Women's perceptions of domestic and intimate partner violence alongside government's interventions in Nigeria: A Qualitative study

Domestic violence, including intimate partner violence, increased exponentially following the Covid-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, there appears to be a paucity of research that draws on a social constructionist theoretical lens to explore women's perspectives of the Nigerian government's interventions addressing such violence. The study recruited twenty-four purposively selected female participants from Delta state, Nigeria. Informed by a social constructionist thematic analysis, findings revealed that they were a perceived sense that law enforcement agencies' gender-biased response to domestic violence complaints and lack of awareness of legal solutions fuel domestic violence. The study recommends a randomised control trial to test the efficacy of legal education interventions in improving domestic violence awareness in Nigeria.

Keywords: Domestic violence; intimate partner violence; intervention; Nigeria; women

Introduction

Domestic violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) against women, is a global public health concern that violates human rights. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2017) report, 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced physical and sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence from non-partners during their lifetime. Within the context of Nigeria, these statistics have seen an exponential increase following the advent of the Coronavirus. For instance, Fawole, Okedare and Reed's study (2021) suggest that intimate partner violence increased significantly during

the lockdown in Nigeria, up to 56%. Before the pandemic, the Nigerian National Population Commission (NPC, 2013) report suggests that women's exposure to intimate partner violence from their partners or husbands includes an estimated 19% for emotional IPV, approximately 14% for physical IPV, and 5% for sexual abuse IPV. Previous studies in Nigeria have shown that the prevalence of intimate partner violence ranges from 7 to 31% for physical violence, 31 to 61 for emotional/psychological violence, and 20 to 31% for sexual violence (Mapayi et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies conducted across different regions in Nigeria have reported the prevalence of IPV to range from 41% in Nigeria's south-south (Dienye, Gbeneol and Itimi, 2014), 42% in the north (Tanimu et al. 2016), 29% in the south-west (Okenwa, Lawoko and Jansson, 2009) and 78.8% in the southeastern region of the country (Okemgbo et al. 2002). Central to this increasing rate of Intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence (DV) in Nigeria, there seems to be a paucity of research exploring how women socially construed domestic violence alongside government interventions addressing the issue.

Existing studies on women's perspectives of domestic violence in Delta State, Nigeria (the study's location) have often tended to focus on the prevalence of domestic violence during pregnancy (Awusu, Okeleke and Ayanwu, 2009) and middle-income women's perspectives of domestic violence (Aderinto et al., 2006). For instance, Awusu, Okeleke and Ayanwu's (2009) study focuses on the prevalence of domestic violence amongst 400 pregnant women attending a hospital in Oleh. While these studies made important points concerning the prevalence of domestic and intimate partner violence, they do not address how government intervention is perceived. In addition, the studies are limited in their scope as domestic violence affects women regardless of their social status or whether or not they are pregnant. The studies are also mainly quantitative in design and methodological approach. Therefore, delineating the significance of adopting

a qualitative research method to investigate how women perceive domestic violence in Nigeria.

The extant literature has proposed diverse frameworks and theories to understand and explain violence against women. Lawson (2012) argues that violence perpetrated against women by their male counterparts is an expression of male patriarchal domination of females, rooted in power and gender inequality. Men are the primary breadwinners in some societies, including some regions in Nigeria. At the same time, women are construed as homemakers, carers of children, and expected to be exclusively dependent on men for their economically needs (Benebo et al., 2018). In the event of a change in the traditional ordering of gender and their respective roles, violence can ultimately result, especially in patriarchal societies (Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Heise et al., 2009; Macmillan and Gartner, 1999). For instance, studies have shown that if a wife challenges or disobeys her husband or even fails to play her gender role, the husband could resort to violence to instil discipline. Heise, Ellsberg and Gottemoeller (2009) and Macmillan and Gartner (1999) argue that such violence is done to maintain control and power.

The ecological framework (Heise, 2011) argues that intimate partner violence is a multifaceted phenomenon enshrined in various levels of causality. The framework also suggests that domestic violence demonstrates the interplay of various factors at varying levels, including individuals, communities, and wider society (Heise, 2011). Informed by this framework and building on a social constructionist theoretical lens, this study aims to contribute to understanding how female subject positions and perceptions of domestic violence, including government interventions, are constructed in Nigerian society.

Against the preceding backdrops, this study contributes to the literature from three main perspectives delineating its originality, significance, and rigour. The study

demonstrates originality by using a qualitative approach to explore women's perspectives of domestic and intimate partner violence in Delta state alongside existing interventions to address the issue in Nigeria. As previously highlighted, the quantitative approach dominates previous studies. The adoption of a qualitative approach provides depth and detail that helps analyse the participants' perceptions. Adopting a qualitative approach also helps gather in-depth insights into participants' perceived issues associated with government interventions.

The use of a social constructionist theoretical lens to underpin the analyses of the empirical data concerning women's perspectives of domestic and intimate partner violence whilst drawing on their multiple cultural values and shared history delineates the study's rigour. The significance of our study is highlighting the taken-for-granted perspectives of women in understanding how they perceived interventions designed to address domestic and intimate partner violence. The purpose is to contribute to the literature and inform policies seeking to improve government interventions addressing domestic and intimate partner violence. For our study's purpose, domestic and intimate partner violence interventions are defined as any programs, workshops, training, law enforcement agencies interventions, and media communication outlets that address and prevent the emergence of such violence in Nigeria.

