers, including bruises, broken bones, back pain, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The study further documented that unattended intimate partner violence results in separation, divorce, lack of trust, infidelity, or the death of a spouse, and that marital communication, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction were rendered absent from the relationships of those affected. The study concluded that



there are severe and serious physical and psychological health consequences associated with intimate partner violence among married primary school

teachers in Delta State, and recommended urgent public enlightenment campaigns, workshops, seminars, and community health programmes organised by government stakeholders, non-governmental organisations, and community leaders.

This study is significant for its documented evidence that intimate partner violence among educated and professionally employed married couples produces the same devastating health and marital outcomes observed in other population groups, thereby demonstrating that domestic violence transcends educational and occupational status. A critical gap, however, is that the study was confined to a specific occupational group primary school teachers in one senatorial zone of Delta State, and did not examine the broader population of married couples across diverse socioeconomic and occupational backgrounds. Additionally, the study did not investigate the strategies that couples or communities employ to address domestic violence or promote marital stability following exposure to violence. The current paper extended this inquiry by examining domestic violence and family stability across a broader spectrum of married couples in Nigeria, including strategies employed at the individual, community, and institutional levels to address violence and preserve the family unit.

Logun et al. (2023) conducted a study on the causes of domestic violence among married adults in Kwara State, Nigeria. The study was grounded in social learning theory, which holds that violent behaviours within the family are acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement of abusive conduct modelled by significant others in the domestic environment, particularly across generations. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The sample was drawn from married adults residing in Kwara State, and hypotheses were formulated at the 0.05 level of significance, tested using t-test and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine differences in the causes of domestic violence based on academic attainment, gender, and length of years in marriage. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary instrument for data collection.

The major findings of the study disclosed that the primary causes of domestic violence among married adults in Kwara State included lack of job satisfaction, increase in unemployment rate, inability to meet daily needs, and unwanted pregnancy resulting from low income and the inability to secure stable employment. The study further found that there was no statistically significant difference in the causes of domestic violence based on academic attainment, gender, or length of years in marriage, indicating that the socioeconomic drivers of domestic violence operate across demographic categories. The study concluded that domestic violence in the Nigerian family is predominantly driven by economic stress and socioeconomic marginalisation, and recommended that all stakeholders in Nigerian society must commence strong public sensitisation campaigns and enlightenment programmes on the effects of domestic violence on the growth and development of children within the family.

The study is valuable for establishing the primacy of economic and occupational frustration as causal factors of domestic violence in the Kwara State context, and for demonstrating through inferential analysis that these causes do not vary significantly by gender or educational level. However, the study was limited in that it focused exclusively on the causes of domestic violence without examining its effects on family stability or the strategies available to address it. The study also did not extend its inquiry to the specific forms that domestic violence takes in the couples' daily marital experience, nor



did it examine how the identified causes interact with cultural norms and institutional failures to sustain violence. The current paper addressed these limitations by examining domestic violence in relation to family stability among married couples in Nigeria, thereby covering the nature, effects, and strategies for addressing domestic violence in a manner that provides a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was anchored on two theories as identified and reviewed as follows:

i. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, as applied to the study of domestic violence, is most directly traceable to the foundational works of Kate Millett, whose 1970 publication *Sexual Politics* articulated the concept of patriarchy as a pervasive system of social organisation through which men maintain dominance over women through political, cultural, and institutional means. This theoretical tradition was substantially extended by subsequent feminist thinkers, most notably bell hooks, who in her 1984 work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* argued that violence against women is not merely an individual pathology but is structurally embedded in hierarchical systems of patriarchy, capitalism, and racial domination that normalise coercive power within the family. The application of feminist theory to domestic violence was further developed by Dobash and Dobash (1979), who grounded it empirically by demonstrating that violence against wives is a systematic expression of male dominance rather than a product of individual psychological disorders, and by Pence and Paymar (1993), whose Duluth Power and Control Wheel operationalised the theory into a practice framework widely adopted in domestic violence intervention.

