



Veritatis Gaudium:

Multidisciplinary Journal of Postgraduate Studies

College of Postgraduate Studies,

Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria

ISSN: 3043 - 5285

Volume 1, Number 2, June, 2026

DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.17243.12321

MARITAL DEPENDENCY AND VULNERABILITY TO INTIMATE PARTNER ABUSE: A REVIEW OF EXISTING EVIDENCE

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Abstract

Marital dependency is an excessive reliance on a spouse for emotional, financial, psychological, or social support, often resulting in unequal power relations within intimate relationships. Intimate partner abuse (IPA) encompasses physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic violence used to maintain dominance and control within intimate relationships. This paper adopts a theoretical approach by exploring major sociological and psychological perspectives, such as social exchange theory, feminist theory, attachment theory, and learned helplessness theory, to explain why victims often remain in abusive relationships despite ongoing harm. The paper further analyzes the forms of marital dependency and looks at the nexus between marital dependence and intimate partner abuse. Additionally, the study highlights the influence of patriarchal norms, gender inequality, religious expectations, and socio-economic conditions in sustaining abusive relationship dynamics, particularly in developing societies. Findings from the theoretical review indicate that unhealthy marital dependency weakens personal autonomy, reduces self-efficacy, and increases susceptibility to manipulation, control, and abuse. The paper concludes that marital dependency is not solely an individual psychological issue but also a structural and cultural phenomenon shaped by broader social inequalities. It recommends multidimensional interventions such as economic empowerment, education, counseling, legal protection, and social support systems to reduce dependency and enhance victims' capacity to leave abusive relationships and achieve personal well-being.

Keywords: Marital Dependency, Intimate Partner Abuse, Emotional Dependency, Coercive Control, Gender Inequality

Introduction

Marriage is widely recognized as a fundamental social institution founded on companionship, emotional attachment, mutual support, and shared responsibilities. In healthy marital relationships, a moderate level of interdependence is considered normal and beneficial for emotional bonding and

family stability. However, excessive or unequal dependency between spouses may create power imbalances that increase vulnerability to intimate partner abuse (IPA) (Ventura-León, Caycho-Rodríguez, & Barboza-Palomino, 2023a). Marital dependency refers to a situation in which one partner relies excessively on the other for emotional support, financial security, social identity, or decision-making, thereby limiting personal autonomy and self-sufficiency (Bornstein, 1992).

Intimate partner abuse encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and economic violence perpetrated within intimate relationships. It remains one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence worldwide and constitutes a major public health and human rights concern (Mukhtar, 2024b). According to the World Health Organization [WHO] (2021), nearly one in three women globally has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner during her lifetime. This widespread occurrence highlights the urgent need to examine the social and relational factors that contribute to abusive marital dynamics.

Research indicates that emotional and economic dependency significantly reduces victims' ability to resist, report, or leave abusive relationships, especially in contexts where access to financial resources, housing, legal protection, and social support systems is limited (Nduka, Okafor, & Adebayo, 2024a). For instance, in many patriarchal societies, cultural norms and gender expectations often encourage women to prioritize marital preservation and family unity over personal independence and safety. Such societal expectations may reinforce dependency and contribute to the normalization or tolerance of abusive behaviour within marriages.

Contemporary studies further emphasize coercive control and economic abuse as critical strategies employed by perpetrators to maintain dominance and restrict victims' autonomy (Postmus, Plummer, McMahon, Murshid, & Kim, 2016a). Coercive control may involve manipulation, intimidation, isolation, and financial restriction, all of which weaken the victim's capacity for independent decision-making. Consequently, dependency within marriage can become both a cause and a consequence of intimate partner abuse. This paper, therefore, examines marital dependency and vulnerability to intimate partner abuse. It reviews existing evidence by focusing on its underlying causes, psychological and social consequences, and possible intervention strategies for prevention and support are proffered.

Conceptual Clarifications

Marital Dependency

This is a relational condition in which one spouse relies excessively on the other for emotional, financial, social, or psychological support. Although a certain degree of interdependence is generally considered a normal and healthy aspect of marital relationships, dependency becomes problematic when it weakens an individual's autonomy, self-confidence, and ability to function independently. In unhealthy marital relationships, one partner may become overly dependent on the other for emotional stability, personal identity, financial security, and decision-making, thereby creating unequal power relations and reducing personal agency within the relationship (Ventura-León, Lino-Cruz, Caycho-Rodríguez, & Córdova-Robles, 2023b). Such dependency may gradually foster feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and low self-esteem, particularly when the dependent partner perceives themselves as incapable of functioning without the support or approval of their spouse.

