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**The Fall of Eve: Exploring How the Nigerian Christian Community  
applies Religious Principles into the Household and Situations of  
Intimate Partner Violence.**

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## **Abstract**

Intimate Partner Violence is prevalent in African societies. Current scholarship states that religion penetrates cultural experiences in Nigeria because it is revered highly as a source of guidance. However, there is little research that explores how a specific demographic interprets religion and apply it to their lives and their view of the world. Moreso, studies have failed to outline how personal interpretations of religious principles inform negative ideologies that cause social issues such as domestic violence. Though IPV happens in homes, across gender, ethnic, and religious lines, this study focuses on exploring the experiences of Nigerian Christian Women in the household and situations of IPV. The study adopts an exploratory research design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Findings revealed that religious beliefs played an essential role in sustaining the culture of domestic violence that exists in Nigeria. This occurs through religious texts interpreted to sustain the belief of men as the head of the household and women as subordinate to them. Violent homes are also preserved by religious beliefs that are averse to separation, even in times of conflict. Because religion and religious texts are broadly stated, individuals apply them to their lives in various ways. Regardless, because religion is seen as supreme when personal beliefs are tagged as religious, they are impossible to dispute using logical evaluation. Participants are aware of religion's stronghold in Nigeria and how this could lead to detrimental effects. However, they acknowledge they feel pressure to succumb to social expectations because it is part of how they practice Christianity. To reduce the prevalence of domestic violence, it is important to recognize the role religious beliefs play in perpetuating this. To objectively approach social issues, it is important to separate personal religious beliefs from social issues. The findings presented here call for everyone to reevaluate how they justify harmful narratives. It encourages them to prioritize their role as citizens and draw the line on when a religious belief is going awry.

## Acknowledgments

This thesis is lovingly and gratefully dedicated to the thousands of courageous women in Nigeria who feel frustrated about the situation in their homes. I hope I have done well by them to move the conversation when it comes to social justice and gender equity. I am deeply indebted to every woman I connected with through this thesis and other external projects. I thank my interviewees and survey participants for trusting me with their voices and the powerful stories of their lives.

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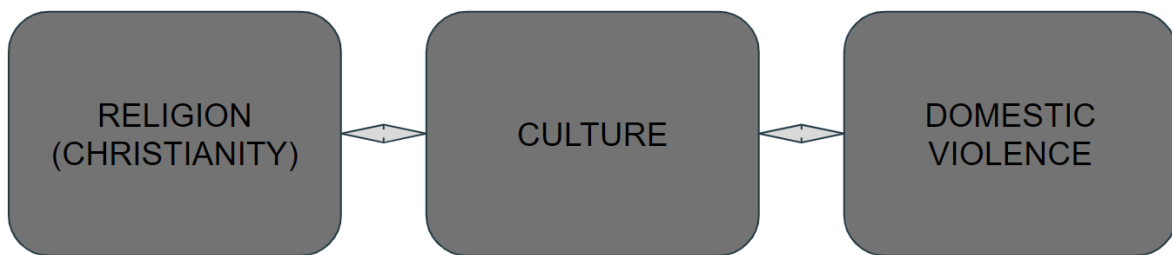
## **INTRODUCTION**

For many centuries, women worldwide have struggled to overcome the pandemic of intimate partner violence. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a widespread health and social problem that cuts across socioeconomic, legal, health, cultural, and ethnic boundaries (Balci & Ayanci; Graham et al.; Hegarty et al.; Johnson et al.; Klap et al.). Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) could be physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse wherein a trusted person, a partner usually, intentionally endangers the partner's well-being in a way that threatens their fundamental right to life. It is also known as domestic violence, spousal abuse, and relationship violence. In Nigeria, domestic violence is a prevalent social issue. Although IPV can be perpetuated and suffered by all population groups, it occurs more significantly in women than men. The Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2018 found that 9 percent of women aged 15 to 49 had suffered sexual assault at least once in their lifetime, and 31% had experienced physical violence. This paper seeks to narrow down research efforts to the subcategory of women in the population of individuals who have encountered the point at hand. Exploring how women in Nigeria today process and ascribe meaning to IPV is of fundamental importance to drawing out strategies to prevent, reduce and eliminate this problem.

This paper makes one main contribution to literature. I critically investigate how Nigerian women, a specific demographic contextualizes the role religion plays in their lives, their society, and the negative experience of domestic violence. I explore the ethnographic links (proximal and distal) between religion- Christianity- and domestic violence. Grounding this paper in the gap in existing literature, I construct three research questions: First, how do Christian women apply religious beliefs to their lives? Second, how influential are Christian beliefs on culture and

gender norms in Nigeria? Lastly, how does the interpretation of religion and religious texts delineate household behaviors that create environments that foster domestic violence?

I chose to focus on religion and Christianity because it is a significant source Nigerian women use to prescribe meaning to their daily lives. Christianity is explored as a case study to understand religion's possible influence on this social issue. Religion is used interchangeably with Christianity in this paper, except otherwise stated. I seek to evaluate Christianity's role in curating the beliefs and values that structure the Nigerian household and how some Christian values upheld as Christian lead to domestic violence. The Bible says what it does, but this paper focuses on how it is interpreted in women's lives. I will draw more evident connections using three theoretical frameworks in domestic violence literature- Flynn's theory of level of influence, feminist theory, and power theory. Though this paper is not drawing causal conclusions, I evaluate the hypothesis that religious beliefs significantly influence cultural foundations that uphold behaviors in the household that perpetuate domestic violence in Nigeria.



To start in the background, I ground the audience in current literature and theories on the sociological causes of domestic violence, highlighting the gap this paper aims to fill by focusing on one aspect of social relations (religion). The frameworks used to theorize conversations are sought from more comprehensive derived documents; however, I will be stretching these frameworks to occurrences in Nigeria.

Next, I explain how Nigerian women situate Christianity into their lives. I find that Nigerian Christian women apply religious beliefs to their lives in different ways, however, they all still shape their behavior in the household according to dominant religious beliefs because religion has a very strong influence in Nigeria. Then, I illustrate what this stronghold looks like in culture and law. Here, I discover that personal interpretations of religion have largely shaped ethnic traditions, law and policy, and gender norms, significant components of Nigeria's culture. Afterward, I highlight the distal beliefs that give rise to domestic violence in Nigeria, i.e., upbringing, the woman's position in the household, and the aversion to separation even in times of conflict. I draw out how interpretations of religious texts have upheld some of these beliefs. To show how these themes play out more practically, I explore the participant-sourced case of a famous Nigerian gospel musician- Osinachi Nwachukwu-who allegedly passed away from intimate partner violence. Through this, I evaluate how cultural norms influenced by religious beliefs very likely played a role in her case and lead to her sad passing. Finally, I explain the broader implications of this research and ground the audience in how this research presents a useful perspective for viewing and solving the social issue of domestic violence.

This paper connects Christianity as a less explored potential motivating force of intimate partner violence and challenges the government and religious institutions to recognize the possible damage Christianity, not done right, can cause. Although many women worldwide use Christian beliefs positively for female empowerment or as a source of healing after domestic violence, my analysis demonstrates how it also causes harm when interpreted differently. Despite the influence of religion on culture, there is resistance to exploring the ways religion may negatively shape cultural behaviors because of the pedestal-like nature of practicing religion. This will open up literature to explore how the religion's stronghold allows harmful

narratives to perpetuate domestic violence and encourage policy leaders and activists to approach prevention and solution programming through this approach.