The major assumptions of feminist theory in the context of domestic violence hold, first, that gender inequality and patriarchy are the root causes of violence against women within intimate relationships, and that male violence is a mechanism through which men exercise and maintain control over women. Second, the theory assumes that domestic violence is not a private matter but a political issue embedded in broader social structures that condone male authority and female subordination. Third, it posits that the institutions of marriage and family, as historically constituted, have been sites of gender oppression, in which wives have been rendered legally, economically, and socially dependent on husbands. Fourth, feminist theory assumes that cultural norms, religion, and law frequently collude to protect perpetrators of domestic violence from accountability and to silence victims.

The strengths of feminist theory in this context are considerable. It possesses strong explanatory power for the gendered patterning of domestic violence, accounting for the empirically documented reality that women constitute the overwhelming majority of victims in spousal abuse cases. In the Nigerian context specifically, feminist theory has been applied to demonstrate that societal-level power imbalances within patriarchal societies create structural factors that work directly or indirectly to validate a male-dominated social order and family structure, resulting in men exercising power and control over women, one manifestation of which is violence (Ajayi et al., 2022; Satyen et al., 2024).

The weaknesses of feminist theory, however, are equally significant and must be acknowledged. The theory has been criticised for its insufficient attention to male victims of domestic violence, who constitute a non-trivial proportion of cases. Research in Nigeria has confirmed that a percentage of men also experience spousal abuse, yet the feminist framework has historically been resistant to



engaging with male victimisation as a social problem warranting equivalent analytical and policy attention (Tu & Zhang, 2024). Additionally, feminist theory has been critiqued for its relative neglect of factors such as alcohol abuse, mental illness, poverty, and psychological history as proximate causes of violence that operate independently of patriarchal ideology, thereby offering an incomplete account of why violence occurs in specific households.

However, Feminist theory applies directly to the study of domestic violence and family stability among married couples in Nigeria by explaining why domestic violence is disproportionately perpetrated against women within the marital context. The deeply patriarchal nature of Nigerian society reflected in customary law provisions that historically permitted wife discipline, religious frameworks that enjoin female submission, and economic structures that render wives financially dependent creates the power asymmetry within which domestic violence flourishes and is sustained. The theory explains why Nigerian women often remain in abusive marriages even when they suffer severe physical and psychological harm: the very social structure that generates violence also removes the resources economic independence, legal protection, and social support that would enable them to leave. It further explains why family stability is undermined by domestic violence not because violence is episodic but because the sustained power imbalance it represents erodes the conditions mutual respect, communication, equal partnership — upon which stable family functioning depends. In this study, feminist theory frames domestic violence as a systemic outcome of patriarchal gender relations, and family instability as the social and interpersonal consequence of that systemic failure.

ii. **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory was developed by Albert Bandura, who's influential 1977 work *Social Learning Theory*, published by Prentice Hall in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, articulated the foundational premise that human behaviour including aggression and violence is acquired primarily through observational learning, imitation, and reinforcement rather than through innate biological drives. Bandura's earlier 1973 work *Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis* specifically applied these principles to the study of aggressive behaviour, providing the intellectual foundation for subsequent applications of the theory to domestic violence and intimate partner violence. The theory developed from Bandura's earlier social cognitive framework and drew importantly on his Bobo doll experiments of the 1960s, which demonstrated empirically that children who observed adults engaging in aggressive behaviour were significantly more likely to replicate that behaviour than those who had not been exposed to such modelling.

The major assumptions of social learning theory as applied to domestic violence hold, first, that violent behaviour within intimate relationships is not innate but is learned through direct experience or vicarious observation of violence in the family environment during childhood and adolescence. Second, the theory assumes that children who grow up in households characterised by domestic violence internalise violence as a normal, acceptable, and effective means of managing interpersonal conflict, and are thereby predisposed to replicate it in their own adult relationships. Third, social learning theory assumes that behavioural reinforcement plays a decisive role in the perpetuation of violence: when aggression is rewarded whether by partner compliance, submission, or the absence of legal consequences it is reinforced as an appropriate and effective behaviour, increasing the probability of its recurrence. An individual who observes aggression being rewarded with compliance may come to view violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflict, regardless of gender or sexual



orientation (Bandura, 1977), and this aligns with the concept of intergenerational transmission, where behaviours and attitudes are passed down across generations or through social groups, perpetuating cycles of violence within relationships. Fourth, the theory holds that the cycle of violence in which children of abusive households become abusive partners in adulthood is not inevitable but is mediated by cognitive processes including attention, retention, motivation, and self-efficacy, meaning that intervention in the learning process can interrupt the transmission of violent behaviour across generations.

