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Cultural Reactions to Abusive Marriages and Relationships in Nigeria: Implications for Marital Counselling and Lifelong Education

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Abstract

This paper explored the cultural reaction of some women to remaining in abusive marriages and relationships or returning to the same after a short break from their partners. The qualitative research design was employed for the study. The population consisted of all women in Lagos metropolis who are in abusive marriages/relationships using a purposeful sampling of ten (10) participants. This was to enable the researcher focus on the key concept that is being explored in the study. Four research questions were raised to find out if love, financial/economic reasons, religion/societal/family pressure will be the reasons for women to remain in or return to abusive marriages and relationships. Individual face-to-face, in-depth and more structured interviews were conducted. Data collected from participants' responses was analyzed using the thematic description. The findings revealed that love and religion were not strong reasons given by women for remaining in or returning to abusive marriages/relationships. Some of the women have only sought counselling in religious/family settings. Only one of the women had the opportunity of visiting a professional marriage counsellor. Conclusion was drawn based on the findings. Recommendations included a call for creating more awareness on professional counselling and the urgent need for and importance of continuous professional marital counselling and lifelong education rendered by professionals in all settings particularly for adults who are moving from independent living to marriages and relationships.

Keywords: Abuse, Marriages and Relationships, Abusive marriages and relationships, Counselling, Marriage counsellor, Lifelong educators.

Introduction

Over the years, in some cultures, domestic violence against women was viewed as a method their husbands chose to discipline or admonish them. In this way, the men could dominate and play the role of dictator in the lives of their wives and children (Clark, 2011). It is extremely difficult to find women who lodge a formal complaint or are ready to speak up about reasons why they remain in or return to abusive relationships/marriages. The majority of women who go through this problem are not even willing to disclose the fact that they are in abusive, relationships not to talk of returning each time they leave home for reasons best known to them. While they may discuss the issue informally, with friends and family, they are cautious when it comes to talking to a counsellor/therapist, who claim to have likely solutions to what they may have seen as a lifestyle or happening in the majority of marriages.

Culture is the way of life of people. It is the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social arrangement of a particular society or group of people (Hornby, 2001). Cultural beliefs have a great influence on the lives of individuals. The places peoples live, the things they do, the tasks they perform, their behaviours, speech and recreation are affected by their cultural beliefs (Vognar, 2012).

The question of why these women choose do remain in these abusive relationship is a difficult one to answer. Many researchers have suggested that women choose to remain in these relationships as a result of financial pressure, societal pressure, family pressure, security and many other factors which will be further addressed in this research paper. In a developing economy such as; Nigeria, one of the reasons women choose to remain in abusive relationship is due to financial pressure. "In addition to lacking financial resources, victims of domestic violence often

lack specialized skills, education, and training that are necessary to find gainful employment, and also may have several children to support” (Alokan, 2013). From the 1970s, however, people tried to speak out against this form of abuse. Feminists pointed out the dangers in all forms of abuse and demanded more protection of women by the police.

The focus of this research is to give a better and clear understanding of why the victims choose to stay in these abusive relationships. The research will also serve as an educative and learning guide for other aspiring researchers in this field.

Domestic abuse occurs whenever one person in an intimate relationship or marriage tried to dominate and control the other person. Zorza (1992) stated that domestic violence seems to be problematic. It is doubtful if arrests of abusers have in any way deterred them. Domestic violence has been treated as less important than other matters, because it has been ignored for a long time. There is a call for advocates of abused battered women to welcome the chance of learning what can put a stop to this criminal behaviour. The author is skeptical about the above since nothing seems to be done to or even any blame apportioned to the abusers instead it appears that victims receive the blame for this strange act.

Picket, (2013) outlined the position of VAWA (Violence Against Women Act) of 1994, which has increased the number of domestic violence cases that have faced prosecution. There is however a little evidence to conclude that the incidence of domestic violence has reduced, although a little drop was recorded between 1994 and 2010, this was linked to the law. It is however difficult to categorically state that the decrease was related to the drop in the rate of violent crimes nationwide. The author concluded that it is difficult to know if a reduced domestic violence rate was as a result of the policies adopted under VAWA.