The paper commences with the debate on women and domestic/intimate partner violence in Nigeria. The next section explores the Nigerian government's interventions to address domestic and intimate partner violence. The study also reports on the social constructionist theoretical lens and the study's methods alongside the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications of the study for literature and policy improvement.

Domestic Violence in Nigeria

Violence conjures various meanings depending on the context. Violence encompasses the rough treatment and use of physical force on another person in an unlawful manner. However, for our study, the emphasis is on domestic and intimate partner violence. According to the UN (1993), domestic violence is any act of violence directed towards specific gender that:

> Results in, or his likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm, or suffering to women, including threat of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, occurring in public or private life.

Other forms of violence directed against women also include intimate partner violence (IPV). The present study adopts the definition by Jewkes (2000, p.1423) of IPV as:

> physical violence directed against a woman by a current or ex- husband or boyfriend. The term "intimate partner violence" often includes sexual violence and can also include psychological abuse; both these forms of abuse often, but not always, accompany physical violence.

For our study's purpose, IPV includes physical violence, stalking, psychological aggression, sexual violence and coercing a partner into substance abuse. The most intrinsic aspect of these issues is women's perspectives on interventions addressing domestic violence. This highlights a significant focus of this paper which seeks to depart from the dearth of literature within the Nigerian context concerning domestic violence to explore how intervention designed to solve the problem is perceived.

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society composed of over 250 ethnic groups. Central to this diversity and multiplicity of culture, 'women' are often perceived as the lesser gender. The term 'women' derives from the perceived role of the ability or capability to bear young ones (Uzuegbunam, 2012). In Nigeria, women as a concept and their role within society are historically, culturally, and biologically defined. Biologically, Uzuegbunam (2012) argues that women in Nigeria are construed as feminine. In explaining the prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria, the role of culture seems

apparent. Arisi and Oromareghake (2011) contend that cultural violence against the female gender represents a ubiquitous plague continually beleaguered Nigeria. Aderinto et al. (2006) argue that the relationship between domestic violence and Nigeria's social-cultural environment is apparent with the influence of patriarchal norms, which derives from prevailing societal norms and values affecting people's behaviour and attitudes. Concerning socialisation, Ananihe (2003) explains that socialisation into gender roles commences early in the family and community. These are reinforced through the interplay of familial, economic, social and cultural forces (Isiugo-Ananihe, 2003). Of utmost importance is the social construct on the role of males in Nigerian society. As Ottong (1993: 1) observed, '*the male plays a very dominant role in the social structure, he is as of right, the head of the family, and is seen and regarded in certain circumstances by the wives (or wives) as the lord and master whose decision is final.*' This arguably positions the female at a disadvantage because an alternative behaviour that does not conform to the male's role as the head might be construed as defiant.

Culturally, the Nigerian communities perceived women as subordinate to males and deserving no respect. Women are perceived as serving a limited role and restrained from contributing to the vital decision-making process within the family and societal structure. The married ones are construed as their husband's assets that may be transferrable upon the later demise in some Nigerian culture, and even beaten up by their husbands if provoked (Arisi and Oromareghake, 2011). Women are often seen as weak, confined to the kitchen and limited from accessing any inheritance, including landed properties (Uzuegbunam, 2012). These stigmas have a critical role in negatively affecting women as in an ideal family, they play a crucial role in childbearing, nurturing and bringing up their offspring.

Within Nigeria, an ideal family comprises the father, mother, and children with good relationships with extended family members. However, separation comes with some cultural implications as well as religious implications. Oluremi (2015) contends that in Nigeria, most women desist from reporting domestic abuse as they are ashamed that their marriages are failing. Divorce is not an option at all, given cultural beliefs. Scholars have argued that such cultural beliefs further exacerbate violence against women in Nigeria as a socially accepted behaviour and a means of addressing resistance against the culturally perceived male superiority (Abayomi & Olabode, 2013; Nelson, 2017). Thus, suffering in silence becomes the norm females adopt to avoid being seen as violating established cultural standards. Such norm appears to transcend borders. Studies have shown that with regards to disclosure of abuse, the female desire to maintain "honour" within their community, cultural expectations acquired through socialization, and gendered power relations were dominant in women's views of why they fail to seek help and escape abusive relationships (Femi-Ajao, 2018; Gill and Harrison, 2019). Rai and Choi's (2018) scoping review, which examined socio-cultural risk factors affecting domestic violence among South Asian immigrant women, reports similar findings.

Domestic and intimate partner violence against women can negatively impact children's upbringing and affect society more broadly. For example, most insecurity issues, including terrorism in Nigeria, have often been attributed to poor family upbringing and issues relating to parental neglect (Ike et al., 2021). The need to explore women's perceptions is vital given the limited emphasis on their views, especially regarding violence against them.

Existing literature also suggests that the lack of women's voices and views being heard plays an instrumental role in their non-reporting of domestic violence. Arisi and Oromareghake (2011) further argue that it also partly explains why women are less likely

to report domestic violence due to the stigmatisation and a society that appears to be more favourable to males. From an economic perspective, it also puts the woman in a disadvantaged position where there is much dependence on the male for basic needs, thus leading to abuse due to the cultural norms that reinforce male superiority.

