

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PREVALENCE OF MARITAL CRISIS IN AWKA
SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ANAMBRA STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is regarded as one of the oldest social institutions ordained by God. It is considered to represent a lifelong commitment by two people, but sometimes this expectation is cut short because of marital crisis. Marital crisis is a serious issue for many families globally. Many families have disintegrated, while others live as if they are strangers because of persistent and unresolved crises in marriage. Therefore, the study sets out to assess the prevalence of marital crises in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. The study adopted social exchange theory as its theoretical base. A cross-sectional survey design and multi-stage sampling technique were utilized. A total of 200 respondents aged 18 years and above were randomly sampled and a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews were administered to generate data. The collected data were presented and analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequency distribution tables. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with the thematic method of data analysis. Findings revealed that marital crisis is among the most underreported menace in Nigeria. Women are more vulnerable whenever there is crisis in the family. , there is a high prevalence of marital crises in Awka South LGA. It was also observed that there are various factors influencing the prevalence of marital crises and among these factors is the social incompatibility of married partners. Thus, the study recommended, among other things, the need to encourage prospective married partners to undertake marriage courses.

KEY WORDS: Family, Marital crisis, Marriage, Prevalence, Separation

INTRODUCTION

Human society has units that are very peculiar to it. One of such institutions is marriage. Every race and culture has its own marriage customs and practices; some are closely similar while others are different, though the essence of the union tends to be similar in all cultures (Eyo, 2018). In Africa, with Nigeria not being an exception, marriage is one of the most important and basic societal institutions. Among Africans, marriage is not only for the living; it is a union where the living, the dead, and the yet unborn meet (Imbiti, 1973; cited in Eyo, 2018). Marriage is a sacred social custom and a mark of

maturity and duty (Nzeribe, 2021). It is a duty of requirement from corporate society and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate (Eyo, 2017).

From the outset, it is clear that marriage is designed to be an exciting and splendiferous adventure, and the relationship between husband and wife is intended to get better with every passing day or year. To Okere and Ubani (2020), getting married is a lifetime experience that is often cherished and looked forward to with great enthusiasm, hope, and expectations of an eventful and fruitful married life. When couples get married, they establish a happy and joyous home devoid of rancour, acrimony, violence, conflict, or crisis.

Amidst the significance of marriage, every society is faced with situations in which marriage fails and the couple cannot tolerate each other. The institution of marriage has been subjected to numerous challenges in recent times, considering the fact that the challenges of the twenty-first century's societal expectations have made some marriages experience distress, frustration, and uncompromising experiences that have had negative implications for them and fuelled marital crises. Ibeh, Obidoa, and Okere (2013) pointed out that marital crisis is a strain on marriage and interaction among couples who are living together.

The concept of marital crisis is associated with separation, divorce, and widowhood. Separation and divorce are social phenomena that are created by the husband, the wife, or both, but widowhood is beyond the control of human beings (Oswald and Powdthavee, 2008). A marital crisis is not just a difference of opinion; rather, it is a series of events that have been poorly handled so as to deeply manage the marriage relationship. Marital crises are a common occurrence among couples. It cut across the upper, middle, and lower classes. Quite a number of families have been thrown apart as a result of the spousal crisis. In Nigeria today, the rate at which married couples experience marital crises is quite alarming. Many families have been and are still seriously at war with themselves simply because of failure to arrest, manage, or resolve conflicting issues between couples or families (Tolorunleke, 2014).

According to Eneji et al. (2022), children are always at the receiving end of the negative impact of an unsettled marital crisis. Right from the point of decision-making on divorce, for example, the issue of child custody is always at the forefront of the brawl. Children are left devastated and resort to using drugs or substances, sexual practices, crime, suicide, and other negative behaviours to fill the void. Some become victims of sexual abuse, domestic abuse, and maltreatment at the hands of step parents and carers.