## **BACKGROUND**

### *Contextualizing Intimate Partner Violence*

UN Women reports that almost one in three women have been subjected to physical and sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life (WHO 2021). Before exploring the conceptual frameworks for understanding IPV, it is important to establish the definition of violence. The present paper adopts the following definition of violence proposed by the World Health Organization:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (Dahlberg et al.)

Krug et al. create a framework that categorizes violence into three types: interpersonal, self-directed, and collective (6). Interpersonal violence can be subdivided into two categories: 1) family and partner violence; and 2) community violence. As necessary for this paper, interpersonal violence is the violence that one person causes to another. Intimate partner violence is placed under the category of interpersonal violence. Other forms of violence Krug mentions are *self-directed violence*, divided into suicidal behavior and self-abuse, and *collective violence*, which usually includes communal violence to advance a particular social agenda.

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines *violence against women* as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN



General Assembly). According to Krug et al., “one of the most common forms of violence against women is that it is performed by a husband or an intimate male partner” (89).

Intimate Partner Violence, as defined in an article published by the World Health Organization, is

Behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors. (García-Moreno et al. 13)

Some authors distinguish intimate partner violence from domestic violence by defining domestic violence as a broad term that includes but is not limited to intimate partner violence (Barcoas et al.; Burelomova et al.). For this paper, IPV and domestic violence will be viewed as analogous, occurring in a family/partner setting and directed towards an intimate partner.

Why is intimate partner violence against women an issue? Serious injury, disability, or even death could directly result from violence against women. Besides these immediate impacts, violence against women might lead to various health problems, such as stress, stress-induced physiological changes, substance use, lack of fertility control, and personal autonomy, as often seen in abusive relationships. Abused women have higher rates of unintended pregnancies, abortions, adverse pregnancies, neonatal and infant outcomes, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), and mental disorders (such as depression, anxiety, disorders, sleep disorders, and eating disorders) compared to their non-abused peers (“WHO Report 2009” 55).

When it comes to international legislation, significant work has been done to address intimate partner violence against women. For example, in 1993, The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the first landmark international legal instrument that explicitly addresses the issue of violence against women as one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate

position compared with men. However, this declaration does not have the binding legal authority of a convention or treaty (UN General Assembly 1993), which means it does not have the implementation tool to create penalties. The UN and the Ad-hoc Committee of the Special session stated that the inadequate understanding of the root causes of all forms of violence against women and girls hinders efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls and that domestic violence is still treated as a private matter in some countries (“UN Report 2000” 11-14). As a result, it is challenging to combat domestic violence from the public lens of the law. This paper undertakes the individual and private perspectives related to IPV to provide policy stakeholders with a greater understanding of the interpersonal causes of domestic violence. This enables leaders to create more formulated societal structures to combat intimate partner violence against women.

### *Contextualizing Religion and Culture*

Research shows that religion has an effect on culture. Scholars believe religion, which reveals the most profound meanings that humans carry, is naturally manifested through the creation of culture (Abdulla). Religious ideas being very philosophical and applicable to human life and morals, ends up forming the core of human culture. They assert that religion and culture cannot be separated. Many traditions around the world see little distinction between religion and culture and emphasize the importance of using religion to define socioeconomic relations.

Religion, specifically Abrahamic and East Asian religions, according to Martin Riesebrodt, is:

A complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible ... The “superhumanness” of these powers consists in the fact that influence or control over dimensions of individual or social human life and the natural environment is attributed to them. (74-75)

Many cultures use religion and the concept of a supernatural supreme being as justifications for the ethnos that guide them (Beyers). Looking at the definition above, the super humanness of

divine powers is what gives it influence or control over human lives. One of the ways religious beliefs are formed is from religious texts. Interpretations of these religious texts are what shape human behavior positively and negatively in a way that could be used as justification for IPV.

Scholars believe cultures in Nigeria draw a strong inference from religion when deciding their principles. Since its independence in 1960, Nigeria has struggled unsuccessfully to articulate clearly the relationship between religion and the state (Sampson). This argument that there is an interrelatedness of religion and culture in Nigeria extends to the role of religious beliefs in defining gender norms.

One way in which scholars show how religion affects gender roles in Nigeria is through a historical analysis of how the different forms of religion define a woman's status. Africans had well-developed religious principles predating Arab incursions long before the European conquest. Indigenous African religion had no restrictions on the role of women (Berger 3). Society expects women to be active in domestic and public spheres alike. Sex did not determine the 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles in traditional Africa. These concepts, however, changed with the introduction of Islam and Christianity by colonists. Islamic principles modified African clothing cultures, asking women to veil their faces for modesty. Women were relegated to domestic roles associated with reproduction and nurturing and were required to obey and comply with their husbands' needs. Men were required to provide for their wives' needs in totality. Christianity invoked biblical passages specifically designed to promote women's cultural subordination. Africans had no choice but to convert to Christianity because it was required for socioeconomic advancements during this time (Berger 3). These efforts changed gender roles in Nigeria and enhanced the belief that women are subordinate to men (Njoh). Women were relegated to subordinate roles, while men had more roles of power according to 'religious

authority'. Religious principles that support this comes all the way from the beginning of the scripture where Eve's creation story is interpreted to mean the woman is created to support the man's position in the world (Milne 17). Today, Nigerian society is largely patriarchal, and women's place within the scheme is subordinate. Cultural definitions of appropriate sex roles believe in the inherent superiority of males and give men proprietary rights over women. These gender roles have fostered ideas that have displaced gender equality, leading to adverse circumstances like domestic violence. In Sub-Saharan Africa, religious beliefs concerning women's role in marital unions and the social construction of masculinity have created environments that foster domestic violence. Many men said it was okay to physically harm their wives under certain conditions (Takyi 25-52). Religious beliefs have been interpreted to foster the cultural subordination of women under men, and this subordination creates environments that permit domestic violence.

Very little literature shows the connection between religious beliefs and the persistence of domestic violence in Nigeria (Igbolekwu). Scholars in this field discuss how some religious and cultural beliefs cause gender-based violence. However, they do not highlight the religious principles that have been interpreted in ways that perpetuate DV. They do not focus on how these principles shape women's behavior and position in the household and environments of violence. This paper aims to show how interpretations of religious texts are used to justify cultural beliefs that foster domestic violence using existing frameworks to underline this connection.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS ON THE CAUSES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

### *The distal influence of religion on domestic violence*

Graham and Flynn define three distinct levels of influence on IPV based on their proximity to violence. Level 1 (the most distal) involves rigid attributes of individuals such as an aggressive personality, attitudes, or beliefs conducive to violence, and upbringing that may make the person more likely to be aggressive. This level is associated with the perpetrator or the victim. This explains a person's propensity for pursuing aggressive solutions to resolve conflict. Level II involves current life circumstances such as stress, depression, poor physical health, current alcohol and drug abuse, and other factors that might make a person more likely to respond aggressively to personal conflict. These factors are variable. For example, someone who hurts their partner because they were drunk may have done so only because they lost inhibition and not because it is their behavior. Level III refers to immediate precursors or precipitators that lead to physical violence. This level includes provocation or excessive anger. Level III points to behaviors in the moment that lead to violence. Level I, which pertains to beliefs or upbringing, falls more in line with how religion motivates domestic violence because religion's influence on human behavior is more rigid because it informs a person's beliefs. Although research shows that the respondents did not attribute level 1 factors as the immediate reason for their experiences of violence, many attribute these factors as precursors and core causes of their situation (Graham and Flynn). This underscores the need for more research that examines systemic and distal factors' influence on IPV to inform social knowledge on the causes of domestic violence.