The strengths of social learning theory are particularly relevant to the Nigerian domestic violence context. The theory provides a compelling and empirically supported explanation for the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence, which is well documented in Nigerian and sub-Saharan African studies: children who witness domestic violence in their parents' home are significantly more likely to perpetrate or experience it in their own marriages in adulthood (Odini et al., 2024; Meinck et al., 2025).

The weaknesses of social learning theory, however, are not trivial. The theory's primary explanatory focus is on individual learning histories and behavioural modelling, which means it underweights the structural, economic, and cultural factors that drive domestic violence at the societal level. In the Nigerian context, where patriarchal norms, poverty, unemployment, and legal impunity collectively sustain domestic violence, a theory that locates causation primarily in childhood observation and reinforcement may offer an incomplete picture.

Social learning theory applies to the study of domestic violence and family stability among married couples in Nigeria by explaining how violent behaviours are acquired, reproduced, and transmitted across family generations in the Nigerian domestic context. In many Nigerian households, children who observe their fathers physically or emotionally abusing their mothers grow up internalising this as a relational norm, replicating it in their own marriages and thereby sustaining the cycle of domestic violence across generations. The theory further illuminates how cultural environments that celebrate male dominance and tolerate wife discipline function as macro-level modelling environments in which violent behaviour is socially legitimised and reinforced.

When domestic violence is practised without consequence when perpetrators face neither legal sanction nor community censure the behavioural reinforcement for continued violence is strong, and the likelihood of its disruption decreases. Social learning theory therefore provides this study with a framework for understanding not only why domestic violence occurs within specific married couples but also why it persists across generations and communities in a way that structurally erodes family stability. The theory also underpins the study's interest in intervention strategies that address the learned dimensions of violence counselling, conflict resolution training, and community norm change as viable pathways to promoting healthier marital relationships and more stable family environments in Nigeria.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper revealed that domestic violence among married couples in Nigeria takes multiple, frequently co-occurring forms, spanning physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and spiritual dimensions of abuse. This finding accords substantially with the views of Sambo et al. (2023), who documented in Kaduna State that the reported forms of domestic violence across



different regions of Nigeria include physical, sexual, spiritual, economic, emotional, general neglect, and deprivation, and that these forms are not restricted to any particular socioeconomic stratum or geopolitical zone. The paper's finding that psychological and emotional violence constitutes the most pervasive form of abuse, as corroborated by Aye et al. (2024) who recorded a prevalence rate of 66.1% for psychological violence among their sample, challenges the prevailing public perception in Nigeria that domestic violence is synonymous with physical assault. This scholarly position is important because it suggests that the true burden of domestic violence is substantially undercounted when policy and legal frameworks focus exclusively on physical harm, as has historically been the case in Nigeria's application of criminal law to spousal abuse cases.

The finding regarding economic abuse deserves particular analytical attention. Nduka et al. (2023) demonstrated from a study of 480 married Nigerian women that economic abuse the deliberate control of a partner's ability to acquire, access, and maintain economic resources is a pervasive and under-researched form of domestic violence in the Nigerian context. This view intersects with the work of Logun et al. (2023), who identified economic hardship and unemployment as leading causes of domestic violence in Kwara State, revealing the dual character of economic dynamics in Nigerian domestic violence: economic stress precipitates abuse, whilst economic abuse itself is used as a mechanism of control that traps victims within violent marriages. These two dimensions of the economic-violence nexus are analytically distinct but practically interlocked, and the failure to disentangle them in much of the Nigerian literature has, to date, produced an incomplete understanding of how poverty and financial dependency sustain domestic violence. The paper's finding supports this position and challenges scholars who focus exclusively on economic deprivation as a trigger for violence without addressing the deliberately constructed economic dependency that prevents victims from escaping abusive relationships.