Religious Implication

Concerning religious implication, Hajjar (2004, p.1) argues that from the context of Islamic religion, 'shari'a creates some commonalities in gender and family relations in Muslim societies, notably the sanctioning and maintenance of male authority over female relatives.' Even in the Christian religion, the book of Ephesians 5 v 22-23 admonishes 'wives, submit to your husband as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife'. As previous studies highlight, men use such religious concepts to assert gendered expectations of women, and when women resist such expectations of them as a "traditional wife," violence appears to be used to achieve female conformity (Gangoli et al., 2020; Thiara and Gill, 2012). The belief that the men are head of the family and responsible economically for the family's wellbeing could also exacerbate such violence. It leaves the woman in a financially disadvantaged position where leaving the abusive relationship becomes difficult. As highlighted in other settings, structural factors such as poverty, culture and economic-based gendered roles influence women's experiences of violence, inability to leave abusive relationships or even report such. (Femi-Ajao, 2018; Nwosu, 2006; Ogunsiji et al., 2011).

In essence, the prevailing argument seems to suggest that violence against women by male partners appears widely condoned by the Nigerian societies, where religion preaches female submission (Gangoli et al., 2020) whilst culture appears to inform the belief that a husband may chastise his wife through beating (Okemgbo, Omideyi and Odimegwu, 2002; Ilika, Okonkwo and Adogu, 2002). Traditional attitudes concerning

women's subordination exacerbate sexual and domestic violence (Ondicho, 2000: 35-44). Violence against women often reflects the low status and position women occupy in many Nigerian cultures. Drawing on empirical data, Aderinto et al. (2006) contend that such a low position explains why women experience a high poverty level in Africa. Poverty thus limits women's dependency on the mercy of their male partners. In addition, the absence of women's financial dependency can lead to abuse and limit opportunities for escaping the abuse.

Women's Rights and Interventions Addressing Domestic Violence in Nigeria

Nigeria is a signatory to several human rights treaties and has undergone the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2009 and 2013 (UNDP Report, 2016). However, the country's history of reporting records and implementation of the ratified treaties remains unimpressive. Several challenges, including corruption issues, seem embedded in some national institutions designed to promote and protect human rights with less than encouraging engagement with human rights mechanisms as prescribed by the UN. Issues such as culture, including religious beliefs and practices, continue to undermine the domestication of international conventions, including the Convention on Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Of 134 countries on the Gender Equality Index, Nigeria ranks 118 (UNDP Report, 2016). For instance, the percentage of women elected to the Nigerian National Assembly is 7.3 per cent (i.e., 8 out of 109) for the Senate, while that of the country's House of Representatives is 5.8 per cent (21 out of 309), which is significantly low (UNDP Report, 2016).

Nigeria represents one of the world countries with the lowest level of women's representation in electoral positions with limited progress in promoting female gender equality with their male counterparts. In Nigeria, women occupy approximately 30 per

cent of all public sector posts and 17 per cent in senior management, including key decision-making positions (UNDP Report, 2016). There are significant gaps in gender-disaggregated data on various economic and social sectors. Nigeria's Inequality Index (GII) varies by status and geo-political zones according to 2013 data which also suggests the north is experiencing the highest, followed by the southeast region. The inadequate perspectives of women and girls in resource allocation, policy adoption, and implementation in social and economic sectors have affected the most vulnerable access to education and protection against gender-based violence. It also negatively impacts the country's socio-economic development.

While signatory and ratification of international conventions represent one of the means through which the Nigerian government seeks to address gender inequality and violence, there appears to be a limitation. Despite Nigeria being a signatory to international conventions, there appear to be no laws enacted explicitly against domestic violence designed to be applicable across the Federation (Madu, 2015). The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP), passed in 2015, represents notable legislation protecting diverse types of violence against women, including domestic and intimate partner violence. However, its application is limited to the Federal Capital Territory and does not extend to many women across the country unless states adopt it (Onyemelukwe, 2015). In essence, domestic violence persists and has become prevalent in the country. This is despite adopting other approaches, including the law enforcement agencies. However, how women construe these approaches remains an essential aspect needing further exploration, especially as it relates to the role of culture and religion in shaping their subject position and what constitutes an ideal home.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative method, and data collection took place in Delta, Nigeria. The research was conducted following ethical approval by the RCCG zonal headquarter in Delta State, Nigeria. It was also conducted in line with global best practices drawing on the British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics concerning informed consent, voluntary participation in the study, data management, use and duty of confidentiality.

Participants and Data Collection

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants in Delta state. Twenty-four participants took part in the study, of which 16 participants took part in the focus group, and a further eight participants were interviewed using the semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were a combination of telephone and face-to-face, depending on the participants' preferences. One face-to-face focus group comprising 16 female participants was conducted. All interviews, including that of the focus group, were conducted whilst considering social distancing, and the Nigerian government prescribed Covid-19 guidelines at the time of data collection. The data collection, including the focus groups, was conducted in 2021. The location for data collection was purposively selected to plan for a future randomised control trial based on the study's findings.