### *Feminist and Power Theory's Perspective on IPV*

Another theoretical framework I will use in this paper to understand the behavior of stakeholders in IPV is feminist and power theory. Feminist theory aims to understand violent

relationships by examining the sociocultural context in which these relationships occur. Supporters of this theory often view gender inequality and sexism within patriarchal societies as the leading causes of IPV (Bell and Naugle 1097-1098). They argue that IPV stems from societal rules and patriarchal beliefs that encourage male dominance and female subordination (Abrar, Lovenduski, and Margetts; Bell and Naugle (1097-1098); Yllo). They argue that violence against women should be studied under the broader context of the patriarchy, which should also be studied from a cultural lens to understand domestic violence. Given the connections we have drawn between religion and culture, a religious lens is also necessary to understand how religious texts and their interpretations uphold various notions that facilitate patriarchal standards. As Nigerian theologian Rose Mary Edet rightly critically observed, “policy related and other research projects concerned with women in development often uncover cultural factors without associating them with religious beliefs and myths that rule women’s lives” (UChem 11). In certain places in Nigeria, women are not allowed to take turns with their partners to make a speech or give a donation on their behalf because it is frowned upon, as against the Bible. In the Bible, the religious text of Christianity, the Abrahamic religion, St. Paul is quoted as saying women should be silent and not speak in the Christian assembly. There is no woman among the Twelve disciples of Jesus, and a woman is said to be secondary because Adam was created before Eve (Uchem 17). These are some examples of the ways religious texts create backbones and interpretations upon which patriarchal values flourish. Qualitative and correlation studies are often referred to as evidence of a relationship between male patriarchal values and physical violence towards their female partners (Bell and Naugle 1097). I will use these strategies to establish my conclusions in this paper.

Power theorists suggest that the origins of violence are rooted not only in culture but also in the family structures that give men power over women (Straus 211-237). Power theorists suggest that power imbalances between partners may increase tension within the family unit and consequently increase the risk of IPV (Burelomova et al. 128-144). Understanding power dynamics in the household and how it is upheld by social structures from the roots of religion will prove helpful in diagnosing the root causes of domestic violence.

Current findings acknowledge that religion is critical to the everyday lives of people in Nigeria. They understand that it continues to impact how cultural norms are defined strongly. However, they speak broadly and do not draw specific conclusions on what this looks like for Nigerian Christian women. Moreso, because religion is viewed as untouchable, they do not highlight the possible ways religion can be interpreted negatively and accepted easily, as a result of its stronghold on how people define their lifestyles. Evaluating how women apply religion to their lives allows us to understand the sociology of religion and its connection to social issues.

## **METHODS**

In this paper, I utilize an exploratory research design. I draw from qualitative interviews (n=16) and quantitative survey responses (n=81) to address my research question. I conducted qualitative interviews first and explored the generalizability of the theories and phenomena observed using quantitative data (Creswell 75). I focus my study on the voices of Nigerian women between the ages of 18-50 who identify as Christian. This demographic is useful as it poses insight into the age range of women most susceptible to IPV but also focuses on the Christian subgroup to highlight stronger connections between religious beliefs and behaviors. This research uses the single case study research method. This is to develop a deeper understanding of the research group to explore how Christian women understand the role

religion plays in their household and IPV. According to Brancati in *Social Scientific Research*, Single case studies allow researchers to dig deeply into the details of a case to develop rich, complex, and compelling arguments (120). The findings from the subgroup of the population we analyze develop a good understanding of into the different mechanism through which Christianity influences domestic violence prevalence in Nigeria.

In conducting this research, I recognized the high sensitivity of this topic and its increased risk of putting participants at increased psychological, emotional, and physical risk. Since this research focuses on understanding broad societal behaviors and characteristics, an intentional decision was made not to actively seek out individuals with a personal IPV experience. Most participants in this study mentioned of their own will that they had not experienced IPV before, and this question was not explored for those that did not mention it. The questions related to IPV experiences specifically were explored using hypothetical scenarios. Questioning individuals who may or may have not gone through domestic violence but are statistically more susceptible to domestic violence (Stockl 2014), and are members of a community affected by domestic violence, poses a fresh standpoint into domestic violence discourse that enables us to understand how these populations of women define, understand and brainstorm solutions to domestic violence. Though there is significant value in investigating this societal issue from the perspective of its victims, there is also considerable knowledge to be gained from investigating this issue from the perspective of “outsiders” who are more able to evaluate the issue with less emotional and mental burdens.

### Qualitative Data

The data in this study come primarily from 10 weeks of interviews with n=16 African women based in Nigeria or within the Nigerian diaspora. All the participants are over the age of



18 years. Over December, participants were recruited through social media (Instagram) and snowball sampling. Participants were screened using the eligibility criteria (age over 18 years, of Nigerian descent). I posted a recruitment poster on my Instagram account which has a current following of n=981 (this was not the exact number at the time when I posted the flyer). My Instagram account features a demographic of people from several places which I have lived in- friends who I grew up with in Nigeria, friends from high school in Dallas, Texas, friends I have met through my travels in Europe, etc, friends at UChicago, and other people from several walks of my life. The age range of these participants skews very strongly towards 18-24 years old. Participants were recruited with a promise of 10,000 Naira (~\$25 compensation) and asked to connect with me through Instagram direct message (DM) or through my personal email. There was quick and immediate interest in the study when the recruitment poster was released on my Instagram page. Individuals I knew personally from growing up in Nigeria and individuals whom I had no connection to i.e., I do not follow, and they do not follow me, reached out with interest to participate in the study. Some of my followers reposted the study on their Instagram stories, which garnered more interest and increased the number of anonymous people who connected with me to participate in the study. The promise of monetary compensation proved enticing as the number of participants I planned to have in the study filled up quickly. One of the primary reasons why I ensured this study provided payment to its participants was not only to attract more participants but also to compensate them for the opportunity cost of the time that could have been spent elsewhere. The monetary aspect of recruitment may have shaped the type of respondents in this study. Most of my respondents identify as between the age of 18-30, Christian, of Nigerian Descent, and currently live in Nigeria. One outlier participant in the demographic is a respondent I recruited for the study through my mother. She is a female

participant who identifies as a pastor in Nigeria and is of age n=47 years. Another outlier participant is a respondent recruited through snowball sampling i.e, I previously had no personal connection to her. She lives in the US. She grew up in Nigeria but has lived in the US for the past six years. She is 18 years old. To gain a deeper insight into their life experiences, I adjusted some interview questions to explore their unique perspectives, as someone older for the previous lady and as someone living in the US for the latter.

University of Chicago's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study. Consented and enrolled participants engaged in a 1hr to 1hr 30-minute-long one-on-one interview with the primary author using virtual forms of communication. Participants were able to select the option they preferred. All participants were asked a similar set of questions following the predetermined format, which was only changed to ensure a more natural, comfortable conversation. Due to time constraints that arose towards the end of data collection, some of the participants were questioned through written communication. I sent the participants the interview questions via email and received their responses back either by email or via WhatsApp Text message. If the responses were too short or not detailed enough, follow-up questions were posed, and the participants went back and reviewed the answers to their questions. Out of the 16 participants interviewed, 3 participants fully utilized this method, while 1 participant used this method in response to the last 4-5 questions in the interview because of a break in internet connection.