The spiritual and cultural dimensions of domestic violence identified in the findings represent perhaps the most distinctively Nigerian contribution to the broader domestic violence literature. Sambo et al. (2023) found that traditional and cultural practices sustain the domination of women in rural Kaduna, even when respondents intellectually reject the justifiability of violence, revealing a critical disjunction between cognitive awareness and behavioural change in contexts where cultural legitimization of domestic violence is deeply embedded. This view is reinforced by Ajayi et al. (2022), who argued that violence against women of Nigerian origin is a consequence of systems of domination that structurally and interpersonally place women in a subordinate position, and that cultural beliefs about marriage, wifely submission, and masculine authority function as enabling environments for domestic violence. These findings collectively affirm the position of hooks (1984) that domestic violence is not simply an interpersonal event but is systematically embedded in patriarchal institutions including the institution of marriage that authorise male power and subordinate female agency.

The findings of this paper document a consistent and well-evidenced pattern of family destabilisation attributable to domestic violence across Nigerian married households. Aye et al. (2024), whose study remains one of the most methodologically rigorous Nigerian contributions to this area, concluded that unattended intimate partner violence results in separation, divorce, erosion

of trust, infidelity, and the death of a spouse, and that marital communication, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction are rendered absent from abusive relationships. This finding is particularly significant



because it demonstrates that the effects of domestic violence on family stability are not confined to the most extreme outcomes homicide or separation but operate continuously at the level of the relational quality of marriage, eroding the trust, communication, and affection upon which stable marital functioning depends. Dikko et al. (2023) reinforced this view by demonstrating that domestic violence is a significant predictor of marital instability among married women in Lagos State, providing further Nigerian evidence for the relationship that the broader sub-Saharan African literature particularly Sardinha et al. (2022) has documented through regional demographic surveys.

The psychological consequences of domestic violence for the victim spouse constitute a second critical pathway through which family stability is undermined. The findings document that Nigerian women who experience domestic violence suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation at significantly elevated rates compared to women in non-violent marriages (Aye et al., 2024; Mantovani et al., 2024). These psychological sequelae are directly destabilising to the family because they impair the victim's capacity to fulfil the relational, economic, and parenting roles that sustain household functioning. This position invites critical engagement with those scholars who have focused primarily on the physical dimensions of domestic violence in Nigeria such as Oginni et al. (2023), who documented the high rates of physical assault on the grounds that the psychological burden of abuse may be both more pervasive and more durably damaging to family stability than the physical injuries it produces, precisely because depression and trauma impair the daily functioning and parenting capacity of the affected spouse over extended periods.

The impact of domestic violence on children within the household is a finding with profound implications for intergenerational family stability. The findings confirm that children who witness domestic violence in their parents' home suffer elevated rates of anxiety, depression, aggression, delinquency, and impaired social functioning. This view is supported by McCloud and Abdullah (2024) who systematically reviewed evidence establishing that childhood exposure to interparental violence significantly predicts adult perpetration of intimate partner violence, with the transmission mechanism principally explained by social learning processes children model the violent behaviours they observe, internalise them as relational norms, and reproduce them in their own adult relationships.

In the Nigerian context, this finding has particular resonance because the presence of domestic violence in a home destabilises the family at two temporal levels simultaneously: it erodes present-day stability by traumatising children and compromising parenting quality, and it plants the seeds of future family instability by predisposing children to violence in their own marriages. This dual temporal effect means that domestic violence, left unaddressed, compounds its damage across family generations in ways that simple prevalence statistics cannot capture.

The economic dimension of the effects of domestic violence on family stability is equally well-grounded in the findings. Umukoro (2023) demonstrated that financial strain significantly predicts both physical and psychological intimate partner violence among married wives of Nigerian military personnel, and that the absence of the wife's independent employment removes a buffer against this pattern. This finding converges with the broader argument made by Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024) that family stability is directly linked to household economic capability, and that the erosion of economic functioning whether through violence-induced incapacitation, economic abuse, or the



financial costs of divorce and separation directly undermines the household's developmental capacity. The specific Nigerian case study of *FCT v. Basil* (2022), in which a husband was convicted under the VAPP Act for sustained physical and psychological abuse of his wife, illustrates concretely how domestic violence results in legal proceedings, family disruption, the separation of children from a parent, and economic burden outcomes that collectively represent the breakdown of family stability in its most concrete manifestation.