The participants' inclusion criteria for the study included being female, aged 18 and above, able to communicate in English, and providing informed consent before taking part in the study. The exclusion criteria include women who are non-residents of Delta state, less than the study's required 18 years of age, unable to provide consent, and unable to communicate in English.

The participants were between the age of 18 and 58 years old. Most participants were married, while others were single or in a relationship. In terms of recruitment, the zonal pastor of the religious organisation was initially approached with the purpose of the

study and to help spread the recruitment advert to those that might fit the study's eligibility criteria. Through this means, participants who voluntarily participated were asked to share with others with similar characteristics, which helped gain more participants. Of the 24 participants, 13 were married with children between 0 and 36 years, whilst the other 11 indicated being in a relationship or cohabiting. For those married, the length of their marriage span from one to 38 years. Twenty-one participants indicated having experienced domestic violence, including intimate partner violence, while the other three mentioned seeing their close family members experiencing domestic violence.

Both focus groups and interviews were conducted. The focus group lasted approximately one hour, while each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were uploaded to NVivo version 11 to aid in coding, categorising, and grouping data into themes. Data saturation was reached at the 24 interviews when no new themes emerged upon which data collection ended.

The research assistant conducted the focus group interviews to explore participants' perceptions of the topic. The valuable feedback emanated from the focus group was used to refine further the semi-structured interview guide used for the interview. It is worth adding that before participating in the study, all participants were brief of the study and read the participant information sheet. The participants also signed the consent forms. All identifiable participants' information in the dataset was anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

A social constructionist thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the dataset. The social constructionist theory emphasises how meaning is developed and shared in coordination

with others rather than individually. The theory is also based on societal constructs and the events surrounding the period in which such constructions exist (Burr, 2013).

We adopted thematic analysis underpinned by Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step process in analysing the data. The process involves initial familiarisation with the dataset, coding, categorising codes into themes, and refining and defining themes before the initial write-up of the findings. Upon transcription of the recorded interview, the data was uploaded to Nvivo computed assisted software for qualitative analysis. The research teams read the transcripts to aid in data familiarisation. A double coding was adopted. The lead researcher completed the initial coding, and the other team members also reviewed this to ensure consistency and rigour. The datasets were underpinned by the core element of social constructionist theory, including shared history, language and social space as the basis of participants' joint construction of their reality. Within the context of Nigeria, we used the tenets of social constructionism to underpin some of the shared social constructs on the lesser value placed on women and the culture that upholds men's domination at the expense of their female counterparts.

Findings

The analysed data based on a social-constructionist thematic analysis revealed the following main themes: lack of independence as a basis for abuse, control and domination, Gender bias and unequal response to domestic violence complaints by law enforcement agencies, fear of reporting, and law as a panacea to allay fears. Verbatim extracts will support each theme.

Theme 1 - Lack of independence as a basis for abuse

A recurrent and common pattern in the dataset was the perceived sense that lack of independence plays a vital role in domestic violence. The shared construct, which positions 'culture' and limited feminine 'value' as central in domestic violence, informs

such a view. 19 out of the 24 participants construed female lack of independence as a factor limiting their rights. It makes them vulnerable to abuse from their male counterparts and makes it very difficult to leave the abusive relationship. Talking about this, Cassandra, an elderly participant with four children from the focus group, whilst sharing her experience, noted that:

> I recall in my experience where I was a victim of abuse from my husband because I rely exclusively on him. He would not want me to do anything other than sitting at home and raise the kids […] And it is not just me, if the woman request that I want to buy food, I want to buy cloth, the man will often say I do not have money, and the men do not want these women to do anything because they are so selfish. So that is why they are doing all those things. The woman does not have rights in Africa; here in Nigeria, they do not have rights. It is the man that has right over them. The man beat them anyhow. If they [the women] say anything, he beat them, and the women have no right. Moreover, when the woman is not doing anything, she depends on the man, the man will always ride on her and use her as a tool, but she can ignore the man if she has something doing.

One central tenet of being in a relationship is the perceived role of the male as the head of the family. Culturally, in Nigeria, the male is considered the family's breadwinner, whose role is to provide food, shelter, and clothing (Eboiyehi, Muoghalu and Bankole, 2016). The participant's perception problematises a role where the male is the family's breadwinner. Being dependent on the male is seen as having a negative impact exploited through abuse. In contrast, being occupied with a job or means of livelihood was construed from a positive outlook where the woman might assume a 'power' position to resist abuse. An implication of this finding is that there is a call for a perceived shift in the cultural and social construct concerning the perceived superior role of men in Nigerian society and more recognition of the need for women's autonomy and independence. Such findings allude to existing studies concerning Nigerian society, where women occupy limited roles in official employments and political positions due to the perceived lack of regard for their role in society (UNDP. Nigeria Human Development Report, 2016).

Concerning lack of female independence, another female participant Elenornita in her early 30's, commented that:

> Domestic violence, in my experience, is a product of a lack of independence. The guy I was with would not want me to work; he cheated with other women a lot. When I confronted him, he will remind me that as a Nigerian, the culture permits him to have as many women as he wants because *'Omote Buron'* [meaning there are lots of women] and he remain the head that decides what happens. He treated me like a house-maid, limit my dressing and always wants me to take permission for everything, which made me so sick and felt like I was in a toxic prison in need of liberation.

