Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.8 No.1 March, 2025; p.g. 427 – 441; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

COVID-19 LOCKDOWN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Many families witnessed domestic violence because of confinement in their homes during the COVID-19 lockdown. This study explores the socio-religious nexus of domestic violence in Nigeria during the pandemic. The study employed a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, documented materials, media reports, and online materials from the data sources. The findings were descriptively analysed. It revealed that in Nigeria, violence against women has some social and religious undertones. It further exposed that during lockdown, unemployment, lack of money, and frustration contributed to the upsurge of domestic violence, which altered the fundamental ethical principles of respect for autonomy and protection of vulnerable people.

Keywords: **COVID-19, lockdown, domestic violence, Nigerian society, culture, religion.**

Introduction

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses ranging from the common cold to severe respiratory illnesses like MERS and SARS (WHO, 2020). COVID-19, a novel strain, emerged as a major global health crisis, with new variants arising from frequent RNA virus mutations (Ray, 2022). SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV were linked to zoonotic transmission from civet cats and camels, respectively (WHO EMRO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread infections and deaths worldwide (WHO, 2021). In response, governments—including Nigeria's—enforced lockdowns and curfews to limit spread. However, these measures unintentionally worsened social issues, notably a surge in domestic violence, especially against women and children

(Ilesanmi & Afolabi, 2020; Fawole et al., 2021). Despite cultural norms, domestic violence remains a critical public health concern (Krug et al., 2002).

Mouzos and Makkai (2004) identify domestic violence as encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, economic, social, and spiritual abuse. While physical and psychological forms are widely recognised, social abuse isolates victims, and spiritual abuse manipulates religious beliefs for control. Perpetrators often use coercion to dominate and dehumanise. Domestic violence imposes heavy emotional, social, and economic costs (Laing & Bobic, 2002) and, as the UN (2020) highlights, cuts across identity, class, race, and religion constituting a profound violation of human rights and dignity (Rico, 1997).

Culture and religion form the major roots of the problem of domestic violence in Nigeria. The patriarchal society enforces violence against women as a tool for correcting behaviour and exerting male dominance, especially in marriages (Teefah, 2019). Nigeria is a religious country with three major belief systems. They are indigenous traditional religions (African traditional religions), Christianity, and Islam.

Religious leaders among these major religious groups are well respected and revered. Their inspiration guides the perceptions of the adherents and shapes their viewpoints. For example, the perceptions of women as "unclean" and the portrayal of virtuous women as "submissive" are religious ideologies about women being inferior to men (Poopola et al., 2019), all of which endorse gender-based violence, especially within the family.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, economic hardship, isolation, and psychological stress contributed to increased domestic violence in Nigeria. Financial strain and prolonged confinement triggered negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and depression, escalating tensions within households (Ilesanmi et al., 2020). Women and children, already vulnerable, experienced heightened mental distress and a loss of safety and autonomy (Bonomi et al., 2006). Domestic violence undermines human dignity and ethical values, with some religious doctrines discouraging divorce, thereby trapping victims in abusive marriages (Teefah, 2019).

This research seeks to bridge a critical knowledge gap by investigating the intricate dynamics between cultural norms, religious beliefs, and socio-economic factors that contributed to the surge in domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. With a particular focus on women, who are often culturally positioned as subordinate, this study examines how these factors exacerbated experiences of domestic violence. By exploring the intersections of culture, religion, and lockdown, this research aims to inform the development of culturally sensitive and religiously aware interventions to prevent and mitigate domestic violence in Nigeria, ultimately contributing to more effective social protection measures.

Literature Review: The Concept of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence (IPV), refers to a spectrum of abusive behaviours, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse perpetrated by one partner against another in an intimate relationship (Bates & Taylor, 2019; Cotter, 2021). It is a

pervasive public health and social issue affecting individuals across all demographic groups regardless of age, gender, or socioeconomic background (Alkan et al., 2021).