The findings of this paper identify a range of strategies for addressing domestic violence and promoting family stability, spanning legal, clinical, community, and economic dimensions. The central legal strategy identified is the full domestication and vigorous enforcement of the VAPP Act 2015. Shajobi-Ibikunle and Kassim (2023) demonstrated that whilst the Act has advanced the legislative framework for domestic violence protection in Nigeria, its effectiveness is severely limited by jurisdictional constraints, inadequate enforcement, and the absence of practical support infrastructure for victims. This view is supported by the documented evidence from the cases of *FCT v. Basil* (2022) and *FRN v. Blessing Okoro* (2023), which suggest that convictions under the VAPP Act are achievable when the framework is properly applied, but that such outcomes remain the exception rather than the rule given the systemic gaps in enforcement. Scholars who hold that legal reform alone is sufficient to address domestic violence in Nigeria — a view implicit in policy documents that celebrate the passage of the VAPP Act as a transformative achievement — must be critically engaged on the grounds that law without enforcement is merely aspirational, and that the structural patriarchy which feminist theory identifies as the root cause of domestic violence is not dismantled by legislative provision alone.

The counselling and psychosocial intervention strategies identified in the findings represent a complementary approach that operates at the relational rather than the structural level. Adaramoye and Olayiwola-Adedaja (2024) proposed professional counselling intervention as the primary therapeutic response to domestic violence as a determinant of marital instability, whilst Wellington and MaryAngela (2023) demonstrated the efficacy of emotionally focused couple therapy for improving marital adjustment in Nigerian churches. These views are valuable but must be held in tension with the feminist critique that couple-based therapy in contexts of coercive control can endanger victims by creating opportunities for perpetrators to monitor, manipulate, or retaliate against their partners within the therapeutic encounter. The findings therefore support a graduated approach: individual safety planning and survivor-centred counselling as first-line responses to active domestic violence, followed by couple-based interventions only where coercive control has been adequately assessed and addressed. This position aligns with the broader intervention literature, as confirmed by Betron et al. (2025), whose clinic-based counselling trial in Ebonyi and Sokoto States demonstrated that structured, trauma-informed support in healthcare settings reduces the risk of experiencing intimate partner violence and reproductive coercion.

The economic empowerment strategy identified in the findings also merits sustained analytical attention. Nduka et al. (2023) established that economic abuse traps victims within violent marriages by removing their financial means of self-sufficiency, and John et al. (2022) empirically demonstrated that couple-based economic empowerment interventions in Ibadan, Nigeria, produced

measurable reductions in intimate partner violence. These findings together present a powerful case for integrating economic empowerment into the domestic violence response framework, since social



learning theory suggests that breaking the cycle of violence requires not only individual behaviour change but also structural changes in the conditions of dependency and reinforcement that sustain abusive behaviour. When women are economically independent, the reinforcement dynamic that makes violence effective as a tool of control is partially disrupted: victims are better positioned to exit abusive relationships, perpetrators lose the economic leverage through which much of their control is exercised, and the behavioural model available to children within the household begins to shift from one of dominance and dependency to one of mutual agency.

The community-based social norm changes strategies identified in the findings engage directly with the deepest theoretical claims of both feminist theory and social learning theory. Feminist theory locates the root causes of domestic violence in patriarchal norms that legitimate male authority, and social learning theory identifies these same norms as the macro-level modelling environment through which violent behaviour is socially sanctioned and reproduced. Community-level interventions that challenge the acceptance of wife beating, reframe masculinity away from dominance and towards partnership, and create social environments in which perpetrators face community censure rather than protection therefore simultaneously address the patriarchal structures that feminist theory identifies and the observational learning environments that social learning theory prioritises. Logun et al. (2023) specifically recommended that all stakeholders in Nigerian society commence sustained campaigns and community sensitisation to challenge the normative climate that enables domestic violence, a recommendation that aligns with the view of Sambo et al. (2023) that the gap between awareness of domestic violence and its actual cessation can only be closed through sustained cultural engagement rather than episodic information campaigns.