Scholars such as Hirschfeld, Klerman, Gough, Barrett, Korchin, & Chodoff (1977), Bornstein (1992), and Postmus *et al.* (2016b) have identified several dimensions of marital dependency, including economic, emotional, social, and psychological dependency. Economic dependency, for instance, refers to reliance on a spouse for financial survival, access to material resources, and overall economic security. This form of dependency is particularly common in societies where unequal access to employment opportunities and traditional gender roles limit one partner's

financial independence. While, emotional dependency involves excessive emotional attachment and reliance on a spouse for validation, affection, self-worth, and personal happiness. Individuals experiencing emotional dependency often fear abandonment and may tolerate unhealthy behaviours to preserve the relationship. Social dependency occurs when an individual depends on their spouse for social identity, societal approval, or interpersonal connections. In many cultural settings, marital status significantly influences social acceptance and community recognition, thereby increasing reliance on a spouse for social legitimacy, and psychological dependency is seen as an inability to make independent decisions or to maintain personal autonomy without the influence or approval of a partner (Postmus *et al.*, 2016a). This suggests that individuals who experienced psychological dependency may struggle with independent problem-solving, self-expression, and self-determination, thereby reinforcing unequal power dynamics within the marriage institution.

Among these dimensions, economic dependency has attracted significant scholarly attention because of its close relationship with intimate partner violence and prolonged victimization. Victims who are financially dependent on abusive spouses often encounter serious barriers to leaving harmful relationships due to limited financial resources, inadequate employment opportunities, and restricted access to housing, legal assistance, and social support systems. Research conducted in Nigeria and other developing societies indicates that financial insecurity and limited economic empowerment significantly contribute to continued exposure to abusive relationships (Nduka, Okeke, Ibrahim, & Bello, 2024b). In many cases, victims remain in abusive marriages because they fear poverty, homelessness, or the inability to adequately provide for their children.

Furthermore, cultural expectations, religious beliefs, and societal norms may reinforce marital dependency by encouraging endurance, obedience, and submission within marriage, particularly among women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kandiyoti, 1988). In many patriarchal societies, spouses who challenge unequal power structures may experience social stigma, family pressure, or community rejection, thereby discouraging resistance to oppressive marital conditions (Oyèwùmí, 1997). Consequently, dependency within marriage is not only an individual psychological issue but also a broader social and structural phenomenon shaped by economic inequality, cultural values, and gender norms (Connell, 1987). Additionally, excessive marital dependency can undermine the quality of the relationship, personal well-being, and individual empowerment, while simultaneously increasing vulnerability to manipulation, coercive control, and abuse within intimate relationships (Bornstein, 1992; Postmus *et al.*, 2016).

Intimate Partner Abuse

Intimate partner abuse (IPA) refers to any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, or economic harm to a current or former partner. The phenomenon includes a wide range of abusive actions such as physical assault, threats, intimidation, sexual coercion, emotional manipulation, social isolation, and financial control (WHO, 2021). According to WHO (2021), intimate partner abuse is one of the most common forms of violence experienced globally, particularly among women. Contemporary scholars like Stark (2023) noted that they increasingly describe intimate partner abuse not merely as an isolated incident of physical violence but as an ongoing pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour aimed at establishing dominance over a partner.

Recent literature highlights coercive control as a central feature of intimate partner abuse. Coercive control involves deliberate and repetitive strategies used by an abusive partner to dominate, isolate, and regulate the daily activities of another person. These strategies may include monitoring movements, restricting communication with family and friends, manipulating finances, making threats, and fostering emotional dependency (Mukhtar, 2024c). Unlike physical violence, coercive control can be subtle and gradual, making it difficult for victims to recognize the abusive nature of

the relationship. Over time, such behaviour erodes victims' autonomy, confidence, and sense of safety, often trapping them in cycles of abuse (Stark, 2007).