Physical abuse includes acts such as hitting, slapping, or choking; sexual abuse involves non-consensual sexual acts; psychological abuse manifests as threats, insults, and manipulation; and economic abuse limits financial autonomy and fosters dependency (Vasiliauskaitė & Geffner, 2020; Tomalin, 2023).

Globally, the COVID-19 lockdown intensified domestic violence, as victims were confined with abusers and access to support services diminished. In Nigeria, reported cases increased significantly during this period (Wake & Kandula, 2022; Iheanacho-Shahid, 2021).

Factors Responsible for Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is influenced by a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and religious factors. Economic hardship, particularly poverty, unemployment, and lack of education, can heighten household stress and contribute to violent behaviours (Peterman et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, job losses and income reduction intensified tensions, leading to increased incidents of domestic violence (Eteng & Eyisi, 2022). Financial dependence often prevents victims from leaving abusive relationships (Postmus et al., 2020).

Cultural and religious norms also play a significant role. Patriarchal values and traditional gender roles often justify or normalise abuse, with women expected to endure violence to preserve family unity (Arisukwu et al., 2021; Lazarus-Black, 2024). Misinterpretations of religious teachings may reinforce male dominance and discourage victims from seeking help (Bartelink et al., 2022). However, growing awareness within religious and cultural communities is fostering advocacy for more equitable, non-violent relationships (Istratii & Ali, 2023).

Impact of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence has far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and communities. During the COVID-19 lockdown, victims experienced heightened psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Lutwak, 2024), alongside physical injuries requiring medical attention. Feelings of isolation and helplessness were exacerbated by confinement. Children exposed to such violence face increased risks of emotional and behavioural issues, developmental challenges, and the potential to replicate abusive behaviours in adulthood (Fong et al., 2019).

The pandemic highlighted the deep entrenchment of domestic violence in Nigerian society, revealing how socio-economic and cultural—especially socio-religious—factors reinforce its persistence. Addressing domestic violence thus requires a multifaceted, sustained response. Recognising its varied forms and the underlying structural drivers is essential to developing culturally sensitive and effective interventions that promote safety, equity, and well-being across society.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the frustration-aggression theory and value theory to analyse the dynamics of domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Frustration-Aggression Theory

Originally proposed by Dollard et al. (1939), this theory posits that aggression arises when goal-directed behaviour is obstructed, producing frustration. Such aggression may be expressed physically, verbally, or symbolically and is often accompanied by victim-blaming rooted in unconscious guilt or prejudice (Jost & Mentovich, 2017). Refinements by Miller (1941) and Berkowitz (1989, 1990) introduced a more nuanced perspective: frustration leads to negative effect, which may generate aggressive tendencies moderated by individual traits, cognitive appraisal, and situational context (Breuer & Elson, 2017). Within the pandemic context, stressors such as economic hardship, confinement, and routine disruption intensified frustration, increasing aggression risk in intimate relationships. Understanding these mechanisms supports the development of interventions targeting emotional regulation, stress reduction, and healthier conflict resolution.

Value Theory

Value theory, rooted in moral philosophy, examines how individuals and societies ascribe worth to actions, beliefs, and entities. Kant (1998) distinguishes between **conditional values**—context-dependent—and **unconditional values**, such as "goodwill", which remain morally good regardless of circumstance. In sociology, value theory explores how societal norms and contexts shape shared values and behaviours (Madison, 2023), with respect for human dignity serving as a core principle (Johnson, 2004).

Applied to domestic violence, value theory reveals how entrenched patriarchal values, gender inequality, and distorted religious teachings sustain abuse. Addressing domestic violence through a values-based approach involves challenging harmful ideologies and promoting egalitarian, respectful, and inclusive norms. This perspective informs policy and community-based interventions that foster cultures of non-violence and human dignity.