Furthermore, the two theoretical frameworks adopted in this paper i.e feminist theory, as advanced by Millett (1970) and hooks (1984), and social learning theory, as developed by Bandura (1977) together provide a coherent, mutually reinforcing, and empirically grounded account of the overall findings on domestic violence and family stability among married couples in Nigeria. Feminist theory justifies the finding that domestic violence in Nigerian marriages is predominantly an expression of patriarchal power relations that structurally subordinate wives to husbands through cultural norms, religious authority, economic dependency, and institutional permissiveness, explaining why violence within the Nigerian marital context is not a random or aberrant occurrence but a predictable outcome of a social system that sanctions male dominance and penalises female resistance. This theoretical position directly accounts for the finding that women constitute the overwhelming majority of domestic violence victims in Nigeria, that economic abuse functions as a deliberate mechanism of control rather than a mere by-product of poverty, and that the VAPP Act 2015 despite its legislative ambitions has been systematically undermined by the very patriarchal institutional culture it was designed to challenge, leaving family stability persistently eroded across all geopolitical zones.

Social learning theory, on the other hand, explains the intergenerational dimension of the findings by demonstrating that violent behaviour within marriage is not biologically determined but is acquired through the observation, internalisation, and replication of abusive conduct modelled by

parents and significant others within the childhood domestic environment, such that children raised in violent Nigerian households are significantly predisposed to reproducing those same patterns of coercive relational behaviour in their own adult marriages, thereby sustaining the cycle of domestic violence across family generations.



In sum, the two theories explain not only why domestic violence occurs within Nigerian marriages and how it is transmitted across generations, but also why the strategies identified in the findings counselling intervention, legal enforcement, economic empowerment, and community norm change are necessary precisely because they address both the structural patriarchal conditions that feminist theory identifies as the root cause of violence and the learned behavioural patterns that social learning theory identifies as its primary mechanism of intergenerational perpetuation, confirming that no single-level or single-strategy response is adequate to the scale and depth of the domestic violence crisis confronting the Nigerian family.

7. CONCLUSION

Domestic violence among married couples in Nigeria is a deeply rooted social problem that operates through physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and spiritual dimensions, each of which inflicts measurable damage on the stability of the marital relationship and the wellbeing of all household members. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that the problem is not incidental to Nigerian family life but is structurally embedded within patriarchal social arrangements that legitimise male domestic authority, normalise the subordination of wives, and systematically remove the legal, economic, and social resources through which victims might seek protection.

The effects on family stability are correspondingly severe, producing marital dissolution, psychological trauma, compromised child development, economic disintegration, and the intergenerational transmission of violent behaviour in ways that compound the damage of domestic violence far beyond the immediate victim couple. The strategies available to address these effects legal enforcement, professional counselling, economic empowerment, and community norm change are each individually insufficient when applied in isolation, but collectively constitute a credible and evidence-grounded framework for reducing domestic violence and restoring the conditions for stable family life in Nigeria. It is therefore concluded that domestic violence represents a public emergency for the Nigerian family that demands a sustained, integrated, and institutionally supported response, anchored in the recognition that the stability of the family unit is inseparable from the safety, dignity, and equality of every person within it.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. State and Federal Governments should institutionalise mandatory pre-marital and in-marriage counselling programmes through licensed counselling centres across all geopolitical zones, with particular priority given to rural and semi-urban communities where domestic violence prevalence is highest and access to formal support is most limited. These programmes should equip couples with communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, and awareness of their legal rights under existing legislation, whilst providing survivor-centred individual support as the immediate response in cases where active abuse is already present.
2. All the thirty-six State Houses of Assembly in Nigeria should expedite the domestication and vigorous enforcement of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, accompanied by the mandatory establishment of dedicated domestic violence courts, the training of law enforcement and judicial officers on trauma-informed service delivery, and the funding of functional victim shelters in every state. Public enlightenment campaigns engaging traditional rulers, religious leaders, and community associations should be mounted to close the



persistent awareness gap that allows domestic violence to remain significantly under-reported and culturally tolerated across Nigeria.

3. Federal and State Governments, in partnership with microfinance institutions and civil society organisations, should develop and scale dedicated economic empowerment programmes targeting married women in high-prevalence domestic violence communities, providing access to credit, vocational training, and financial literacy education. These initiatives should be delivered alongside psychosocial support and community norm change components, since economic empowerment without a concurrent shift in the normative environment that legitimises male domestic authority is insufficient to produce durable reductions in domestic violence and sustainable improvements in family stability.

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Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. This study did not involve human or animal subjects.

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