Intimate partner abuse manifests in multiple forms that frequently overlap. For instance, physical abuse includes behaviours such as slapping, punching, kicking, choking, or any act intended to inflict bodily harm. Emotional and psychological abuse involves humiliation, insults, gaslighting, intimidation, and manipulation designed to undermine a victim's self-esteem and emotional well-being. Sexual abuse includes forced sexual activity, unwanted sexual contact, or coercion into sexual acts without consent (WHO, 2012; WHO, 2021). In addition, digital abuse has become increasingly prevalent in modern relationships, involving the use of technology to harass, monitor, stalk, or control a partner through social media, phone tracking, or online threats (WHO, 2021). Economic abuse is another significant dimension of intimate partner abuse that has gained increasing scholarly attention. Economic abuse occurs when an abusive partner controls or limits access to financial resources to create dependency and reduce the victim's ability to leave the relationship. Such behaviour may involve preventing a partner from working, confiscating earnings, restricting access to bank accounts, sabotaging employment opportunities, or controlling household financial decisions. To this end, research indicates that economic abuse contributes significantly to long-term financial instability, emotional distress, and social vulnerability among survivors (Postmus, Stylianou, McMahon, & Rucci, 2020). For instance, victims who experience financial dependency often face substantial barriers when attempting to escape abusive relationships, especially when children, housing, and employment insecurity are involved.

On the whole, intimate partner abuse is a complex and multidimensional social problem with severe consequences for individuals, families, and communities. It includes not only physical and sexual violence but also psychological abuse, coercive control, and economic abuse, which often operate in subtle but highly damaging ways (WHO, 2012). Understanding these less visible forms of abuse, particularly coercive control and economic abuse, is essential for developing effective interventions, support systems, and policies aimed at preventing violence and protecting victims (Stark, 2007; Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008). These dynamics highlight the need for comprehensive responses that address both overt violence and patterns of control that entrap victims over time (UN Women, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory

This theory, originally developed by George C. Homans and later refined by Peter Blau, explains interpersonal relationships as ongoing exchanges in which individuals seek to maximize rewards while minimizing costs (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964). Within this framework, relationship stability is not determined solely by emotional attachment, but by a continuous evaluation of perceived benefits, disadvantages, and the availability of alternative options. When applied to marital relationships affected by intimate partner abuse, social exchange theory provides a useful lens for understanding why victims may remain in harmful or violent unions despite persistent harm.

From a social exchange perspective, individuals are more likely to remain in a relationship when the perceived rewards, such as financial security, emotional attachment, social approval, or shared family life, outweigh the perceived costs, including emotional distress, physical harm, or psychological trauma (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In abusive marriages, however, this cost-benefit evaluation becomes distorted by structural constraints and fear-based dynamics. Victims often face significant economic, emotional, and social barriers to leaving. These may include financial dependence on the abusive partner, lack of independent housing, fear of losing custody of children, and potential social stigma or isolation from family and community networks (Dutton & Goodman,

2005). Consequently, despite the presence of abuse, remaining in the relationship may be perceived as the less risky or more viable option compared to uncertain alternatives.

Marital dependency plays a central role in reinforcing this dynamic. Individuals who are economically or emotionally dependent on their partners often experience limited perceived alternatives outside the relationship. This condition reduces their “comparison level for alternatives,” a key concept in social exchange theory that refers to how individuals evaluate available options outside the current relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Abusive partners may further exploit this dependency by controlling financial resources, restricting access to employment, isolating victims from social support systems, or undermining self-efficacy. Such tactics increase the perceived costs of leaving while simultaneously lowering the victim’s sense of viable independence, thereby strengthening relational entrapment (Stark, 2007).

Over time, these imbalances contribute to the persistence of abuse through structured power inequality rather than isolated acts of violence (Stark, 2007). The relationship becomes sustained not only through emotional bonds but also through calculated constraints that limit autonomy and reinforce dependency (Goodman, Dutton, Vankos, & Weinfurt, 2005). In this way, social exchange theory highlights that staying in an abusive marriage is often not a reflection of acceptance of violence, but rather the result of constrained decision-making within an unequal exchange system (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Research on interdependence and commitment further explains that individuals remain in relationships when perceived alternatives are limited, and investments are high (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing interventions that reduce dependency, increase access to resources, and expand perceived alternatives for victims of intimate partner abuse (Anderson, 2003).

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, advanced by scholars like Kate Millett, Bell Hooks, and Sylvia Walby, situates intimate partner abuse within broader systems of patriarchy and gender inequality (Millett, 1970; Walby, 1990; Hooks, 2000). This theory argues that abuse is not merely a private or interpersonal issue but a manifestation of structural power imbalances that privilege men and subordinate women. From this perspective, patriarchal systems institutionalize male dominance through cultural norms, economic structures, and gender-role socialization (Walby, 1990). These systems shape expectations about masculinity and femininity, often legitimizing male authority and reinforcing female subordination within intimate relationships.