Methodology

This study adopted a **qualitative research approach**, which prioritises understanding meanings, processes, and perspectives rather than numerical data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As Alan (1998, p. 45) notes, qualitative research is committed to viewing social phenomena from the standpoint of participants. A **maximum variation sampling** method was used to select **twelve diverse participants**, ensuring a broad range of perspectives (Patton, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015). The study's purpose and procedures were clearly explained, and **informed consent** was obtained to ensure voluntary participation.

Data were collected through **in-depth interviews** with twelve participants who shared their **perceptions, attitudes, and awareness** of domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. Discussions covered topics such as economic hardship, contributing factors to domestic violence, and cultural and religious perceptions of abuse. Respondents also reflected

on the **influence of culture and religion**, societal norms, and suggested remedies to address domestic violence.

In addition to participant interviews, data were sourced from a variety of library materials, including textbooks, journal articles, encyclopaedias, and media reports like newspapers, magazines, and online sources. These resources facilitated a qualitative analysis of the study's issues, as researchers used a descriptive-analytical method to effectively analyse the findings.

Overview of COVID-19 Lockdown and Domestic Violence in Nigeria

Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse within intimate or familial settings (Ekweonu, 2020). Although early definitions often neglected emotional and verbal abuse due to cultural ambiguities, domestic violence remains a culturally contingent phenomenon with diverse manifestations across societies (Bakare et al., 2010). Research shows higher prevalence in societies with strong religious influences, where patriarchal norms and rigid gender roles reinforce unequal power dynamics and often legitimise violence against women (Oke, 2021). While it is commonly framed as male-on-female violence, men can also be victims, though gendered assumptions often obscure this reality.

Globally, domestic violence, particularly against women, is widespread and transcends social, cultural, and national boundaries (Albana, 2017). In Nigeria, the COVID-19 lockdown worsened the crisis by intensifying structural inequalities, trapping victims with abusers, and restricting access to support services. Across religious communities in Nigeria, doctrines that emphasise female submission reinforce male dominance and traditional gender roles, which subordinate women and children to male authority. These religious interpretations often validate patriarchal control.

Women, who constitute a substantial segment of the global population, play vital roles in both domestic and public spheres (Sambe, 2015). However, patriarchal power imbalances continue to fuel violence against women, leading to their marginalisation and hindering their advancement (UNCHR, 1993). Victims of domestic violence frequently endure severe abuse at the hands of partners who ought to protect them, with profound consequences for the health and well-being of both women and children.

Religio-Cultural and Pandemic-Driven Intensification of Domestic Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly exacerbated domestic violence, as increased fear, disrupted routines, prolonged confinement with abusers, and social isolation intensified pre-existing household tensions. Informants noted a rise in physical, emotional, and sexual abuse during this period, with perpetrators' aggression often linked to heightened stress and frustration. Informant 3 highlighted the role of religious teachings in reinforcing patriarchal norms through calls for female submissiveness, thereby legitimising male dominance and violence. This aligns with Oke (2021) that both Islamic and Christian traditions have, at times, portrayed women as property. This reinforces misogynistic ideologies (Jung & Olsen, 2017).
Lockdown restrictions further constrained victims' ability to access support, as movement limitations, geographical inaccessibility to police services, and delayed law enforcement

responses enabled unchecked abuse (Umukoro, 2020a). In many Christian contexts, doctrinal beliefs regarding the sanctity and permanence of marriage often discouraged women from leaving abusive relationships (Akangbe, 2020). The death of gospel singer Osinachi Nwachukwu in April 2022, following years of domestic abuse, starkly illustrates the fatal consequences of religious and societal pressures that compel women to remain in violent unions (Ochogwu, 2022).

Faith-based responses have frequently prioritised spiritual over practical interventions. Abused women are often advised by church leaders to forgive, submit, and endure, with separation rarely encouraged, even in cases of severe harm (Fortune & Enger, as cited in Akangbe, 2020). Simister and Kowalewska (as cited in Akangbe, 2020) similarly observe that victims are urged to remain loyal helpmates. Informant 4 noted that religious institutions largely rely on spiritual counselling, rather than facilitating access to legal or psychosocial support, an approach particularly inadequate during the pandemic.