The interview was conducted using WhatsApp voice audio call or through Zoom audio call. Participants were able to select which mode was more preferred. There was no video interaction in any of the interviews to reduce the feeling of observation from participants. The audio of the respondents who used Zoom was recorded using the Zoom software. The audio of the respondents who used Whatsapp voice audio call was recorded through an external online

recording website- “Online Voice Recorder”. All participants were generally asked the same set of questions, though different probes were used depending on what interviewees shared in their initial responses.

The main goal of the interviews was to decipher how religion and cultural beliefs have shaped their lives and their realities and influenced situations involving intimate partner violence. I approached the interviews with open-ended questions aimed at exploring the nuances in the direction people chose to answer the questions.

### Quantitative Data

Quantitative Data in this study was obtained using an anonymous Google form survey. In the coding of my interviews, I noticed several phenomena that I decided to gather quantitative evidence for from a large group of people. The quantitative data used in this part of the study featured n=81 women who identified as Nigerian between the age of 18-65. Two of the women who filled out the form indicated they were 16 years of age, and they were removed completely from the data, leaving n=79. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling with direct messages on Instagram and WhatsApp. I reached out directly to every Nigerian woman in my WhatsApp contacts and Instagram following and asked them to fill my Google form. I also asked them to send the message to their contacts and more than 20 women told me they did. The dataset only included demographic information like age, religion, and religious affiliation. Some of the women who filled out the Google survey were also interview participants.

### Data Analysis

For the qualitative interviews, I produced analytical memos towards the end of the data collection period. My questions were adjusted through the interview, using experience from earlier interviews or following feedback from research mentors to obtain relevant answers. Open

coding was used during initial rounds to detect possible themes and patterns and focused coding was used in subsequent rounds. To protect the identities of the participants, their names were removed, and the participants were identified by a pseudonym.

The quantitative survey data responses were analyzed using RStudio Version 4.2.0. The data responses were coded into R and transformed into more digestible information like pie charts, column charts, and word clouds as you will see below.

### *Study Limitations and Researcher Positionality*

A primary limitation of this work is the use of snowball sampling, though the accumulation of data in this way is relevant, it leaves room to get biased data that skews a certain way as a result of the demographic source. This paper features people with good cell phones and internet access, a small segment of the population in Nigeria. It also indicates the possibility that the participants researched are a wealthier population.

Secondly, this research is limited in its generalizability. The interview data represents a section of voices when it comes to domestic violence but also in Nigeria. It also features women as the victims of domestic violence and does not highlight the experiences of other non-female survivors. Also, this paper walks only within the structures of IPV in heterosexual relationships between two individuals. It also generalizes experiences across class and ethnic groups.

It is important to underscore my position as the primary researcher of this study. I grew up in Nigeria and moved to the US 6 years ago. As a result, I have deep, personal, and old relationships generally with this study, its demographic, and its participants. Some of the respondents are former classmates, friends, and friends of friends. There are some I don't have any personal connection to, but I have a connection to most. This position as a researcher could cause unidentified bias from the respondents who chose to participate in this study. This bias

could be that it led some participants to do this study because of my relationship with them or for them to filter their responses during one-on-one interviews. My positionality also gives me key implicit insights into the population I am studying, which may influence the interpretations and results I draw from the study. I recognize that I am an insider to this study, as I qualify as the demographic this study evaluates, i.e. I am a Nigerian woman who identifies as Christian. While I attempt to acknowledge how my perspectives as an insider may frame both the results and analysis, I recognize how this perspective could influence my work.

## **FINDINGS**

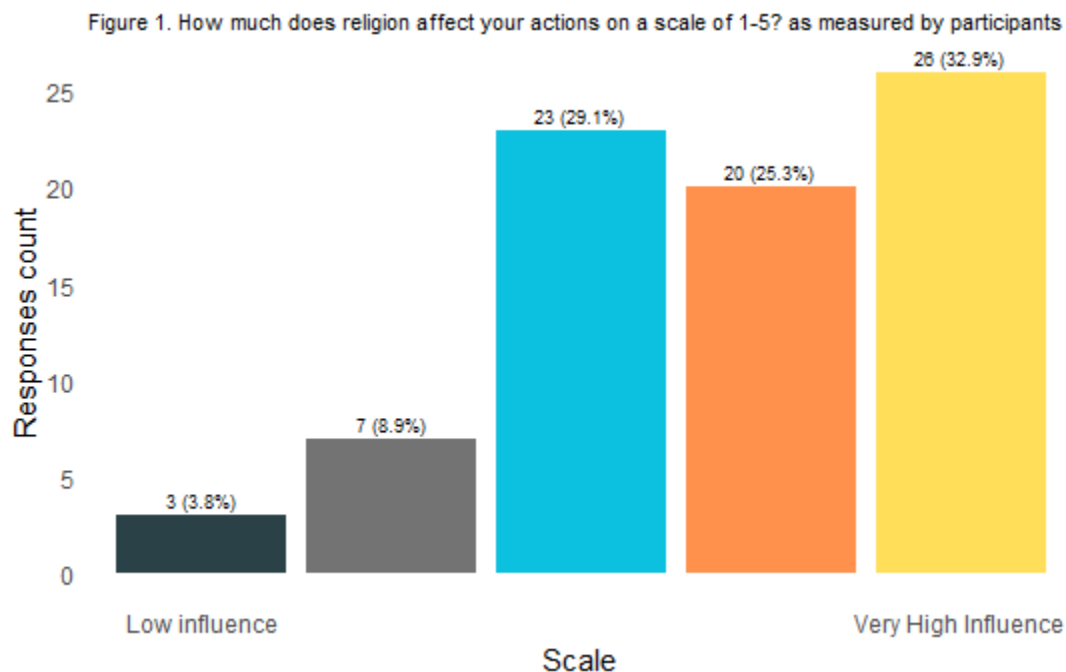
The interviews and surveys conducted with Nigerian Christian women demonstrated that these individuals saw a meaningful relationship between religion, cultural beliefs around gender norms, and domestic violence. They all shared a reproof of domestic violence and acknowledged religion's role in its prevalence. In this section, I start by defining the ways Nigerian women incorporate Christianity into their lives. How they apply their religious beliefs is significant in determining how susceptible they are to various interpretations of the Bible; and if they are more likely to perpetuate harmful interpretations. I discovered though that regardless of how women employ Christianity in their lives, it still played a major role in decision-making because it has a stronghold in Nigeria.

Then, I contextualize different aspects of culture in Nigeria from the vantage point of the religious interpretations that shape them. Afterward, I show how the dominant religious interpretation of gender norms fosters a communal environment that permits domestic violence. With this in mind, I situate my findings in a recent, famous IPV legal case of the Nigerian gospel artist Osinachi Nwachukwu. As a disclaimer, seeing that my participants are Christian, in some instances, I include quotes from the bible as relevant to the discussion in the footnotes for

reference. However, I claim no expertise or knowledge of theology. Hence in mentioning religious beliefs, and Christian values, I do not speak directly about what the bible says, but rather how it has been interpreted in peoples' lives. Participants also do the same and speak about how the bible has been interpreted in their lives.

## **PART 1: HOW CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN NIGERIA DEFINE THEIR RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY**

How women see their religion goes a long way in determining how they allow it to influence their day-to-day actions and their big decisions. How they allow religious beliefs to permeate their lives determines how susceptible they are to religious interpretations and also to perpetuating their beliefs onto others. Nigerian Christian women incorporated their religion into their lives with varying intensity levels. Notwithstanding, Christian beliefs still heavily influenced their behavior and decisions. This shows the stronghold religion has on individual actions in Nigeria. In Figure 1, I asked participants to share how influential religion is on their daily actions to visualize how much religious beliefs affect their actions.