Women are frequently socialized to prioritize caregiving, emotional labour, and family preservation, which can result in economic dependence and reduced autonomy (Hooks, 2000). This socialization not only limits access to independent resources but also shapes beliefs about acceptable relationship behaviour, making it more difficult for women to recognize abuse or leave abusive partnerships (Walby, 1990; Hooks, 2000). As a result, structural inequalities increase vulnerability to intimate partner abuse while simultaneously discouraging resistance or separation (Jewkes, 2002; Abramsky, Watts, Garcia-Moreno, Devries, Kiss, Ellsberg, Jansen, & Heise, 2011).

Feminist theory emphasizes that intimate partner abuse is reinforced by societal norms that normalize male authority and female obedience (Millett, 1970). In many contexts, especially in patriarchal societies, women may be expected to endure hardship to preserve marriage and family unity, even in situations involving violence or coercive control. These expectations are often supported by cultural, religious, and legal frameworks that prioritize family stability over individual safety.

Contemporary research in sub-Saharan Africa further demonstrates that patriarchal systems contribute to economic control, coercive behaviours, and restricted autonomy within marriage, thereby sustaining cycles of dependency and abuse (Jewkes, 2002; Abramsky *et al.*, 2011). Economic dependence and gender inequality have been identified as significant predictors of intimate partner violence in multiple settings across the region (Jewkes, 2002; Abramsky *et al.*, 2011). Such structural conditions limit women's bargaining power within relationships and reduce their perceived alternatives, making it more difficult for them to exit abusive relationships (Rusbult, 1980; Goodman *et al.*, 2005).

Generally, feminist theory highlights that intimate partner abuse must be understood as a structural issue rooted in gender inequality rather than isolated acts of violence. Addressing it, therefore, requires not only individual-level interventions but also broader social and institutional reforms aimed at reducing patriarchy, improving women's economic independence, and transforming harmful gender norms.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby (1969) and expanded by Mary Ainsworth (1978), explains how early caregiving experiences shape internal working models of the self and others, which in turn influence emotional regulation and relationship patterns in adulthood. Individuals with insecure attachment styles may develop heightened anxiety, fear of abandonment, and excessive emotional dependence in romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Within the context of intimate partner abuse, attachment theory helps explain why victims may remain emotionally attached to abusive partners despite repeated harm. Individuals with anxious attachment styles may prioritize emotional closeness over personal safety, leading them to tolerate abuse to avoid abandonment or rejection. Emotional dependency, low self-worth, and trauma bonding further reinforce attachment to abusive partners (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Abusive relationships often exploit these attachment vulnerabilities through cycles of intermittent reinforcement, where periods of affection and reconciliation alternate with episodes of aggression or control. This unpredictability strengthens emotional dependence and confusion, making it more difficult for victims to disengage. Over time, the attachment system becomes activated under stress, increasing proximity-seeking behaviours even in unsafe relationships (Bowlby, 1969). Additionally, shame and learned helplessness may reduce perceived options for leaving, thereby sustaining prolonged involvement in abusive dynamics. Consequently, the interplay between early attachment experiences and ongoing relational reinforcement processes contributes significantly to the persistence of abusive relationships and the difficulty of separation.

Research in adult attachment further indicates that securely attached individuals are more likely to seek support and exit harmful relationships, whereas insecurely attached individuals often engage in hyperactivating strategies such as rumination, protest behaviours, and repeated attempts to restore proximity to the abusive partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In intimate partner violence (IPV) contexts, these attachment-driven responses can be intensified by social isolation and economic dependence, reducing external support systems. Therapeutic approaches that address attachment insecurity, like trauma informed by cognitive behavioural therapy and emotionally focused interventions, aim to rebuild secure relational expectations and enhance autonomy. Strengthening self-efficacy and reprocessing early attachment injuries can help individuals recognize abusive patterns and reduce relational dependence over time, and promote healthier relational functioning in adulthood context.