Feuerman, (2016) focused on Abuse that is not always obvious, such as being hit or shoved and called degrading names. This type of abuse can be underhanded or subtle. The person in the relationship may find himself/herself feeling confused about the relationship. It may seem that the victim is "walking on eggshells" all the time this is the kind of abuse that often sneaks up on the victim as he/she becomes more involved in the relationship. This is known as psychological abuse or mental and emotional abuse. Psychological abuse occurs when a person in the relationship tries to control information available to another person with intent to manipulate that person's sense of reality or their view of what is acceptable and not acceptable. Psychological abuse often contains strong emotionally manipulative content and threats designed to force the victim to comply with the abuser's wishes.

People who have never been abused often wonder why a person would not just leave. They don't understand that breaking up can be more complicated than it seems. There are many reasons why both men and women stay in abusive relationships; these include; conflicting emotions, fear, believing abuse is normal, fear of being revealed, embarrassment, low self-esteem and love; other likely reasons are; pressure (social/peer pressure), cultural and religious reason, pregnancy/parenting, distrust of adults or authority, puppy love, distrust of police, language barriers/immigration status and reliance on the abusive partner (economic), nowhere to go and disability (love is respect.org, 2016).

Osewa, (2016) gave five reasons why Nigerian women stay in abusive relationships. According to the researcher, abusive relationships are not new in Nigeria. It is estimated that 25 percent of women in Nigeria face domestic abuse. Nigerian women do not just go through abuse daily but most choose to remain with their abuser for the following reasons; religion, financial constraints,

social stigma, for their children and poor orientation. Owolabi, (2016) wrote on a mother of two who was killed by her husband in Lagos in a domestic violence case. According to the writer, a woman's purpose in life is bigger than the husband and bigger than marriage and no woman should apologize to anyone for leaving an abusive relationship (especially physical).

Fareo, (2015) opined that many women in Nigeria are brutally treated by their intimate partners which in some cases lead to the death of such women. The researcher recommended that comprehensive and extensive premarital counselling should be given to intending couples on how to manage their marital relationships. Faloore, (2012) looks at the policies that discourage violence against women and girls which abound in Nigeria, but have not been effectively implemented. The study revealed that mothers-in-law with excessive psychological and emotional attachment to their sons are over-protective of their sons. It recommended that mothers-in-law should develop the good sense of letting go in order to give the new couple enough space to establish themselves at the same time remain supportive to the couple and that daughters-in-law should be loving, tolerant and respectful because they are going to become mothers-in-law one day.

Benson, (2009) reporting on domestic violence discovered that women find it difficult to involve the police when they are facing violence at home because of slow or no response to domestic violence; There is also a report of refusal to arrest the abuser even when survivors appeal to officers to do so and lack of referrals to other sources of help such as women's shelters. Townsend, Hunt, Kuck & Baxter, (2006) in their research found out that a written operational procedure has been established for responding to domestic violence services by the police departments. These policies have been revised since

implementation; in scope and procedures covered. Response to emergency domestic violence calls, duties of those dispatched in response to these calls and how victims and children who witness domestic violence are covered by these policies. A call was made for a major change in police response to domestic violence.

Guidance and counselling in adult (lifelong) education involves different services given by professional service providers. These services are different with regards to their methods, aims, objectives and importance of the counselling and lifelong processes. The professional background of providers of these services (counsellors/therapists and lifelong educators) is also of great importance. Experienced practitioners of these services provide their client/students with information, coaching and lending emotional support (in case of counselling/therapy) among other services they render. Counsellors and therapists also serve as managers of information, managers of processes, providers of explanations, short-term advisors and psychologists among other roles. Clients' and students' needs are taken into consideration and they are helped to develop communication skills to deal with conflicts and emotional distress (which they may face in their marriages/relationships (Raschauer, and Resch, 2006).

Adult women who are in abusive marriages/relationships may be experiencing various emotions because they may have been dehumanized or intimidated by the abuse (verbal, non-verbal, physical or emotional) so much so that their self-worth or integrity have been reduced. This may lead to low self-esteem, great frustration and stress resulting in inability of these women to achieve their goals and wishes. Some of these women may build fear and anger (Igbafe, 2009) within them and these can affect their personality structure and sometimes destroy their ability to take steps that might get them out of their abusive marriages/relationships.