The lack of personal will and independence are construed as the major impediment to women. Eleanornita's experience highlights a state of helplessness as she indicated a feeling of being 'in a toxic prison in need of liberation, which seems to suggest a call for help to be free of the situation she is experiencing. Lack of independence is construed as a tool males use to exert authority on females. Such lack of independence resonates with previous studies (Aderinto et al., 2016; Arisi and Oromareghake, 2011), highlighting its socio-economic implication, which leaves the woman at the mercy of her abuser. Eleanornita's perception seems to highlight how Nigeria's cultural values and social construct often seem to place the male in a position of authority that, to her, fuels domestic violence. In essence, the taken-for-granted need for female independence has a significant impact, which positions the female as one at the mercy of their abusive male counterpart.

Control and domination

In this subtheme, 17 of the 24 participants perceived that the quest for domination and control is central to domestic violence's rise. The findings resonated across most participants, irrespective of their age or marital status. Talking about this, Melissa, a participant married for over 30 years, commented that:

> My experience of domestic violence is that my husband tried to control my life based on; he does not want me to work, he does not want me to do business. Anything he said I should do, so I do not want to live that kind of life, and it does not make me happy. Sometimes he shouts and talks very rudely to me, and these have both psychological and mental impacts on my wellbeing. This is typical of the situation in Nigeria because most men in Nigeria do not have respect for women because they want to take charge of the women, control them, and use them the way they like. When the woman complains, they will start beating the woman.

The participant's construct appears informed by patriarchy, domination and Nigeria's culture. 'Respect' is construed from a position of strength and power where the women are perceived as less deserving of respect from their male counterparts. The interplay between culture and the superiority of the male gender also forms part of the factors fuelling domestic violence. A more in-depth analysis of the participant's perception unveils the perceived concerns relating to how lack of respect is 'normalised' such that the male counterpart is very much resentful of any attempt by the female to resist acts of disrespect. A similar finding was reached in Arisi and Oromareghake's (2011) study when they argued about the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society that seems to favour the male in domestic abuse cases. Thus, in its extreme, the interview extract highlights that female resistance faces physical violence in the form of 'beating'. This finding alludes to previous literature which identified the quest to control due to the limited value placed on females in Nigeria as some of the basis for domestic violence by their male counterparts (Uzuegbunam, 2012; Benebo et al., 2018). A possible explanation for the participant's perception might be her subject position as a woman who has been married for quite some time. The participant's tribe as an Urhobo and an indigene of Delta state reflect a cultural heritage where the males are greatly respected. At the same time, there is an expectation for females to be subordinate to their husbands.

The focus group also highlights a perceived sense of control, silencing women's voices. In its extreme form, males' resort to physical violence as the end product of such control. Commenting on this, a participant from the focus group noted that domestic violence:

> It is common because, in most homes, you see some men beating their wives; the men would not even allow the woman to air her view. I mean, they do not want the woman to say anything, they do not even want the woman to correct them […] many women have packed out of their home because of this domestic violence. I have also experienced abuse where I was treated like garbage and had to leave because the culture tends to silence the woman.

The extract highlights a sense that domestic violence is 'common'. The role of culture that positions the woman as inferior to her male counterpart and silencing any dissent is construed negatively. Culture thus appears to fuel abuse; in its extreme, leaving is considered an option instead of remaining in the abusive relationship. Whilst leaving might be an option, this could face hindrance by factors including lack of financial independence, cultural norms, and religious teachings. For example, drawing on the Christian religion, marriage is often perceived as a union for better or worse. Only death or adultery are considered legitimate grounds for divorce.

Theme 3 – Gender bias and unequal response to domestic violence complaint by law enforcement agencies

Equality before the law represents an integral aspect of criminal justice agencies in any given society (Ike, 2018). However, when equality is perceived as compromised, this tends to breed frustration and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system. Among most participants and the focus group discussion, a common theme was the perceived imbalanced treatment accorded domestic violence cases based on gender. Being a 'female' is problematised as unfavourable and less likely to receive justice when they

experience acts of domestic violence. The central tenet associated with this theme is that this injustice is often at the hands of those meant to enforce law and order. Commenting on the issue, a female participant who has been in a marital relationship for over 35 years commented that:

> The society is not helping anything. There seems to be no adherence to human rights concerning domestic violence. A man can beat his wife for no reason, other than just that he is tired of staying with the woman. But when the woman reports, because the man has the upper hand, when she reported to the station, as she went to the police, police will ignore the woman and then she does not have any say and then they will now dismiss the case. So, in Nigeria here, in Delta state, women have no say no matter how; they will not support her because the man will always find his way out, and that was the experience I had when I went through domestic violence in my home.