Animashun (2014) posits that in Nigeria, the increasing rate of separation and divorce among couples justifies the fact that there is a crisis in today's marriage. Statistically, the 2018 data from Nigeria's Demographic and Health Survey revealed that women were more likely than men to be divorced or separated, as 3% of women were either divorced or separated as against 1% of men (Osaji, 2023). In a report published in 2018, a total of 3000 divorce cases were recorded in Badagry, Lagos State. Also, in a 2019 report titled "Deciphering the High Rate of Divorce in Nigeria", Kano State alone had over 1

million registered divorcees (Yakubu, 2019). Similarly, records at the FCT High Court showed that over 2000 divorce cases were filed between the year 1999 and February 2020, with an average of 30 cases being entertained every day, even as the court is trying hard to reconcile couples through arbitration panels (Adeniyi, 2021). The increase in marital crisis rates is one of the most visible changes in contemporary family life. The rising rate of marital crises over the years is one of the fundamental changes in Nigerian society. In the view of Josiah and Nteje (2022), problems such as domestic violence, mismanagement of money, infertility, and poor communication, amongst others, have caused serious breakdowns in marital relationships, and often times, these crises degenerate into running separate homes and divorce.

Furthermore, Adelman (2019) noted that the incidence of marital crises in Nigeria has gone up exponentially amidst the fact that marriage is viewed as the central institution and the cornerstone of a generation and is considered indestructible. According to Adelman (2019), Nigerian couples are separating more and more, and not even the wearisome process and expensive cost of filing for divorce, which depend on factors like a court's location, lawyers' charges, and sometimes the reason for divorce, have been able to stop the high rate. One of the new and challenging developments in modern family life is the increasing rate of marital crises characterized by divorce, separation, and cohabitation. For instance, in the commercial city of Lagos, it was reported that at two customary courts, 354 applications for divorce were filed. Ninety-three applications were granted, thirty were withdrawn, and two hundred and thirty-one were pending in the two courts (Inah et al., 2022). The trend, regrettably, has not changed. For example, in Abuja the capital city of Nigeria, about 4000 divorce applications had been filed in the first months of 2020, and some of these marriages lasted less than a year (Inah et al., 2022). This data suggests that marital crisis rates are outrageously high. Amidst the various recommendations posited by scholars, academics, religious, and governmental institutions, amongst others, towards reducing the incessant rise of marital crisis among couples in Nigeria, recent researchers have continuously affirmed that marital crisis among couples is still prevalent and spontaneously on the rise across the country, of which Awka South Local Government Area is not an exception. Oputa (2022) reported that over 1000 cases of marriage crises are currently at the family welfare unit of Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State, and the number is geometrically increasing on a daily basis with little or no efforts to reduce the incessant rise. Hence, this study set out to assess the prevalence of marital crisis among couples in Awka South local government area of Anambra state, in a bid to generate data for a proper public and policy response to the social problem and make recommendations for its management in the present and future.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES/LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, issues arising from the work and related areas are reviewed under a number of sub-headings, as follows:

PREVALENCE OF MARITAL CRISIS

Osaji (2023) observed that marital crises are prevalent in Nigeria, though not as high as in European societies. In Nigeria today, many families are still seriously at war with themselves simply because of their failure to arrest, manage, or resolve conflicting issues between couples (Dada, 2016). To Akinbobola (2021), separation rates in Nigeria recorded a 14 percent increase in 2018. Also, in 2019, Kano State alone had over one million registered divorcees.

According to the Daily Trust (2022), at least 49 spouses reportedly died between January 2021 and March 2022. The data showed that 35 women were beaten to death by their husbands, while wives killed their husbands on 14 different occasions. For instance, in January 2022, a 57-year-old man, Muhammed Alpha, was arrested for allegedly stabbing his wife of over 20 years with a knife over the ownership of a door made from zinc, while Motunrayo Alaba, in March 2021, also allegedly applied a hot pressing iron to the chest of her husband over a minor disagreement (Daily Trust, 2022). Also, Boluwatife (2022) noted that in Anambra State, a priest of the Anglican Communion resigned over a marital crisis existing between him and his spouse in 2021. Similarly, Halim (2022) noted that in the year 2022, over 10 Nigerian celebrities suffered different forms of marriage crises that led to separation and divorce between them and their spouses.

However, despite an apparent upsurge in the number of young people who are getting married today in Nigeria, there is at the same time a frightening reality of the high percentage of marriages that are breaking up and suffering one form of marital crisis or another (Nnabugwu, 2014). Records at the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) High Court showed that over 2000 divorce cases were filed between the years 2019 and 2020, with an average of 30 cases being entertained every day, even as the court is trying hard to reconcile couples through arbitration panels (Akinbobola, 2021).

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PREVALENCE OF MARITAL CRISIS

Just as rust can corrode metal under a coat of paint, a number of factors can eat away at an apparently successful marriage (Awake, 2008). The factors, according to Amadi and Amadi (2014), are:

Social Incompatibility of Marriage Partners: There is no doubt that some marriages have absolutely no foundation or basis for being contracted in the first instance. Hence, crises are bound to ensue in such a situation, and if not properly managed, they will degenerate into separation and divorce.