87.3% of participants stated that religion had a medium to powerful influence on their behavior. Since many Christian women in Nigeria think moderately to highly about religion when they are making daily decisions. This shows that regardless of how women apply their religion to their lives, it still considerably affects their actions. I shall dive further into how religion broadly affects Nigerian Christian women shortly. First, I shall explain the three ways women in Nigeria internalize Christianity, their religion- Christianity as a personal lifestyle, Christianity as a way to connect with God, and Christianity as a lifestyle enforced from childhood.

### Women who see religion as a lifestyle

Some women believe that Christianity should be incorporated into a person's life and that every step and action a person takes should follow the bible and the principles of God. This stands in line with the bible verse participants quoted that emphasizes how Christians should allow God to direct their path.<sup>1</sup> Participants who shared this saw Christianity as a lifestyle. Being Christian is not just about having a religion that you follow or turn to once in a while, but rather about living your life according to the principles of the bible. These Christians believe imbibing Christian values into every step of life and using this to shape your lifestyle is what makes a good Christian and is the way to reap the benefits of following the supernatural God.

Temi, a 21-year-old undergraduate law student who identifies herself as being Christian, emphasized how Christianity influences every aspect of her life- her educational choice, daily routine, friendships, daily interactions with people, and her morals:

I personally define being religious as living your life with a consciousness of your religion and its ideals. So as a result, one's thoughts, actions and inactions are heavily influenced by religion. I am definitely a religious person. Christianity influences every aspect of my life. For example, I'm currently trying to decide on what electives to do this semester, my first concern is that I must not pick a course that is not in line with God's will for my life.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV): Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge him, And He shall direct your paths.

Temi imbibes religion into her everyday life. She believes that as a Christian, she has to live her life according to Christian ideals. The words from the bible and religious institutions define her lifestyle. Its guidance draws out what she wants her life to be. It's the most superior guidance in her life. When she was trying to decide what course, she wanted to study, the ultimate direction of what she ended up doing came from her Christian values.

Christianity and its ideals are placed on a pedestal in her life, exalted above any other guiding sources such as family, friends, mentors, or the law. Based on her current actions, we can extrapolate that because she guides her life first with Christian values, when it comes to shaping her home, or how she wants to behave, religious guidance would end up taking the first precedence. She would shape her relationships with people based on her personal beliefs. People that see religion as a lifestyle are more likely to place their religious interpretations on other people because to be in their life you must live according to their personal beliefs. Temi told us a personal story that supports our conclusion. She was in a healthy relationship with a previous partner, but she broke up with the partner because he was not Christian. This was influenced by a bible verse that has been interpreted in Christian spaces as God's directive that Christians should not cultivate intimate relationships with non-Christians<sup>2</sup>. At the time, her partner was a Muslim. She shared that she broke up with him because of the bible verse and religious leaders who advised her to because it would make God unhappy. Because Temi views religion as the creator of the roadmap of her actions, she is more likely to always seek to learn how she wants to apply these religious beliefs to her life. This is either by following other people's religious interpretations or forming their own. As a result, Temi is more likely to expect her religious

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:14 (NKJV): Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? ANd what communion has light with darkness?



beliefs from others and be susceptible to external religious interpretations of the bible. She broke up with her boyfriend because religious leaders told her to do so. To be Christian for her is to continually learn how she can apply the Bible to her life. She does this by looking to the Bible to create her personal interpretations but also by looking externally and placing other people's interpretations into her life.

Nigerian women who place Christianity as the guiding force of all the decisions in their life venerate Christian ideals and leave little room for criticism or logical evaluation. These women are dedicated to religious activities like attending church and reading the bible to learn how they want to apply religion to their lives. Religion is rarely criticized because doing so will be seen as disobeying what the bible says, trying to rationalize it or mold it to fit into your life. As a result, women who see religion this way are more susceptible to incorporating interpretations of religious texts that are harmful. Because religious texts are broad, it has to be interpreted to be relevant to the present day. When Christians like Temi interpret their religious beliefs, they stand firmly by it but in doing so, place these interpretations on others, and say it is God's word. Then because many women view God's word as supreme, as demonstrated in Figure 1, they begin to also imbibe these beliefs, hesitant to dispute it. When Christianity is used to defend gender norms, household cultural norms, or human interaction, it involves people taking personal beliefs and making them social and hard to dispute, using any other ideals - legal or cultural. In cases of domestic violence when religious beliefs are used as the foundation of ideology around domestic violence, religious interpretations are passed down between people, using the power of religion, that it becomes hard to dispute because it comes from a supernatural being. For example, if a woman who encounters domestic violence goes to church to seek support and advice on how to respond, if she is told to return back to her husband because of the

religious belief that God is against marital conflict or separation as a whole if she places religion on this pedestal, it is hard for her to dispute this, because it comes from the supreme order.

People who make religion their ultimate are more vulnerable to following every religious belief because they believe it is expected of them by God, but they are also likely to perpetuate their religious interpretations onto others. This becomes dangerous when those beliefs are harmful.

*Women view religion as a lifestyle enforced during their childhood by their parents.*

Some participants described having a very religious lifestyle growing up with their parents. Their parents took them to church every Sunday, organized family prayer and bible sessions, and required them to be active in the church. They were raised the Christian way, with Christian ideals used to measure right and wrong. When they were young, they had no say in what these Christian values were and followed through with how they were raised without thinking too deeply about making a personal connection with religion itself. These women share that they have carried this view of religion into their adult life. They practice Christianity and see it as the supreme order, but they don't think too much of its ways because it wasn't a conscious decision they made themselves. These people are also likely to be very susceptible to following religious beliefs and interpretations as the beliefs they currently have are biblical interpretations from someone else. Oni, a 21-year-old law student, and entrepreneur shared the ways Christianity was implemented daily throughout her childhood, sharing the daily routines her family enforced for her and her siblings. She shared:

Basically, like my family, when we wake up in the morning, we have to do family prayer and pray together all of that. We are all around. We have to pray together before we eat, we pray together before we go to bed, we pray together and all of that

Oni, from her childhood was always taught that religion was supreme, the foremost part of her day, and guided her every childhood. She carried these teachings into adulthood and shared that

even after leaving home for school, she maintained this routine without thinking too much of it because it was the way things had always been.

Dayo, a 27-year-old lawyer living in Nigeria, shared that her parents dictated her dressing style when she was younger, using religion as justification:

I wasn't allowed to wear trousers till my 3rd year in school. You are a christian and you cannot be wearing trousers

She shared that her parents' teachings on her dressing influenced her till she grew up. She just started wearing trousers and earrings and it was considered jarring to her family and church. In this case, the religious beliefs she followed were not necessarily from the bible or justified that way as there is no line in the bible that specifically mentions trousers. However, religious leaders in her life, backed up this rule with the interpretation of their Bible readings, and this rule followed her through her life.