A course on Learning for life involving adult learning, mental health and wellbeing, was organized by the Mental Health Foundation in the United Kingdom. Participants testified that the course was extremely useful. It helped one participant to think more clearly, understand her thought processes and challenge them with good results". It helped another participant to "cope with severe stress and anxiety attacks, to calm down and not to panic in very hostile situations". The majority of participants testified that they had specific improvements which included "feeling happier and more relaxed, feeling more able to deal with stress, finding better balance, tackling problems, increased self-confidence, having the ability to recognize and challenge negative thought patterns and having more focus in life" (Mental Health Foundation, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the cultural reactions of women to abusive marriages and relationships in Nigeria and the implication for marital counselling and lifelong education. The study specifically focused on the reasons given by women for returning to or remaining in abusive marriages and relationships (love, security (economic/financial), religion/societal and family pressure.

Research Questions

Researchers tried to find answers to these research questions in order to meet the purpose/aims of the study.

- i. Love will not be a strong factor for returning to or remaining in an abusive relationship.
- ii. Financial/economic reasons will not be strong determinants for returning to or remaining in an abusive relationship.

- iii. Religion will not be a factor for returning to or remaining in abusive relationship.
- iv. Societal/family pressure will not be strong factors for returning to or remaining in abusive relationships.

Scope of the study

The study is delimited to cultural factors that determine the reaction of women to abusive marriages/relationships. These factors are; love, security (economic/financial), religion, societal and family pressure.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted the qualitative research style (Cheng, 2012). This research style is important for this study because of the following reasons: cultural beliefs appear to have a great impact on the reaction of women who are in, or return to abuse marriages and relationships. It is important to learn directly from these women, reasons why they return to, or remain in abusive relationships. And to also find out if these women have at any time sought help, from who and where. Inquires made with the use of qualitative research method helps researchers have an in-depth understanding of problem that is not clear or confusing (Patton, 2002).

Area of Study

This study was carried out in Lagos Island area of Lagos metropolis. Lagos is the largest commercial centre in Africa. It is home to people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who have come to eke out a living from the various activities taking place in the city. The study was however carried out in the Lekki area of the metropolis. This is because the researcher reside

in this axis of Lagos and women in the study were reached to get their personal stories and experiences.

Study Population

The population consisted of all women in Lagos metropolis who are in, or keep returning to abusive marriages and relationships.

Sample size and Sampling Techniques

A purposeful sampling of ten ((10) participants were done in this study, to enable the research focus on the key concept (abusive marriages and relationships) that is being explored in this study (Vossler and Moller, 2015). Participants for this study were selected using the following criteria,

- No emphasis on educational attainment
- Married or in relationship for between two (2) – twenty (20) years.
- All Female participants
- Between the ages of 25 - 50
- Live in Lekki area of Lagos metropolis
- Have been in informal counselling (religious organizations and friends) at some point in their marriages and relationships.

Data Collection

The qualitative research design was used for this study. The items used to elicit responses from participants were structured in such a way that all participants were presented with the same items and they were able to respond accordingly. This helped in ensuring that responses of participants were focused on the same theme.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used for the study was designed by the researcher. Responses to the variables in the study were presented in the statement items under these categories: love, security (economic/ religion, societal pressure and family pressure.

Data Analysis

Responses of participants to items on these variables (love, security, religion, societal and family pressure) were analyzed in a “within-case level” (Cheng, 2012) and presented in thematic description categories (Cheng, 2012; Ayres, Kavanaugh and Knafl, 2003). The rule of thematic description was applied in analyzing participants’ responses. Interview with participants was done in English Language and the “pidgin” English; The two common medium of communication among diverse culture in Nigeria. Participants were selected from diverse educational background which informed the use of the two common medium of communication in Nigeria.

Table 1
Summary of Categories and Themes
Reasons given by participants for going into Marriages and Relationships

Categories	Themes
Marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love (emotional reasons) • Security (personal, companionship, emotional & economic) • Religious pressure • Societal Pressure • Family Pressure
Abusive Marriages/Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love (emotional reasons) • Security (personal, companionship, emotional & economic) • Religious pressure • Societal Pressure • Family Pressure
Reasons for remaining in, or returning to abusive marriage/relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love (emotional reasons) • Security (personal, companionship, emotional & economic) • Religious pressure • Societal Pressure • Family Pressure

Table 2
Love as a reasons for going into marriages and relationships

	Category	Themes									
		A		Spc, Security, (personal; counsellorship emotional)		Religious Pressure		Societal Pressure		Family Pressure	
	Participant	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	Jojo			✓							
2.	Vava	✓						✓			
3.	Bebe	✓		✓							
4.	Kaka	✓				✓					
5.	Muba	✓								✓	
6.	Lili	✓		✓							
7.	Riri	✓						✓			
8.	Emi	✓						✓			
9.	Bobi	✓						✓			
10.	Tila	✓		✓							
	Exposure to Counselling	1									
	TOTAL	10		4		1		4		1	