Sexual Incompatibility: Poor sexual satisfaction on the part of a marital partner may spice up a crisis in the union, which, if not properly and timely detected and managed, could lead to extramarital sexual affairs.

Lack of mutual respect between partners: Mutual respect for one's spouse is critical for marital union sustenance, and a lack of it is a crisis factor capable of rocking even the strongest marital foundation of hitherto blissful homes. Respect and love are reciprocal variables in every marital union, and as such, a spouse has an obligation to respect and love his or her marriage partner (Buckwell, 2010).

Unwholesome social behaviour: bickering, unnecessary criticisms, gossip, or what may simply be tagged nagging, has rocked some good families. It is not an overstatement that the majority of women take to nagging instead of politely confronting their husbands with issues. Most men, in turn, do not take kindly to such threats and would go a long way towards crushing such tendencies. This case of attack and counterattack is crisis-prone, as no reasonable man would want his authority as the family head to be usurped (Amadi & Amadi, 2014).

According to Afu and Nteh (2020), families are faced with lots of conflict-inducing challenges, like the dwindling financial capacity thrown up by socioeconomic factors like poverty, unemployment, and pressure from family and friends. Warda et al. (2022) see marriage as a phase of life that is a very important part of the personal and social lives of whoever is entering it. However, one should be cautious of factors capable of destroying the union, such as money, interference from a third party, drug use, sexual infidelity, physical abuse, the end of mutual love, etc.

CONSEQUENCES OF MARITAL CRISIS

Marital crises have had some deleterious consequences for couples, their children, and society at large. According to Onah (2014), marital crisis has become a thing of concern in contemporary society, and this is associated with myriad consequences like waywardness among children from crisis-ravaged homes. Children who are raised in homes where crisis and abuse abound will suffer emotional complexes. Continuing, Onah (2014) asserted that medically, children raised in such an adverse environment suffer from debilitating stress, severe headaches, rashes, and ulcers. Academically, they are always behind when compared with others who have had a stable upbringing (Agha & Obika, 2010). Similarly, Carl (2011) opined that marital crises introduce a massive change into the lives of every child, irrespective of their age. Witnessing the loss of love between parents and having parents break up their marriage commitment will create a challenging new family life circumstance in which to live.

Akpeli (2019) noted that the presence of a crisis often derails the course of marriage and inflicts negative emotions such as anger, bitterness, and even hatred. If the crisis in marriage is not resolved, marital satisfaction is threatened by estrangement, separation, and divorce. Also, the inability to successfully manage crises in marriage is linked with declines in physical well-being (Akpeli, 2019). In Akpeli's view, responding to marital crises with negative interpersonal behaviours is bad for the stability of the marriage and for one's physical health.

MEASURES THAT CAN BE EMPLOYED TO REDUCE THE RISE IN MARITAL CRISIS

According to Ogundepo (2023), the bliss of a joyful marriage can end when couples allow the festering of unresolved disagreements, which consequently leads to a crisis in the home. To Ogundepo (2023), measures to effectively handle marital crises include reflection on good memories, forgiveness, and seeking help from counsellors and therapists, amongst others.

In the views of Atkinson (2021), all relationships and marriages go through periods when they face crises. The secret to a healthy and growing family is one's ability to overcome marital crises. Hence, to Atkinson (2021), the strategies for solving marital crises are:

Communication: Communication is the secret to a lasting relationship, and hence, all healthy and happy marriages keep their communication lines open. A couple is expected to openly discuss the issues affecting them and come up with a resolution together. Achieving this would help reduce the risk of marital crisis (Atkinson, 2021).

Make decisions together: Issues in marriage can only be solved when couples approach them together and decide on the best solution as a couple. According to Atkinson (2021), by making decisions together, couples can be at ease knowing and learning each other's feelings and concerns, thereby nurturing the affection that exists between them.

Getting Counselling: Counselling is a great way to solve marriage problems. Couples who are struggling to stay united in love are expected to seek the services of a counsellor who will offer them the necessary guidance to fix their marital problems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social exchange theory stands out as the most suitable for this research work. This theory was introduced in 1958 by the sociologist, George Homans. The social exchange theory is a psychosocial perspective that explains social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchange between parties. Social exchange theory posits that human relationships are formed through the use of subjective costs-benefits analysis and the comparison of alternatives.