Another way religious beliefs are passed on is seen in how parents are particular about the church or denomination they, and by virtue, their children attend. Participants note that they do not have a strong affiliation to denominations, but their parents were usually the ones that did, through childhood and sometimes into adulthood. For them to be a Christian is to follow the doctrines of God and His institutions, therefore churches and religious denominations. Deviating from the ideal of a denomination you have attached your life to all these years felt synonymous with deviating from Christianity itself. For parents who saw religion as their lifestyle, they saw religion as analogous to their religious institutions. Dayo shared a story of how her parents reacted very negatively toward her when she decided to quit her parents' church. She was 18 years old at the time and had just recently started attending a different church at University. She told her father about her decision to switch to a different church and he withdrew the allowance he initially planned to give her. He didn't call or check up on her for the two months that

followed. Her father reacted strongly to her choice to change her church because he views a person's church as central to how they worship God. Many people derive their interpretation of the bible from their religious leaders and their church. Hence, changing your church can be said to be analogous to changing your view of God. Different churches, and church denominations interpret the bible differently. This underscores the fluidity of religious beliefs and how it is different for people. Hence, taking one religious interpretation and making it social 'law' could be harmful because it may not benefit everyone. Furthermore, since women in Nigeria place Christian beliefs on a pedestal, these beliefs are passed on without logical reevaluation. As we will explore later in this paper, when these religious beliefs are used to justify gender norms it could be detrimental.

Women who view their religion as a belief system they got from their parents are interesting because they present a population of people who follow the religious beliefs they were taught. These women turn to these religious denominations for guidance and they take the teachings from this denomination and go on to use them in their everyday life, some without reevaluating how it actually fits into their needs and desires as humans. This makes them susceptible to harmful religious interpretations and they are also able to perpetuate religious beliefs because they are usually rigid in the belief systems they got from their parents.

#### *Women who see religion as a means of worship*

Though most participants in this study see religion as a lifestyle, other participants viewed religion's impact on their life as a way to connect to the spiritual, an activity that keeps them grounded. They view their religion as part of their life but acknowledge their independent ability to make decisions outside or contrary to their religion's dictates. Being a Christian doesn't define everything they do, it is a part of their identity but does not shape all of their identity.

Adaku, a 27-year-old Nigerian woman who works with the Ekiti state government, shared that she considers herself Christian but a liberal-minded person. When asked to rate how much religion affects her actions from 1-5, with 1 being that it has the smallest effect to 5 being that it has the most effect, She rated it 0. She defines being a liberal person as:

I believe in God. I believe directly in common sense. I don't believe everything that is being dished out with the bible. So sometimes when they say something that makes me sick, I shut my head off and go home

Adaku believes in her relationship with God, but she draws a strong line between that relationship and the effect that relationship has on her life. She practices Christianity but she argues that this belief does not necessarily have to influence everything she does. There should still be common sense applied to everyday situations. People should still use logic when they are thinking about the decisions they want to make in their lives. They should not just do things without not thinking deeply about them. She is less susceptible to following every religious belief in the community. She is also not likely to perpetuate her beliefs onto others because she views her belief as personal. Adaku defines religion as a means of worship saying

It is a means of worship. We were created for a sole reason to worship God. So religion is a passage where we offer our service to God. Something between you and God, it is a medium to offer your sacrifice to God

For Adaku, religion is a pathway for her to connect with the supernatural but has little practical influence on the way she lives her life. She mentioned that she doesn't attend church quite frequently, because of the rigidity and institutionality of it all, but she still considers herself someone who has a relationship with God.

Dayo shares a similar view as Adaku, on the role religion plays in her life. She doesn't view her Christianity as a religion but rather views it as an active relationship with Christ:

I like to make a difference between religion and the active relationship, because for me, religion is like, I'm going to church, be religious, going to church,

observing some dictates, doctrines. Different churches have different doctrines and you are trying to observe them, but when you have a relationship with Christ, that is liberating, in what it does to your mind.

She views being religious as being tied to doctrines, denominations, or being tied to a church, wherein those factors map out your life while having an active relationship focuses on that connection and pathway to Christ. Dayo emphasized the importance of building this connection over drawing out religious laws that dictate a person's lifestyle. She believes that simply following religious laws without applying wisdom and grace, is what makes people fail in Christianity, because they would fall into loopholes that are harmful to others but justify them using religion. In the case of domestic violence, these loopholes are very important. Because religion has a stronghold on society, many individuals see religious institutions, the bible, the church, and its leaders as God and follow their doctrines though some of these teachings could be coming from a person, and their interpretation and biases of what the bible says. A situation like this is very possible when religion is used to justify domestic violence because there is no literal space in the bible where the bible addresses every possible experience of violence, but people interpret the bible to understand these instances. And sometimes, these interpretations are announced as God's teachings, even in harmful ways. Sadly, because of the stronghold religion has in Nigeria, all these women still express feeling pressure to apply religious teachings to how they shape their lives and household.

#### *Religion's influence on women's actions.*

Regardless of how participants defined being Christian and its impact on their daily decisions, every participant imputed religious activities into their daily or at the very least weekly interactions. This ranged from people who joined prayer meetings or fellowships every morning when they woke up to participants who were pastors. The predominance of religious

activities in everyone’s lives including the lives of people who don’t define religion as a lifestyle, goes to show how deeply rooted religion is in individual cultures. To understand how frequently Christian Nigerian women put themselves in religious spaces and use this to quantify Christianity’s stronghold on behaviors in Nigeria, we asked participants in our survey to share how many times they go to church. Figure 2 highlights this information, with people having varying levels of commitment to fulfilling this religious obligation.

**Figure 2. Frequency of church attendance as reported by survey participants.**

	Total (N=79)	
	(n)	(%)
Only on Sundays	37	47%
Twice in a week	4	5%
Wednesday and Sunday	2	3%
When there is a Major Event	13	16%
Sundays and Some Weekdays	1	1%
Sundays and a few special events	2	3%
Sunday, Wednesday and Fridays	1	1%
Everyday	4	5%
Sometimes	1	1%
Once in a while	2	3%
I barely go to church	1	1%
Sundays and other times virtually	1	1%
3 times a week	5	6%
Every 2 weeks	1	1%
Ocassionally. I usually watch mass online	1	1%
Sundays, Wednesdays, Saturdays	1	1%
Never	0	0%

There are several variations of church attendance, some people go every day, others go on Sundays and other times, and some go only on Sundays. I included a broad summary of all the responses from participants to highlight the intricate difference in how participants define the frequency they go to church. For example, participants who say they go to church “Three times in a week” are communicating a different level of commitment from participants who indicate they go to church “Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays”, with the latter indicating a higher level

of commitment. It is also significant to note that though 47% of respondents mentioned that they only go to church on Sundays, no respondent said they never go to church, though the option was mentioned in the survey. This illustrates how the religious practice and frequent receipt of religious teachings is the common lifestyle in Nigeria. Women who see religion as a lifestyle and those who do not practice their religion by seeking frequent religious teachings. This supports the data from Figure 1 that women place religion highly in their lives.

Though participants shared different viewpoints on the role their faith plays in their life, they interacted with religion the same way. When Joke, a 21-year-old law student, was asked to describe the occurrences of her day-to-day life, she began by describing the religious aspect of her day. Though this could be because the interview description mentioned religion, it is interesting that she mentioned the religious part of her day first, without any nudge in the question, asking her to include this:

My day majorly consists of my devotion and family devotion, work or school work, house chores and fellowship activities depending on the day of the week...During the holidays I wake up around 6:30 am for morning devotion. On the days I go to work, I wake up around 5am to prepare and join the family devotion and leave for work after the morning devotion

Joke wakes up very early in the morning to ensure she inputs her devotion into her day. Waking up at 5 am to practice her religious activities and do the handful of other chores she has for the day shows her commitment to maintaining a Christian lifestyle. It is not shocking that women like Joke go the extra mile to maintain a Christian lifestyle. What is more interesting was that Adaku, who sees religion as a means of worship, also does the same thing every day. Regardless of how people view their religion, women in Nigeria still observe religious activities. I initially hypothesized that only the people who view religion as a way of life would do this, because for



others, there is leeway for them to redefine and self-define the parameters around their relationship with God. However, this was not the case.