Table 3
Financial/economic reasons for remaining in abusive marriages and relationship

	Category	THEME										
			Attraction		Security, (personal; counsellorship emotional		Religious Pressure		Societal Pressure		Family Pressure	
	Participant		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	Jojo	Abusive Marriages and Relationships			✓							
2.	Vava				✓							
3.	Bebe										✓	
4.	Kaka						✓					
5.	Muba								✓			
6.	Lili						✓					
7.	Riri								✓			
8.	Emi										✓	
9.	Bobi								✓			
10.	Tila				✓							
	Exposure to Counselling		1									
	TOTAL		10		3		2		3		2	

Table 4

Religion/societal/family pressure as reasons for remaining in abusive marriages and relationships

	Category		THEME									
			Attraction		Security, (personal; counsellorship emotional		Religious Pressure		Societal Pressure		Family Pressure	
	Participant		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	Jojo	Reasons for returning to or remaining in abusive marriages and relationship			✓							
2.	Vava				✓							
3.	Bebe									✓		
4.	Kaka						✓					
5.	Muba									✓		
6.	Lili									✓		
7.	Riri									✓		
8.	Emi									✓		
9.	Bobo										✓	
10.	Tila				✓							
	Exposure to Counselling		1									
	TOTAL		10		3		1		5		1	

**Security, (personal; counsellorship emotional Religious
Pressure Societal Pressure Family Pressure**

Actual names were not used in the study to shield the identities of participants and their secrecy.

Jojo has been married for 16 years. After the birth of her son, she left her abusive husband but had to return to him 6 years later because of disagreement with her aunt with whom she was staying. The reason why she left in the first instance was because her husband was a chronic alcoholic and an abuser. She had 3 more children amidst physical & verbal financial & emotional insecurity. She has finally taken a decision to leave him for good and make a new life for herself and her children. **Vava** suffered abuse from her lover before she decided to go into marriage with him. As lovers, she was physically abused to the point that she lost the pregnancy of triplets that she carried at the time. She left the marriage for a while and eventually returned to her husband. They now live in the United States of America where they now reside. She has had other children. **Bebe** had no clue that her lover who later became her husband would turn out to be an abuser. They started off on a cordial note but interference from relations became the major cause of their problem. She was physically abused for the first time by her husband because of a relation. She is still in the marriage and has two children. The marriage has lasted for seven years. **Kaka** is currently in an abusive relationship. She has been abused several times by her lover of only four years. It was so bad at a time that she had to walk an isolated street alone at 1.00 am in the night to seek refuge with friends. She believes the relationship gets stronger after each bout of abuse. She has never sought help. Only tells her story to close friends and not even her relations.

Muba has been in an abusive relationship for 12 years. She traced her problem to the attitude of her sister in-law who told her

husband to physically abuse the wife in order to dominate her. It is the only way to subdue a wife according to a sister in-law who is in her fifties and has never settled down in marriage. She is still in the marriage in spite of her high position in one of the international organizations in the country. Her children (a male and a female) are being raised in an environment of fear. She has never sought the help of a counsellor. **Lili** faced abuse in her relationship of 17 years when she decided to spend all her spare time in a religious setting instead of taking care of her husband and four children. Hers was emotional abuse by a frustrated husband who did not want himself and his children to die of hunger because of the neglect. He went ahead to marry a younger woman to meet his needs and those of his children. **Riri** is a very wealthy and comfortable business woman. She has been in an emotionally abusive relationship that never developed into a marriage for the past 10 years. She has been exploited financially by both her lover and his relations because of her generosity. She has a son & a daughter from a first failed marriage and no child in the current relationship. She is not bothered to seek counsel. She believes she can handle the situation. **Emi** has been married for 14 years. She started the relationship with her present husband as a live in lover after she left her abusive husband of six years. The physical and verbal abuse is both ways. The couple is constantly either physically or verbally abusing each other. The turbulent marriage has produced four good looking boys. **Bobi** has been married for 20 years. She is under constant physical and verbal torment from her husband who must make a snide remark about anything good that happens to her and her relations. They have five children in their teenage years. **Tila** also has been in an abusive relationship for over 20 years. Tila's relationship with her husband bothers on economic and emotional deprivation. Tila takes care of all the needs in the home while the husband who

works in the oil & gas industry spends his money on himself and his numerous friends and well-wishers.