Social exchange theory is relevant to this study because marriage is an institution that comes with expectations from the respective players (husband and wife). Often times, one enters into a marriage because of numerous benefits attached, such as financial benefits, connections, the need to have children, particularly a male child, amongst others and when those expectations are not met, a crisis sets in. For example, men like to spend so much money on ladies, especially during dating, because of the reward attached (sexual favour), and often times, when a man gets married, he swiftly reduces the way he spends, unlike in his youthful days. On the other hand, a woman who got married to this type of man due to material and financial benefits might end up being disappointed, and at that point, a crisis might erupt in the marriage, which if not well managed could lead to separation and divorce. Succinctly, according to this theory, when partners feel that their expectations are not being met in marital relationships or when the rewards and satisfaction derived from the relationship diminish, it can lead to dissatisfaction and a potential crisis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study design for this work was mixed methods research design. This is because mixed methods research design enables a researcher to study a large population at one point in time. The area of the study was Awka South Local Government Area, located in Anambra State. Nine towns make up the Awka South Local Government Area: Awka, Nibo, Nise, Isiagu, Mbaukwu, Okpuno, Ezinato, Umuawulu, and Amawbia. According to National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) Awka South LGA has a projected population of

270,300. A sample size of 200 respondents was adopted for the quantitative component of this study. The Taro Yamani (1967) statistical formula was applied to determine the sample size of the study.

The questionnaire and In-Depth Interview (IDI) guide were the instruments used for data collection. The questionnaire items were arranged in line with the research objectives, and they were both closed-ended and open-ended, aimed at gaining more insight into the issue under study. On the other hand, the in-depth interview guide was designed to gather relevant qualitative data from respondents and also elucidate and support the findings from quantitative data. The in-depth interview guide was divided into the consent section and the section that deals with the substantive issues of the research as drawn from the specific study objective.

The quantitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The researcher made use of frequency distribution tables and percentages to present the data for easy understanding and clarity. The qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed using thematic method of analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1: Respondents' views on the prevalence of cases of marital crisis

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Very often	116	58.0
Often	71	35.5
Rare	10	5.0
None	3	1.5
Total	200	100.0

Field Survey, 2024

Table 1 indicates that in terms of prevalence of marital crisis in Awka South LGA, 58.0% of the respondents stated that it occurs very often. 35.5% of the respondents indicated often, 5.0% said it rarely occurs while 1.5% indicated none of the above. This means that there is high prevalence rate of marital crisis in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State. This aligns with the qualitative data. One of the interviewees stated: "Marital crisis is very peculiar not only in Awka but in every community in Nigeria. I would say that marital crisis is as high as 50 percent in Awka South Local Government Area" (Male, Married, 45 years, Businessman, Amawbia).

Table 2: Respondents' views on most prevailing factors influencing the prevalence of marital crisis

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Social incompatibility of married partners	34	17.0
Sexual incompatibility of married partners	41	20.5
Lack of mutual respect and communication between married partners	64	32.0
Financial Pressure	49	24.5
Unwholesome social behaviour	12	6.0
Total	200	100.0

Field Survey, 2024

Table 2 shows that 17.0% of the respondents identified social incompatibility of married partners as one of the major factors influencing the prevalence of marital crisis, 20.5% identified sexual incompatibility of married partners while 32.0% of the respondents indicated lack of mutual respect and communication between married partners. In the same vein, 24.5% and 6.0% of the respondents identified financial pressure and unwholesome social behaviour as other factors contributing to marital crisis in the study area. This aligned with the qualitative data. One of the interviewees stated:

Family pressure, financial pressure, poverty, unemployment and expectations from partners have affected many marriages in Awka South Local Government Area today. Again, lack of mutual respect, trust and sexual incompatibility has brought about marital crisis in many homes in Awka South LGA (Female, Married, 44 years, Opinion Leader, Awka Urban).

Another interview stated:

Social incompatibility is one of the factors influencing the prevalence of marital crisis in Awka South Local Government Area. Sexual incompatibility and ingratitude can as well affect marital unions. For example, when a married woman starts comparing her husband to other people then that is an invitation to marital crisis (Female, Married, 33 years, Civil Servant, Amawbia).