The law enforcement agencies, including the police, are problematised as failing to ensure justice. The nonchalant attitude accorded domestic violence cases appears detrimental to effectively prosecuting the case or even ensuring justice. The reference to terms such as 'dismiss the case' is construed to infer a shared social construct within the Nigerian communities where participants perceive the man to more likely emerge as the winner following their report of acts of domestic violence. Similar findings resonate with previous studies (Arisi and Oromareghake, 2011). A possible explanation that might have informed the participants' narrative might be the shared cultural construct embedded within the Nigerian communities, which often portrays women as weak and subordinate to males. Such constructs imply that it instils a sense of injustice where acts of violence are left unaddressed. It also instils a perceived lack of confidence and trust in the law enforcement agencies. This situation has been attributed to agencies, including the Nigerian police, perceived by the public as corrupt and unfair in dispensing their duties (Ike et al., 2021). Such an implication highlights how the law enforcement agencies are perceived to tend to 'normalise' and 'trivialise' domestic violence issues based on being

from a lesser gender. As another participant noted when it comes to the government response to domestic violence in Nigeria:

> It is not really good. They [referring to the government] are not putting effort. They are not taking it likely they are not just serious. We need the government to take it seriously so that they are aware that it is a thing that is killing women a lot. So far, they are not taking it seriously, so we need the governors to take it seriously.

The negative implication of domestic violence spurs a need for a more 'proactive' response to the issue. The 'trivial' means of handling domestic violence is problematised as something that could lead to the death of some women. A possible explanation for the participant's construct could be the mental health effect and possible depression that may result from domestic violence. For instance, the study conducted by Jidong et al. (2020) found, among others, that issues of abuse are some of the leading causes of depression among mothers in Nigeria.

Favouritism and the influence of the person who committed the violence are construed to limit government efforts to address domestic violence. Such acts allude to previous studies, which often problematise the police as perceived to be corrupt, lack effective public relations and are insensitive to the victim's plight (Ike et al., 2021). As one participant in the focus group commented:

> I will not lie to you; the government are not trying. They are not doing anything in the sense that even if a man is beating his wife or a child was rape, at the end of the day, when they take it to the government, if you have money, everything will work for you. Are you getting it because they might arrest the person at the end of the day, but when there is money, maybe the person in question, the victim is the commissioner or governor son, so what do you expect! They said the police are your friend and they are the ones working against us. So, it just takes the grace of God too. I would say that we should pray that God should help us in this country because the government is not doing anything for us.

This perception reflects a construct that highlights some of the limitations associated with the Nigerian criminal justice system. Corruption is part of a broader issue that affects the effective dispensation of justice (Akintayo, 2019; Audu, 2016). The 'police' as the first point of call is, problematised as the enemy. This construct implies that such negative perceptions might deter possible reporting, as addressed in the next theme.

Theme 4 – Fear of reporting

The dataset revealed a pattern that highlights a sense of fear in reporting domestic violence when such acts of violence occur in the home. 22 of the 24 participants expressed concerns about reporting. The female was problematised as also contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence due to their silence. The 'societal' construct and stigma attached to reporting shape participants' construct. Commenting on the issue of fear, one of the participants with two children opined that:

> The problem is also from the women because they are not reporting some of the issues in their homes, like domestic violence, so they want to protect their marriage. What they do when you see them with bruises, and you ask them, ah please, what happened to you? They would just tell you, ah no problem. They would not even go to meet the people that would help to sort out they tend to now keep the secret.

Another participant from the focus group commented that:

> Many of us as women are hiding; we are afraid we want to protect our marriage; we do not report these issues. For the one that has been reported, the women also see it as the government is not doing enough because of that, there is no need for them to report they are trying to secure our marriage and that is not good we should try to save our lives as well.

The extracts highlight a sense of learned helplessness to respond to abuse through enduring and eschewing acts that could trigger conflict in their homes. Learned

helplessness represents a lack of will triggered by the recurrent barriers which limit escaping from an unpleasant situation. Individuals who are victims of consistent abuse could become passive due to the feeling of pessimism (Hyde-Nolan and Juliao, 2012). Hiding and fear of retaliation become the way of avoiding more violence. Previous studies emphasise how the perceived fear of retaliation from their male counterpart could deter women from reporting abuse (Kumar et al., 2022). Women's silence thus appears to reinforce more abuse.

In addition, the extracts suggest that 'fear' is perceived as a basis for non-reporting due to feeling helpless. The need to protect their 'marriage' and the perceived inaction by the government limits the chances of reporting domestic abuse and violence. 'Silence' then seems to become a normalised reaction to abuse as societal stigma and the lack of support from the criminal justice system appears to impliedly promote it. Whilst fear represents a common theme, the impact of religious or cultural perceptions of marriage in Nigeria also appears to play a role, especially concerning the participant's reference to the need to 'protect' their marriage. For example, the Urhobo and Ijaw cultures in Delta appear to promote the need for a woman to preserve and keep her home. Any contrary behaviour is frowned on and could lead to stigma against the woman for not managing her marriage effectively.

Even where a perceived ability to report exists, the fear of the unknown limit such reporting tendencies (Behrman, 2019). The court is seen as an outsider, which may exacerbate the issue even after the cases end. The aftermath of court cases and what the victim might experience seem more critical and whose value outweighs the need to report acts of domestic violence. Such concerns resonated across both the focus group and the interviews. Talking about this, a female participant from the focus group commented that:

> What I want to share is that as women, we should not give ourselves to our husband
> to be beaten; we should try in every way to tolerate and avoid anything that would

cause domestic violence in the home because when you report your matter to the lawyer meaning that you are already taking your husband, your cases outside and when you come out from the court you are going to face that man and when you face that man if that man is not a Christian or is not somebody that trust in God the case would be serious so we must learn to tolerate and try and avoid those things that are causing confusion in the home.