Another similarity we see amongst all women regardless of how they practice their religion is in how they respond to conflict. Participants highlighted that most Christian women in Nigeria see prayer as the immediate and only response to a crisis. When there is a problem, the first strategy of response from Nigerian women is to pray. Participants shared that people turned first to prayer in a way that evades them of the personal responsibility to seek a solution to the issue themselves. Ife, a 21-year-old Masters student in English Literature, described how this behavior is seen in political contexts. During the time of elections, when people have the social and civil ability to change their leaders, there is usually a low turnout to vote (Yusuf). But when you ask people about the situation of the country and what they planned to do, they would only say pray:

A lot of people would say pray for the country, Nigeria would be great again. And the country being better, yes the leaders have a role to play but it is a collective responsibility. For instance, you walk into an office and people are not doing what they are supposed to

Regardless of where women stand on how they worship God, they lean on prayer first when it comes to a crisis. This further reiterates the argument that religion is seen as the supreme solution and guide of all situations in Nigeria.

One of the reasons religious practices permeates the lives of women in Nigeria is because of living conditions in Nigeria. Participants shared that living in Nigeria is hard, and one could feel helpless without leaning on a supernatural authority. This corresponds to a famous Marx quote- the Opium of the people, which one of the participants shared to explain why Nigerians are quite religious (Ife)- “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people” (line 19; Introduction).

Despite people's beliefs on how they want to be religious, there is still a strong incentive to pray for better personal living conditions. Yetunde, a 47-year-old female pastor in Nigeria expressed this belief saying:

I turn to prayer everyday. You can't be in this part of the world and not pray. On social media they make jest of Nigerians that we pray about everything. But for your emotions to be stable in this part of the world, you turn to prayer. Because prayer is talking to God

Yetunde shared that people turn to God for different things because of all the stresses in Nigeria. People pray for God to help their businesses flourish, or for God to help their relationships. The social and economic condition in Nigeria motivates people to pray despite how they view Christianity as an institution. Another reason why Nigerian women practice religion so habitually is because religion is ingrained into the system and culture of Nigeria as a whole.

## **PART 2: RELIGION'S INFLUENCE ON CULTURE AND GENDER NORMS IN NIGERIA.**

Participants outlined that religion is pervasive in Nigeria's culture. Different traditions, norms, and cultural beliefs are derived from religious principles, and they gain their credibility via this means.

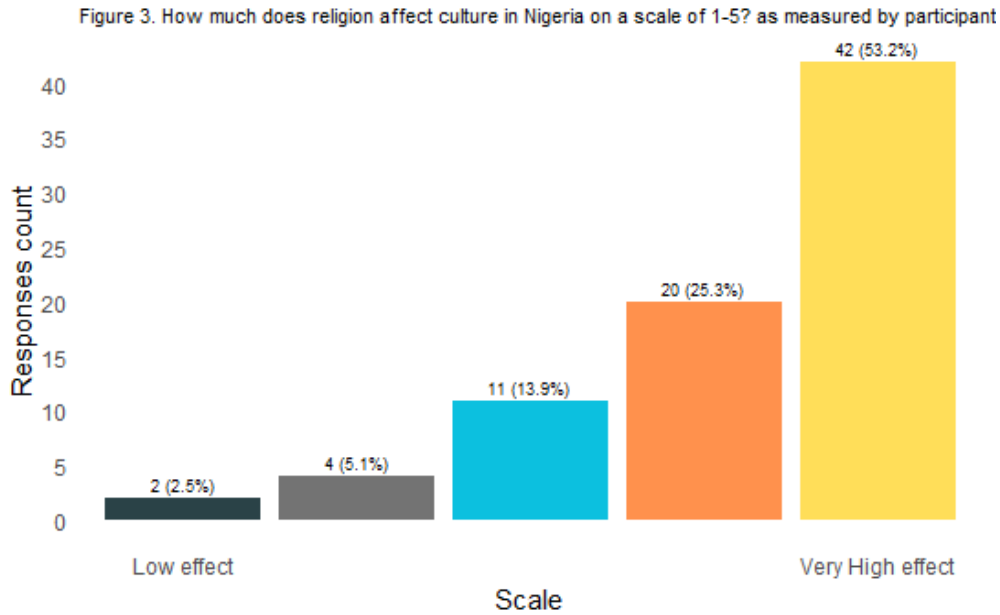


Figure 3 shows how much participants believe that religion affects culture in Nigeria. Only 2% of women believed that religion had a low effect on culture. More than half of the women think religion has a very large effect on culture in Nigeria. Participants shared that religion has an effect on three major aspects of culture- ethnic traditions, government and the law, and social expectations of behavior. The effect religion has on culture stems largely from the stronghold it has on individual actions. Because most people shared that religion has a medium to high influence on their behavior, this spills over into how they contribute to society and shape Nigeria’s culture. For this part, I will be using Christianity as a case study to evaluate religion’s influence on Nigeria’s cultures. Participants used examples from other forms of religion (Muslim and Traditional) to explain their viewpoints about religion's effect on culture, but they shared that these viewpoints are also seen in the Christian community. Due to limitations in my data points, I will be evaluating culture here homogeneously and generally,

although Nigeria has 300+ cultures. Though there are major differences in how religion affects different cultures, my findings would focus on the generalizable themes amongst them.

Religion's effect on ethnic traditions.

Many ethnic traditions derive their customs from religious texts, and these texts continue to give these customs meaning. Before the arrival of missionaries into Nigeria, most of Nigeria's cultural norms were derived from traditional religions. Traditional religion and culture were so interwoven together that different tribal nations and ethnicities based their traditional beliefs on what was wanted by divine beings. Religion partaked fully in all parts of the traditional society including its beliefs, sacred myths, and rituals (Okeke et al). An example of a traditional belief based on traditional religion is seen in Igboland with the traditional god of the Earth *Ala*, who they believe gives the earth sustenance and vital resources such as food, crops and water. *Ala*, according to Iwe, is the sustainer of all lives and fertility. *Ala* was so sacred that anyone who committed an abomination against it did not hope to survive. A typical example is found in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where Okonkwo, the protagonist had to flee from Umuofia for 7 years for committing homicide, a crime particularly abhorrent to the earth (*Ala*) (Okeke et al). *Ala* is responsible for public morality and offenses against the law are against *Ala*. The Igbos gave their children names connected with *Ala*, for example, *Ala emeka*- the earth has done a lot. As we see from this example, religion has always had a stronghold on Nigeria's traditions from pre-colonial times. The people in Igboland used the desires of their god to shape the traditions and customs of their community. Nigerian Christian women are very aware of how religion shaped old traditions in Nigeria and consider it as how things are. They expressed that some of the beliefs that stemmed from the traditional gods, continue today and form a significant feature of the customs of ethnic groups in Nigeria. Temi highlighted this saying:

Religion has always been a huge part of Nigerian culture. Even before Christianity and Islam were introduced into Nigeria, our traditional religions shaped our culture. For example, because it was believed that the gods required it, some human sacrifices had to be made to appease them when there was famine or when the people sinned

The supremacy of a divine has always been a guiding light for cultures in Nigeria. Women in Nigeria acknowledge this supremacy as the way things are and see value in it. Though missionaries through colonization came to Nigeria and shifted the predominant religion away from traditional religions, this reliance on religion to mold the society remained just as intense. What we see after Western religions is a shift in whom these belief systems are based because Western Gods were seen as superior. In Christianity, traditional beliefs that guided human customs around how to respond to a problem, marriage, burying the dead, etc, evolved to follow the precepts of God. Temi highlighted this shift in people's response to challenges:

Nowadays when people sin or there's a calamity, we don't offer sacrifices, but we fast and pray for days and weeks for God's deliverance.