Learned Helplessness Theory

Learned helplessness theory, introduced by Martin Seligman (1975), explains how repeated exposure to uncontrollable negative events can lead individuals to develop a sense of

powerlessness. Over time, individuals may believe that their actions cannot change their circumstances, even when opportunities for escape exist. This psychological process was initially demonstrated through animal experiments but has since been widely applied to human behaviour, particularly in contexts of chronic stress and victimization. Later refinements of the theory emphasized the role of cognitive attributions, suggesting that individuals who attribute negative events to internal, stable, and global causes are more likely to develop persistent helplessness and depressive symptoms (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

In abusive marital or intimate partner relationships, victims often experience repeated cycles of physical, emotional, and psychological violence. Continuous exposure to coercion, threats, isolation, and humiliation can gradually erode self-efficacy and undermine confidence in one's ability to effect change (Seligman, 1975; Walker, 1979). As a result, victims may stop attempting to resist, assert boundaries, or leave the abusive environment, even when opportunities for safety are available. This psychological state creates a form of "behavioural paralysis," where individuals perceive escape as impossible or futile (Abramson *et al.*, 1978). The unpredictability of abuse alternating between aggression and brief periods of remorse, affection, or reconciliation can further reinforce this learned expectation that efforts to change the situation will not lead to lasting improvement (Walker, 1979). Over time, this cycle of intermittent reinforcement strengthens emotional dependency and reduces the likelihood of help-seeking or separation.

Over time, learned helplessness is often accompanied by depressive symptoms, emotional numbing, and reduced problem-solving capacity, which further limit help-seeking behaviour. Even when social support systems, legal protections, or shelters are accessible, victims may struggle to utilize them due to diminished motivation and impaired decision-making. In the context of intimate partner violence (IPV), this can contribute to prolonged entrapment in abusive relationships and reinforce dependency on the perpetrator for emotional, financial, or social stability (Walker, 1979). Additionally, chronic stress associated with ongoing abuse can dysregulate emotional and cognitive functioning, making it increasingly difficult for victims to evaluate alternatives realistically.

Importantly, learned helplessness does not imply passivity or weakness; rather, it reflects an adaptive response to repeated uncontrollable trauma. Interventions that restore a sense of agency, such as trauma-informed counseling and empowerment-based approaches, can help individuals rebuild self-efficacy and re-engage in protective decision-making. By addressing both cognitive distortions and environmental constraints, recovery-focused interventions aim to reverse the psychological effects of helplessness and support long-term safety and autonomy.

Forms of Marital Dependency

Marital dependency operates through multiple dimensions that reinforce vulnerability to abuse. The most significant forms include economic, emotional, and social dependency.

Economic Dependency

Economic dependency occurs when one spouse lacks independent financial resources and relies on the partner for basic survival. This form of dependency is strongly influenced by limited access to education, employment, property rights, and inheritance opportunities, particularly in patriarchal contexts (Adams *et al.*, 2008; Postmus *et al.*, 2020). Socio-economic factors such as unemployment, gender wage gaps, childcare responsibilities, and traditional gender roles contribute significantly to this dependency (Anderson, 1997). Women are often socialized into domestic roles while men occupy the position of financial providers, reinforcing structural inequality within marriage (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Abusive partners may use economic control as a mechanism of coercion. This includes restricting access to money, preventing employment, sabotaging careers, confiscating earnings, and accumulating debt in the victim's name. Such financial abuse limits independence and

creates fear of poverty, homelessness, or inability to support dependents, thereby trapping victims in abusive relationships (Adams *et al.*, 2008; Postmus *et al.*, 2020).

Emotional Dependency

Emotional dependency deals with excessive reliance on a partner for emotional validation, self-worth, and psychological stability. While emotional attachment is a normal component of relationships, unhealthy dependency emerges when individuals derive their identity primarily from their partner (Bornstein, 2006). Factors contributing to emotional dependency include low self-esteem, childhood trauma, insecure attachment patterns, fear of abandonment, and social isolation (Bowlby, 1988; Bornstein, 2006). Emotionally dependent individuals often prioritize relationship preservation over personal well-being, even in abusive circumstances. Abusive partners frequently exploit this vulnerability through manipulation, coercive control, and emotional abuse. Techniques such as gaslighting undermine victims' confidence and reinforce reliance on the abuser for emotional reassurance (Stark, 2007). Over time, this deepens psychological dependency and reduces the likelihood of leaving the abusive relationship (Walker, 1979).