Cultural and religious norms in Nigeria continue to entrench gender hierarchies that marginalise women. President Muhammadu Buhari's 2016 comment that his wife belonged "in the kitchen and the other room" (BBC, 2016) typifies patriarchal attitudes. Religious texts are frequently interpreted to legitimise male dominance. In Islam, verses such as An-Nisa 4:34 have been read to permit disciplinary actions by husbands, while 2:223 and 30:21 are often distorted to justify sexual entitlement and female submission (Alkiek et al., 2017; Quran-Islam.org). Similarly, biblical texts like Judges 11 and Esther 1 have historically reinforced portrayals of women as subordinate or expendable (Tamar, 2021). Such interpretations sustain theological narratives that normalise domestic violence by casting women's endurance as a religious and marital duty (Akangbe, 2020).

Domestic violence remains both culturally contested and widely underreported, particularly due to the stigma surrounding disclosure. According to the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI), surveys conducted in 2012 and 2013 revealed that approximately 30% of Nigerian women had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional domestic violence in their lifetime (IAGCI, 2016).

Awareness and Perception of Domestic Violence during the COVID-19 Lockdown

Domestic violence remains widespread across societies, though its interpretation varies contextually. Informant 1 described it as a routine aspect of marital life, often minimised rather than recognised as harmful. This reflects a societal tendency to normalise abuse within intimate relationships. All informants reported heightened awareness of domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown. Informant 2 linked it to relational breakdowns, a view supported by Moreira and Da Costa (2020), who found that domestic violence often escalates during periods of social and economic stress, such as those experienced during Nigeria's lockdown.

The COVID-19 lockdown significantly impacted the livelihoods of many Nigerians, particularly those employed in the informal sector, whose earnings declined sharply due to the enforcement of strict movement restrictions (Informant 3). As Informant 4 observed, the

economic conditions in local communities deteriorated owing to border closures and limited access to markets and employment. Additionally, the government's inadequate and uneven distribution of palliatives meant to mitigate the lockdown's economic impact further deepened the hardship, contributing to a decline in the socio-economic status of numerous households (Informant 5).

This deteriorating economic context coincided with a global rise in domestic violence cases during the pandemic, as documented by Datonye and Tamuno-Wari (2020), Lennard (2020), and Ekweonu (2020). In Nigeria, the increase in domestic violence was closely tied to the financial and psychological stressors brought on by the lockdown. Moskovska (2021) underscores that financial insecurity, exacerbated by confinement and disrupted social networks, played a critical role in fuelling intimate partner violence. These developments collectively illustrate the severe economic strain experienced during the pandemic and its role in intensifying domestic violence.

Informants 6 and 7 cited financial hardship during the COVID-19 lockdown as a key driver of domestic violence, with many families facing hunger and lacking basic necessities due to job losses. Supporting evidence from media, academic, and government sources reported a sharp rise in domestic violence, including spousal abuse, landlord-tenant conflicts, exploitation of domestic workers, and child sexual abuse (Oguntayo et al., 2020; Umukoro, 2020a; UN Women, 2020a). These incidents were largely fuelled by economic strain, frustration, and enforced confinement (Usigbe, 2019; UN Women, 2020b; Umukoro, 2020b).