This extract highlights a dimension of fear that reflect the 'futuristic' aftermath of the effect of reporting issues concerning domestic violence. Here, bearing acts of domestic violence or even 'avoiding' domestic violence is construed as a more viable alternative to reporting consequences. Such a construct portrays the 'male' in a position of 'strength' where reporting implications are considered deterrent factors. Impliedly, the perceived lack of trust in the criminal justice system to protect victims of domestic violence informed the participant's perception. The complex combination of factors, including lack of confidence in the police, fear of retaliation, and lack of awareness of legislation, might explain why women endure domestic violence. The implication is that acts of domestic violence might go unreported as the fear of the unknown far outweighs any awareness of the criminal justice system's role in preventing or even dealing decisively with domestic violence. This is evidence of the multiple barriers women face when deciding how to respond to their abuse (e.g., hindering help-seeking).

Theme 5 – Limited awareness and law as a panacea to address domestic violence

A common pattern from the interviews (6 out of 8 participants) and focus group (11 out of 14 participants) was the perceived sense that law constitutes a practical solution to addressing domestic violence issues. The proactive role of law enforcement agencies and the practical function of relevant legal agencies is construed as necessary. Commenting on this, a participant who was not married at the time but in a relationship noted that:

Drawing on my personal experience when I encountered domestic violence, I was unsure where to get help or whether any law exists to protect me against my male partner abuser. I was afraid I could be stigmatised. So, I think if there is a centre or

platform where legal consultants orientate us as women, that will help. It will help
because we will then know our rights as humans, know how to get legal support and
address these domestic violence issues, which have a ripple effect in not just
destroying the woman's mental health and self-esteem, but also the children.

The extract highlights the perceived role of law in combatting domestic violence issues.
A central finding is the perceived lack of awareness of relevant laws addressing domestic
violence in Nigeria. Such limited awareness could pose a significant risk as acts of
domestic violence might be perpetrated with the victims not even aware of their legal
rights within the confines of the law. For instance, reference to stigma and lack of
awareness of laws safeguarding against domestic abuse conjures a hindrance to
addressing domestic violence. The finding seems contrary to the previous study, which
recognises culture as the main hindrance to addressing domestic violence in Nigeria (Arisi
and Oromareghake, 2011).

On a slightly similar vein, another participant in the focus group commented that:

Lack of awareness and limited access to legal support channels and human rights
centre makes domestic violence victims suffer [...]. I think we should have a human
rights lawyer and a centre for it so that in the event of any domestic violence case
arising, you can go there and lay a complaint and solve the issue.

Again, the perceived lack of awareness of the relevant human rights centre and access to
legal assistance inform the participant's perception. A possible explanation for such a
perception might be the perceived construct concerning the nonchalant attitude
government responds to domestic violence issues. It may have fuelled a sense concerning
the lack of available legal service and support to victims of domestic violence. As such,
awareness of channels of legal support and what the law provides could be a helpful
avenue in addressing the situation. For example, the Violence Against Persons
(Prohibition) Act (VAPP), passed in 2015, constitute significant legislation protecting
violence against women, including domestic violence and intimate partner violence.

Awareness of such legislations, including ways of instituting civil and criminal proceedings such as grievously bodily harm resulting from physical violence, could proffer valuable solutions to addressing such violence.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study aimed to explore women's perspectives of domestic violence, including intimate partner violence and interventions to address these in Nigeria. Informed by a social constructionist thematic analysis, the following themes emerged: lack of independence as a basis for abuse, Gender bias and unequal response to domestic violence complaints by law enforcement agencies, fear of reporting, and limited awareness and law as a panacea to address domestic violence. The themes will be discussed with existing literature and the implication for policies.

First, our study found that the lack of independence is perceived to result in a detrimental subject position for the female. Lacking independence was construed from a position of weakness. It includes financial constraints where the female is dependent on the male for basic needs and, as such, is disadvantaged and subject to enduring domestic abuse, often left unreported. Such financial constraints highlight a culture that promotes patriarchy and the idea that it is the man's role to fend for the family whilst the woman's role is associated with the kitchen and caring for the children (Uzuegbunam, 2012). Thus, often leaving the woman economically disadvantaged. Our study's findings are congruent with existing literature (Obi and Ozumba, 2007) and highlight similar patterns among Asian immigrant women (Rai and Choi, 2018). This finding implies that the social construct that tends to downplay female independence and involvement in a productive segment of society appears to breed violence due to reliance on males for basic sustenance. This implication also extends to the family, especially where children are

involved, as unstable families faced with domestic violence are more likely to impact the children's wellbeing (Jidong et al., 2021).

Our study highlights how the quest for control and domination influences domestic violence in Nigeria. The perceived lack of 'respect' for females suggests a broader social construct embedded within the Nigerian culture where females are a lesser gender (Arisi and Oromareghake, 2011). Such a construct resonates with previous literature, suggesting that Nigerian culture tends to construe females as assets, restricted to tending to children and home chores (Uzuegbunam, 2012). It also alludes to existing literature that suggests any attempt to change the status quo might result in violence (Heise et al., 2009; Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Macmillan and Gartner, 1999). A notable implication of the findings is that when women challenge the perceived inferiority construct, it could trigger violence from the opposite sex, who might seek to reaffirm power. It is problematic, especially in Nigeria, whose cultural norms often portray women as less superior to their male counterparts. The importance of changing this construct might help re-evaluate women's role within society whilst addressing views that present women in a disadvantaged subject position. Societal and negative cultural construct against women, which normalises the perceived inferiority of females, needs a reformation to help address abuse.