Findings

The findings are presented in accordance with responses of participants (see tables 2-4). They are presented under these categories; love, (emotional) security & economic), religion, societal and family pressure. **Marriage:** None of the 10 participants mentioned love as the main reason for getting married. While they all agreed on being attracted to their partners, other reasons such as **security (personal, companionship, emotional and economic):** was the major reasons given by participants for marriage. Economic and social security played major roles in participants' reason for getting married. **Religious pressure:** Only one participant mentioned religion interference as reason for getting married. **Family and societal pressure:** were major contributory factors for participants going into marriage.

These findings are in line with the findings of Vashishtha, (2015), who outlined ten (10) reasons people give for getting married among which are; improvement in lifestyle, better economy, not alone at old age, tax breaks, someone to depend on (security), to have children, social pressure, fear of staying single, sex and meaning to life. According to this author marriage gives meaning to life. It is like a job because of the responsibility that comes with it; for example taking care of the household, the children and so many other things. All the ten participants have suffered one form of abuse or the other (physical, emotional, financial deprivation etc) in marriages and relationships. These are related to security (personal, (companionship), emotional (love) and economics) reasons; religious, family and societal pressures, given for the abuse faced in the marriage/relationship. In support of the above, Kay, (2015) pointed out that women do not intentionally go into abusive marriages/relationships or expect their relationships to

become abusive. It takes a long time sometimes for a woman to realize that she is in an abusive relationship, women are expected to look out for and detect the early signs of abuse in a relationship. The signs could be hidden from outsiders because of security, religious, family and societal pressures.

It is sometimes difficult for women to explain or give reason why they remain in or keep returning to abusive marriages and relationships. The ten participants also have a problem pointing out the reasons why they have remained in or keep returning to their abusive relationships. Reasons for this ranges from security, religious, family and societal pressure. This is in line with findings of Meyer, (2016) who gave 7 reasons why people stay in abusive marriages/relationships. According to the author, it is difficult for some women to explain why or give reasons why they stay in an abusive relationships with all the physical and emotional pains that come with such relationships. Reasons given by such women at times are; love, finances, religious beliefs, low self-esteem, fear, shame and isolation.

Conclusion

Marriages and relationships in adulthood are relationships that have high-level demands that require complex cognitive and interpersonal skills and a secure sense of self-identity and self-worth. We are living in communities that are marked by significant levels of inequalities between social groups and gender (male/female) roles. It is important to continue lifelong education whether people are literate or not literate. "This lifelong education will foster competence and self-esteem for all individuals (young or old, male or female). This will serve as an essential ingredient for addressing any problem an individual might face in the course of their lives (Gendron, 2001). The findings of this study has helped to expose the fact that there is an urgent need for

professional counselling and continuous education in all settings particularly for two adults who are moving from independent living to marriages and relationships. In spite of the problems identified in the study, it is unfortunate that nine out of the ten participants never had the opportunity to seek professional counselling. Only one of the participants had a semblance of professional counselling intervention which was short-lived.

Recommendations and Implication for Counselling

It is difficult to separate counselling from lifelong education. Counselling helps individuals cope with and deal with various problems of life. Lifelong education in addition to counselling will expose people (particularly women who are the participants in this study) to the kind of learning that will help them build up their self-esteem and self-worth; and refuse to be treated as second class citizens or remain in abusive marriages and relationships. There is need for proper pre-marital counselling/education provided by experts before marriages. Behaviours that they see in their partners during courtship that they are not comfortable with, should not be tolerated because they are not likely to change after marriage. Women particularly should not hesitate to seek regular counselling when they find themselves in abusive marriages and relationships. The woman is the one who mostly suffers these abuses and not the family, society or religious setting where she belongs. Training programmes can be organized periodically in all settings to teach women communication and assertiveness skills to help them deal with conflicts and emotional distress which they may face in their marriages and relationships. Various groups can also empower women to be less totally dependent on the men. These are to be done by only professional counsellors who are well equipped with counselling skills and theories. It is important for professional counsellors and lifelong educators to be mindful of the fact that no one can be forced to make a choice he or she is not willing to make.

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