According to Informant 4, the increase in domestic violence may also be linked to men's lack of emotional regulation, exacerbated by patriarchal ideologies and the pressures of lockdown restrictions. Informants 2, 3, and 6 further associated the rise in abuse with cultural and religious systems that reinforce male authority and female subordination, especially within traditional African contexts. Informant 1 characterised domestic violence as a private family matter, often condoned by societal norms. Informant 8 noted that the absence of punitive consequences often leads to cultural acceptance, with families choosing to resolve such incidents internally. Informant 9 echoed this view, suggesting that even if domestic violence is not explicitly condoned, the absence of public condemnation implies tacit societal approval. Culturally entrenched gender hierarchies have historically positioned women in subservient roles, often requiring them to obey their husbands and, in cases of widowhood, defer to their eldest sons (Ekweonu, 2020). Furthermore, dominant religious teachings in Nigeria frequently emphasise wifely submission and obedience (Informant 10), reinforcing these patriarchal structures. Collectively, these religious and cultural frameworks perpetuate the marginalisation of women and create environments conducive to domestic abuse.

Out of the twelve informants interviewed, ten unequivocally perceived domestic violence as a morally and socially unacceptable act. Their responses reflected a shared understanding that such behaviour constitutes a violation of human dignity and should not be condoned. However, two male informants, influenced by their religious convictions, expressed divergent views. They maintained that domestic violence was not necessarily a serious issue warranting public concern but rather a corrective mechanism intended to preempt further misconduct.

As noted by Informant 11, prevailing cultural and religious ideologies such as the notion that "a wife is a man's property and can be disciplined at his discretion without external interference" contribute to the normalisation of domestic violence and diminish its perceived severity.

Despite these culturally embedded justifications, Informant 12 rejected the acceptability of domestic violence, asserting that it remains unjustifiable regardless of its historical or religious underpinnings. In terms of attitudes, all informants unanimously affirmed their opposition to engaging in or tolerating any form of domestic violence. Informant 9 described domestic violence as inhumane and degrading, arguing that no individual should be subjected to such treatment. Similarly, informants 6 and 7 emphasised the universal unacceptability of violence against any individual, be it men, women, or children. They stressed that domestic violence must be taken seriously, warning that it can result in cumulative psychological and physical harm if not urgently addressed.

Domestic violence against men

Violence against men remains underreported and less visible due to entrenched societal norms that discourage male victimhood and amplify female narratives of abuse. In the Nigerian context, this silence is reinforced by cultural and religious ideologies that designate men as heads of households and custodians of authority (Informant 4). These gendered expectations position men as symbols of strength and protectors, discouraging expressions of vulnerability or victimisation (Informant 2). Consequently, while men may endure significant forms of domestic abuse—including verbal humiliation, emotional manipulation, child alienation, and deprivation—they often suffer in silence (Informant 10).

The COVID-19 lockdown heightened awareness of domestic violence against men, as confinement intensified tensions and some men experienced role reversals or partner aggression. Informant 7 highlighted that cultural norms often portray men solely as perpetrators, overlooking their victimisation. Despite Sugg et al. (1999) defining domestic violence against men as partner abuse, this issue remains underexplored in gender-based violence discourse.

Research on gender-based violence is often hindered by the silence, fear, and shame surrounding abuse, particularly within familial contexts, which contributes to the underreporting of domestic violence against men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). This underreporting has led to the marginalisation of male victimhood. Taft et al. (2001) argue that while male victims of domestic violence exist, men are more frequently victims of violence perpetrated by other men. Notably, studies show that while women may match men in aggression when violence is measured by actions, men are more likely to inflict severe injuries (Dienye & Gbeneol, 2008).

Despite this, most literature continues to highlight a significantly higher prevalence of domestic violence against women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Common forms of assault include pushing, slapping, and hitting, with more severe cases involving rape and homicide.

During and after the COVID-19 lockdown, there was a marked increase in domestic violence, with men also reporting varying degrees of abuse.

In Eastern Nigeria, domestic violence against men is culturally considered a serious transgression, warranting social and personal sanctions such as abandonment, refusal of meals prepared by the wife, denial of conjugal rights, withdrawal of financial support, and even divorce (Informants 2, 4 & 10). Sanctions may also include fines and public apologies imposed by the victim's peers, thereby reinforcing the community's disapproval (Dienye & Gbeneol, 2008).