Social Dependency

Social dependency arises when individuals rely on marriage for social identity, acceptance, and community status. In many societies, particularly those with strong traditional or religious norms, marriage is viewed as essential for social legitimacy, especially for women (Kandiyoti, 1988). Victims may remain in abusive relationships due to fear of stigma, divorce-related discrimination, family pressure, or concerns about children's social standing (WHO, 2021). Cultural expectations often encourage endurance of hardship to preserve family unity and social respectability (Kandiyoti, 1988). Furthermore, abusive partners may intensify dependency by isolating victims from friends, family, and support networks. This isolation reduces access to external support systems and increases psychological dependence on the abuser, thereby perpetuating cycles of control and victimization (Stark, 2007; WHO, 2021).

Nexus Between Marital Dependency and Intimate Partner Abuse

Marital dependency and intimate partner abuse are closely interconnected social issues that reinforce one another through unequal power relations, emotional control, and socio-economic vulnerability. Dependency within marriage often creates an imbalance of power that enables abusive behaviour, while prolonged abuse further deepens victims' dependence on abusive partners. Scholars have increasingly emphasized that intimate partner abuse extends beyond physical violence to include coercive control, emotional manipulation, and economic exploitation aimed at maintaining dominance within intimate relationships (Mukhtar, 2024b).

Marital dependency contributes to intimate partner abuse through power and control dynamics. Abusive partners frequently create or intensify dependency as a means of maintaining authority and restricting victims' independence. Economic abuse is a common mechanism through which perpetrators exert control over their partners. Such behaviours may involve restricting access to finances, preventing victims from securing employment, monitoring expenditures, confiscating earnings, or deliberately creating financial instability (Postmus *et al.*, 2016a). Economic dependency reduces victims' ability to leave abusive relationships because they may fear homelessness, poverty, or inability to provide for themselves and their children. Studies have shown that financial insecurity remains one of the primary reasons many victims continue to endure abusive relationships despite severe emotional and physical suffering (Nduka *et al.*, 2024a).

Closely related to economic abuse is the concept of coercive control, which has become central to contemporary understandings of intimate partner abuse. Coercive control refers to persistent patterns of domination involving intimidation, surveillance, emotional manipulation, isolation, and

financial restriction aimed at limiting a victim's autonomy and freedom (Stark, 2007). Unlike isolated incidents of physical violence, coercive control operates continuously and systematically, making victims psychologically and socially trapped within abusive relationships. Research increasingly identifies coercive control as a stronger predictor of severe violence and intimate partner homicide than physical assault alone because it establishes total domination over victims' lives (Mukhtar, 2024a). For instance, victims who lack financial resources, social support, or emotional independence become especially vulnerable to coercive control because dependency reduces their ability to resist or escape abusive situations.

Psychological manipulation also plays a critical role in maintaining dependency within abusive relationships. Emotionally dependent individuals are often more susceptible to gaslighting, intimidation, humiliation, and emotional abuse. Abusers may deliberately exploit victims' insecurities, fears of abandonment, and low self-esteem to maintain control and reinforce emotional attachment (Dutton & White, 2012). Over time, victims may internalize blame for the abuse, doubt their perceptions of reality, and lose confidence in their ability to leave the relationship. Such psychological entrapment often contributes to learned helplessness, where victims feel powerless to change their circumstances despite ongoing harm.

Fear of leaving abusive relationships further strengthens dependency and prolongs victimization. Victims often remain in abusive marriages due to fear of financial insecurity, social stigma, retaliation, loss of child custody, or emotional loneliness. In many societies, cultural and religious expectations encourage individuals, particularly women, to preserve marital relationships regardless of abuse. Research conducted in Nigeria and other patriarchal societies demonstrates that many women endure abusive relationships because divorce or separation may result in social rejection, shame, or family pressure (Nduka *et al.*, 2024a). Emotional attachment and concern for children's welfare may also discourage victims from seeking help or leaving abusive partners.

Gender and cultural norms significantly shape patterns of marital dependency and intimate partner abuse. In patriarchal societies, men are commonly regarded as providers, decision-makers, and authority figures, while women are expected to be submissive, obedient, and economically dependent (Walby, 1990). Such traditional gender norms may normalize controlling behaviours, including restrictions on women's mobility, monitoring communication, financial control, and male dominance in decision-making. These cultural expectations often discourage victims from reporting abuse or pursuing divorce due to fear of stigmatization or community condemnation (Hooks, 2000). At the same time, changing gender roles and increasing female economic empowerment may generate conflict in relationships where traditional expectations of male dominance are challenged, sometimes contributing to domestic violence and coercive behaviours.