As surmised in the dataset, the impact of abuse may lead to broken homes where the female is left with no alternative other than moving away from the abusive relationship. It represents a unique finding that deviates from previous literature that suggests that leaving an abusive relationship appears difficult due to financial or other factors, including fear and cultural norms to maintain honour (Abayomi and Olabode, 2013; Gill and Harrison, 2019; Nelson, 2017).

The second finding from our study was the perceived gender bias and unequal response to domestic violence complaints by law enforcement agencies. The 'police', who are often the first point of call for domestic abuse issues, are viewed with scepticism by the females. The perceived lack of a proactive response to domestic violence cases is construed negatively. For instance, our dataset suggests that 'gender' plays an instrumental role in addressing issues concerning domestic violence. In essence, being a 'female' conjures the perception of being less likely to be treated seriously and receive justice. Such perceptions seem congruent with existing literature, highlighting how cultural values that undermine females in Nigerians have a role in unequal treatment related to domestic violence issues (UNDP Report, 2016). The 'society' and the police as part of the law enforcement agencies seem unfavourable to the female. More specifically, perceived police corruption limits their ability to effectively address domestic violence issues as participants lack trust in them. (Ike et al., 2021). The silence was perceived as a more favourable outcome than reporting to the police, perceived as compromised and not trusted. Such a finding is congruent with previous research concerning perceived high levels of police corruption as factors limiting trust in the police in Nigeria (Akinlabi, 2020; Ike et al., 2021).

In the third finding from the dataset, the perceived lack of trust in the police and the criminal justice agencies breeds fear of reporting. Socially constructed societal and cultural norms and perceived stigma were highlighted as some of the main reasons for the limited reporting of domestic violence in Nigeria. Notably crucial to the findings is how the fear of the unknown repercussions is strongly considered the most critical determinant of reporting. The dataset revealed a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system and that reporting to a lawyer is tantamount to taking one's family's 'case outside'—an act perceived to have dire consequences in the aftermath. Previous literature

reports a similar finding. For instance, concerning factors associated with the prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria, Obi and Ozumba (2007) found in their study comprising 600 respondents that there was gross underreporting of issues concerning domestic violence due to embarrassment repercussions that may transpire after reporting and cultural factors. Such a construct implies that it seems to normalise domestic abuse as the family's protection is considered more important than reporting for such an abuse to be addressed legally.

A fourth finding was the perceived limited awareness and law as a panacea to address domestic violence. Although, domestic violence issues were perceived to be influenced by a social construct that positions women as lesser gender, the law is seen as the means to curb domestic violence. However, a notable finding from our study was the perceived limited awareness of relevant legal interventions to address domestic violence. There was a perceived lack of awareness of relevant statutes and laws regulating offences related to domestic violence. This finding appears contrary to previous studies, which highlight fear, cultural expectations, religious values and gendered power relation as to why most females fail to seek help (Femi-Ajao, 2018; Gill and Harrison, 2019; Hajjar, 2004). Our finding on a lack of awareness has significant implications for reporting. The victims might be less likely to report if they are unaware of their legal rights or the likely support they may get in free legal representations where appropriate.

So far, our study has explored women's perspectives on domestic violence and government response to the same. In terms of the impact of lack of independence, the study recommends a sustained level of women empowerment as this may help address the subject power position where the males seem to be able to exploit such lack of independence for their private gains. In terms of the role of the police and the criminal justice agencies, it is encouraged that trust-building be promoted by avoiding unequal

treatment of domestic violence cases reported by females to build confidence in the justice system. Concerning the role of law, sensitisation is encouraged. A possible randomised experiment that seeks explicitly to isolate legal interventions whilst comparing tests on other government interventions to assess the impact of the interventions on both the direct outcome of effectively addressing domestic violence and the indirect outcome of prevention. Against this backdrop, we suggest that future studies of domestic violence adopt randomised controlled trials that isolate specific types of interventions such as law and religious support to test the different ways it can promote a behaviour change (e.g., through more openness in reporting issues of domestic violence). The trial could be conducted by randomly assigning participants into a control group that includes legal interventions covering human rights issues, access to justice, and a way for legally instituting action against the abuser. The treatment-as-usual group could be in the form of support from a religious group embedding cultural norms and values to see whether or not there is a difference. The significance could be measured using an Analysis of Variance.

It is worth highlighting some of the limitations of our study, including the use of a single location and a small sample size. Whilst the small sample might not constitute a basis for generalisation; however, it could serve as a basis for transferability to other case studies sharing similar characteristics as those described in our study. Despite these limitations, our study made an original contribution by highlighting how social constructs coupled with societal stigmatisation of women and a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system can impact the perceived normalisation of domestic violence. The adoption of social constructionism highlights methodological rigour in using such a theoretical lens as the basis for thematically underpinning the patterns in the data set. Such rigour points to the significance of our study, which emphasises a need for changing the narrative that

tends to undermine women's value in society whilst also promoting legal sensitisation on their rights enshrined in statutes and legislations.

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