This study examined the relative risks faced by men and women during the COVID-19 lockdown, highlighting the heightened vulnerability of women to physical injury and the psychological burden experienced by men. Male victims were found to suffer from emotional trauma, diminished self-worth, and a perceived erosion of authority within the household (Informant 7). Cultural norms of masculinity and social stigma contribute to men's reluctance to report abuse, except in cases involving severe physical harm. The findings demonstrate that while men are less likely to report domestic violence, their victimisation remains a significant concern.

The Aftermath of the COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

The post-lockdown period in Nigeria was marked by a surge in socio-economic challenges, including increased crime, kidnapping, banditry, inflation, and a weakening economy (Informant 1). With the global rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, Nigeria redirected funds to vaccine procurement, limiting investment in critical sectors. Persistent structural bottlenecks, such as insecurity in agricultural regions and dependence on food imports, continued to drive inflation despite the reopening of borders. Unemployment rose due to widespread job losses, particularly in the informal sector (Informant 9).

The economic downturn during the pandemic pushed many families into extreme hardship, with daily wage earners turning to community support for survival (Informant 7). These financial strains contributed to a rise in domestic violence across Nigeria (Informant 5), exacerbated by enforced proximity, frustration, and ongoing disagreements within households.

Victims of domestic violence often confront existential crises, questioning their suffering and the moral fabric of their lives. Without proper psychosocial support, they may experience guilt, self-blame, illness, and even death. From a Kantian ethical perspective, domestic violence violates the principle of treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than as means to personal satisfaction (Johnson, 2004). Upholding human dignity requires adherence to moral duty and respect for the intrinsic worth of every individual.

Recommendations

To effectively mitigate domestic violence, this study recommends multi-dimensional interventions targeting individuals, the state, faith-based institutions, and media platforms.

At the individual level, increased awareness of the signs, consequences, and support structures related to domestic violence is essential. Victims, particularly women, should be empowered to seek formal legal, medical, and psychosocial assistance, rather than relying solely on spiritual or informal remedies.

The Nigerian government must prioritise comprehensive gender-based violence legislation with strong enforcement and institutional support. Economic measures like job creation and crisis palliatives can ease financial pressures that fuel domestic conflict. Public education should drive behavioural change and accountability. Additionally, the state must foster partnerships with NGOs and religious bodies, fund research, and establish a centralised database for monitoring cases.

Faith-based organisations and leaders are encouraged to reassess religious doctrines that legitimise gender inequality and reframe them through a human rights lens. Religious leaders should be trained to speak out against domestic violence and direct victims toward appropriate support services. In addition, the institutionalisation of pre-marital counselling can foster communication, compatibility, and financial planning among couples, thereby preventing future conflict.

Media organisations must adopt gender-sensitive and inclusive reporting practices. Comprehensive coverage of domestic violence affecting all genders can challenge entrenched stereotypes, promote equitable discourse, and foster a culture of respect, accountability, and non-violence.

Conclusion

Domestic violence in Nigeria remains a multifaceted issue, exacerbated by financial instability, socio-cultural norms, and the psychological impact, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. Economic hardship and prolonged household confinement during the pandemic led to increased tension, frustration, and conflict, manifesting in both physical and emotional abuse. While some men resorted to violence to assert control, some women engaged in verbal and psychological abuse, resulting in adverse health outcomes for both genders.

This study underscores the role of religion and culture in reinforcing gender inequality and legitimising violence against women and children, often framing women as subordinate to male authority. The pandemic amplified these dynamics, with job losses and restricted mobility intensifying household stress.

This research positions domestic violence as both a socio-religious and ethical concern. Addressing it requires a multidimensional approach that includes public education, legal reform, and ethical engagement. While the study primarily drew data from southern Nigeria, limitations in accessing respondents from the north—due to religious sensitivities and logistical challenges highlight the need for further nationwide research to deepen understanding and inform effective interventions.

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