The consequences of intimate partner abuse are extensive and affect victims psychologically, physically, economically, and socially. Victims frequently experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts as a result of prolonged abuse and coercive control (WHO, 2021). Physical abuse may lead to injuries, chronic pain, reproductive health complications, disability, or even death (Campbell, 2002; WHO, 2012). Additionally, chronic stress associated with abusive relationships can contribute to hypertension, insomnia, and weakened immune functioning, reflecting the long-term physiological impacts of sustained exposure to violence (Campbell, 2002; WHO, 2012). Economically, abuse undermines victims' financial stability through employment disruption, debt accumulation, financial exploitation, and reduced productivity (Adams *et al.*, 2008; Postmus *et al.*, 2012). Socially, victims often experience isolation, family breakdown, loss of social support, and reduced participation in community life (Stark, 2007; WHO, 2012). For instance, children who are exposed to intimate partner abuse are also at greater risk of emotional trauma, behavioural difficulties, and future

involvement in violent relationships (UNICEF, 2017; Hughes, Bellis, Hardcastle, Sethi, Butchart, Mikton, Jones, & Dunne, 2017).

Addressing marital dependency and intimate partner abuse requires comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies. Economic empowerment remains essential in reducing dependency-related abuse by improving women's access to employment, education, vocational training, and financial literacy programs (Stylianou, 2018). Financial independence enhances victims' capacity to leave abusive relationships safely and rebuild their lives (Postmus *et al.*, 2012; Adams *et al.*, 2020). Effective legal frameworks addressing domestic violence, economic abuse, marital rape, and coercive control are also necessary to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable (Stark, 2007; WHO, 2021). In addition, victims require access to trauma-informed counseling, mental health services, support groups, shelters, legal aid, and crisis intervention programmes to facilitate recovery and restore autonomy (Campbell, 2002; WHO, 2021).

Public education and community involvement are equally important in challenging harmful gender norms and promoting healthy relationships. Educational campaigns can increase awareness of coercive control, economic abuse, and the signs of intimate partner violence while reducing societal tolerance for abusive behaviours (WHO, 2013). Such initiatives also help shift cultural beliefs that normalize or minimize intimate partner violence, which is a key factor in its persistence across communities. Religious institutions, healthcare providers, schools, and community organizations play critical roles in supporting victims, providing early intervention, and promoting non-violent family relationships (UN Women, 2019). Healthcare systems, in particular, are often the first point of contact for survivors and can facilitate identification, documentation, and referral to support services.

Community-based interventions that engage men and boys in discussions about gender equality have also been shown to reduce acceptance of violence and promote healthier relationship norms (Heise, 2011). School-based programs that teach emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and respect in relationships further contribute to long-term prevention by shaping attitudes before patterns of abuse become established. Through combined legal, economic, psychological, and social interventions, societies can reduce marital dependency-related abuse and foster safer and more equitable intimate relationships. Coordinated responses that integrate law enforcement, social services, and advocacy organizations are particularly effective in ensuring survivor safety and perpetrator accountability while addressing structural inequalities that sustain abuse (WHO, 2013).

Conclusion

Marital dependency and intimate partner abuse are closely linked through psychological, economic, cultural, and social factors that create unequal power relations within marriage. While dependency is a normal aspect of intimate relationships, excessive dependency increases vulnerability to abuse and control. Economic dependence, emotional attachment, and societal pressures often prevent victims from leaving abusive relationships. Contemporary studies identify coercive control and economic abuse as major tools used by perpetrators to maintain dominance. Therefore, reducing intimate partner abuse requires economic empowerment, legal protection, public education, counseling services, and the promotion of equality and healthy relationship dynamics.

Policy Recommendations

1. This paper recommends that access to education, vocational training, microfinance, and employment to reduce financial dependence and increase women's bargaining power in relationships should be expanded.
2. Strengthen laws to include coercive control and economic abuse, and ensure effective enforcement through trained police and survivor-centred justice systems.

3. It is also recommended that shelters, transitional housing, and crisis centres that offer immediate safety and viable alternatives for victims seeking to leave abusive relationships should be provided.
4. The paper recommends that gender-sensitive education and awareness programmes that challenge harmful norms and improve recognition of all forms of intimate partner abuse should be implemented.

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