Table 3: Respondents' views on measures that will help to manage the high incidence of marital crisis being recorded in our contemporary society

<i>Responses</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Encouraging married partners to take decisions together	33	16.5
Encouraging prospective married partners to undertake marriage courses	41	20.5
Creating an open communication between married partners	40	20.0
Promotion of gender equality	31	15.5
All of the above	55	27.5
Total	200	100.0

Field Survey, 2024

In terms of measures that will help to manage the high incidence of marital crisis being recorded in our contemporary society, table 3 indicates that 16.5% suggested encouraging married partners to take decisions together, 20.5% indicated encouraging prospective married partners to undertake marriage courses while 20.0% suggested creating an open communication between married partners. In a related development, 15.5% of the respondents suggested promotion of gender equality while 27.5% of the respondents indicated all of the above. This implies that most respondents maintained that all the measures outlined above will help to manage the high incidence of marital crisis being recorded in our contemporary society, particularly in Awka South LGA. This agreed with the qualitative data. One of the interviewees stated:

In order to address the issue of marital crisis in Awka South LGA, parents have a greater role to play. The way and manner parents handle their misunderstandings in the family will influence the behaviour and reaction of their children to similar circumstances in the future. Parents and guardians must realize that they are role models to their kids and should act and lead by examples (Male, Married Man, 47 years, Clergy Man, Awka Urban).

Another interview stated:

Married couples should understand that crisis could come but with love, forgiveness and understanding they will surely overcome. Couples should be open to each other and be able to talk about their differences and should not allow a problem to linger beyond normal (Male, Married, 37 years, Trader, Awka Urban).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In line with the first study objective, it was found that all the respondents have heard about marital crisis. For this reason, majority of the respondents defined marital crisis as a disagreement between couples who are in a marital relationship, resulting in feelings of anxiety or anger and followed by abusive language and hostile actions. The result indicates that there is high prevalence of marital crisis in Awka South LGA. This corroborates previous study by Onovo and Ani (2021) which revealed that there is high prevalence of marital crisis in Enugu State, Southeast Nigeria.

In the second objective, it was found that there are various factors influencing the prevalence of marital crisis. Most prevalent among these factors is social incompatibility of married partners. Other factors influencing the prevalence of marital crisis include sexual incompatibility of married partners, lack of mutual respect and lack of communication between married partners, financial pressure and unwholesome social behaviour. This study found that major factors influencing poor reporting of crisis among married couples include: religious condemnation, guilt, lack of evidence and social stigma. This supports another study by Israel (2021) which reported that factors influencing the prevalence of marital crisis include poverty (lack of adequate income and its distribution), infidelity, lack of attention, neglect of children's needs, social and sexual incompatibility.

The third objective was designed to recommend measures that will help to manage the high incidence of marital crisis being recorded in our contemporary society. Some important measures were identified as follows: encouraging married partners to take decisions together, encouraging prospective married partners to undertake marriage courses, creating an open communication between married partners and the promotion of gender equality. This agrees with another study by Amadi and Amadi (2014) which maintained that in order to manage high incidence of marital crisis the following measures are necessary: establishment of counseling centers in urban and rural settings, organizing of regular workshops, seminars, and conferences by religious and government

institutions, integration of continuing education programmes on marriage and family living, encouraging couples to go for counselling before marriage, appreciate each other's differences and effective spousal communication.

Finally, these findings agree with the social exchange theory which was also adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. The social exchange theorists see marriage as an institution that comes with expectations from the respective players (husband and wife). Hence, failure for the respective players to meet their socially, religious and customary approved responsibilities can lead to strain and conflict within the marriage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Marriage is regarded as one of the oldest social institutions ordained by God. It is considered to represent a lifelong commitment by two people, but sometimes this expectation is cut short because of marital crisis. Marital crisis is among the most underreported menace in Nigeria. Women are more vulnerable whenever there is crisis in the family. The institution of marriage has been subjected to many challenges in recent times, considering the fact that the challenges of the twenty-first century and societal expectations have made marriages to experience distress, frustration, and uncompromising experiences, this study is timely to address this problem. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made to address the issue of marital crisis in Awka South LGA of Anambra State and Nigeria in general:

1. Family and religious institutions should encourage married partners to take decisions together. This will help strengthen their bond and love for one another.
2. There is need to encourage prospective married partners to undertake marriage counselling sessions. This will help them to get abreast with some issues facing marriages and how to navigate them.
3. There is need for couples to appreciate each other's differences and ensure an effective communication with one another. This will stimulate the existing love between the couple and help reduce crises in marriages.

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