It is necessary to point out the shift in how Nigerians respond to challenges i.e the shift from offering sacrifices as done in traditional systems to fasting and praying done now. Traditional Gods like Ogun in Yoruba culture used to require that people offer dogs, goats, meat, cows, etc to get a response to their demands in times of trouble, and this used to be the norm (Awolalu 82). However, now with Western religions being more dominant, the norm is for people to fast, and seek God's face when they are in need. Regardless, the divine remains and people still turn to him for guidance on shaping cultural beliefs. When situations of domestic violence happen in these cultures because the divine is the one that shapes traditions, then the advice cultural leaders give or the general behavior that is considered a culturally acceptable response has been drawn out from the instructions of the divine.

## Religion's Effect on Government and Law

In Nigeria, religion also influences politics and legal structures. Although the constitution bars the federal and state governments from adopting a state religion, prohibits religious discrimination, and allows for individuals' freedom to choose their religion, religion is still used as the measuring stick for many legislations. For example, in the case of LGBT rights, the general public objected to homosexuality primarily on the basis of religious beliefs and perceptions of what constitutes African culture and tradition. This led to the legalization of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill (HRW, 2016). The constitution also provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law in addition to common law civil courts (“Nigeria-United States Department of State”). Sharia is the ideal form of divine guidance that Muslims follow to live a righteous life. It is the guidance Muslims believe God provided them on a range of spiritual and worldly matters. Human interpretations of sharia, or fiqh, are the basis of Islamic law today (Robinson). Abimbola, a 22-year-old, 3rd year accounting student living in Nigeria shared how Nigeria as a legal society is dependent on religion to define its values:

So where we are right now as a country, as a continent, is very dependent on our religion, our culture, our ethnicity... there are parts of Nigeria that have laws which are generalized to everybody in that place but is addicted to a particular religion that everyone may not have

Indeed, in the Hausa dominant North of Nigeria, Sharia law is dominant in the legal system. This means everyone who lives there is expected to abide by Sharia law, though it is possible that everyone there is not Islam.

Religion is also a major factor people consider when voting for representatives during Nigeria's elections. People admit to voting along religious lines because they believe that someone of a similar religious identity would possess the same values. Religion has influenced

how state power is captured in Nigeria. This can be seen in the political statements of religious institutions, their choice of candidates, and the inclination of candidates to turn to their religious communities for support. Many Nigerians admit to voting for a particular candidate because they are Christian, Muslim etc. The tensions between different religious communities seen in the prevalence of conflict in Nigeria further re-enforces the divide amongst religious lines<sup>3</sup>.

(Balogun). Abimbola shared how she saw this reflected in Nigeria during the 2023 elections:

Citing the example of the elections we have on Saturday, you hear people say things like, oh, because he's a Muslim, is why I am voting for him, or you hear people say, because he is Christian is why I am voting for him

Religion's influence on politics, legislations, and elections demonstrates how religion forms not only cultural structures but also legal ones as well. If a legislative leader is voted into power across religious lines, the bills, and policies he legislates for would also be across religious lines. So, if for example, his religion does not believe in the harmful impact of domestic violence, he would not propose or vote for bills that do. In this way, his religious beliefs have gone beyond him into formal legal structures. This highlights religion's influence on not only culture but also formal legal structures.

#### Religion's effect on gender norms as a social behavior

Participants noted that society's parameters on how a woman should behave are usually derived from and reinforced by religion. In Nigeria, the behavior and expectations of women and men in a household are derived and supported by religious beliefs. Men are seen as the head of

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<sup>3</sup> Violent conflicts between predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen and predominantly Christian farmers in the North Central states continued throughout the year. For example, according to ACLED data, total civilian deaths numbered 2,454 during the year, compared with 2,198 in 2019 and 3,106 in 2018. Some domestic and international Christian groups stated that Muslim Fulani herdsmen were targeting Christian farmers because of their religion. Local Muslim and herder organizations said unaffiliated Fulani were the targets of Christian revenge killings.

the household and women are expected to submit to their husbands, by taking care of them and their home. Temi shared this system saying:

I remember being told from a very young age that wives are to submit to their husbands, the husband is the Head of the Home and the provider, while the wife is the caregiver

Participants shared that this position is central to cultural definitions of a Nigerian home but is also ground in biblical texts that establish the man as the head of the household<sup>4</sup> and tells women to submit to their husbands in everything. Also, Jesus Christ is identified in many religious contexts as a man who goes further in establishing men as the head of the household. As a result, men are not taught to do household chores, because that is the responsibility a woman is meant to carry out in submission to her husband.

Women, on the other hand, are expected to take on domestic responsibilities. The expectations of how women should behave when it comes to domestic responsibilities are justified as Christian values. Women are the ones in charge of taking care of the household, regardless of any external duties they have. So regardless of if a woman works a full-time job, has children, or other additional activities she might be engaged in, the sole responsibility of taking care of a home is placed on her. Women have been bestowed these responsibilities from a young age, with the distinction starting from when they were girls.

Adaku shared the difference between her sister's and brother's abilities in the home, highlighting how gender expectations of women when it comes to domestic responsibilities have shaped his incapacity:

My younger brother doesn't know how to boil water, and sweep the ground. My younger sister would do all the chores in the house...women are programmed to do everything in the house, do everything that human beings should know how

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 5:22-24 (NKJV)- Wives submit to their husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.



to do. You should know how to cook for yourself because you have a mouth to eat

Lade, a 21-year-old woman in Nigeria, in her 5th year in university, also expressed that her brother and sister were treated dissimilarly when it came to household responsibilities

So I see the way my mom wants my sister to do more housework than my brother, or my mom. Statements like my brother are the man of the house or my brother should be respected when my younger sister and brother have a conflict. There is a mandatory nature for my sister to be clean, tidy, organized, and focused, but there is a lenient nature for my brother

In her case, her mom is one of the enforcers of this role distinction. As a result of the mom's position in their lives, as a figure of authority, and one of the major agents for socialization, her defining these roles as such will have long-lasting roll over effects on keeping these norms in generations to come, with the possibility of defining how Lade's siblings behave in their matrimonial home.

The view of men as the head of the household extends into religious institutions that place men at the forefront of religious work. The General overseer of churches in Nigeria is usually termed the Pastor of the church. The highest role a woman can attain is that of the wife of the Pastor (Pastor Mrs). Very rarely would you see a female pastor being the general overseer in a church in Nigeria. There is a clear gender divide in the respect and authority afforded to men versus women. Abimbola shared how women in some churches are told to sit at the back of the service so men can sit at the front:

Most religions [in Nigeria], the men are said to be the ones doing it. The women are told to sit back and relax. I don't want to offend another person's religion, but there are some religions that have said that the men have to sit at the front in their place of worship, and the women have to sit at the back. And psychologically, it just sends a very nasty message... Because religion is a part of us, that dictates our culture, traditions, it dictates a lot of gender roles here in Nigeria

Women in churches are asked to clear out of the way for men to take higher positions. They are not treated as equals, even in trivial things like sitting positions. Women aren't allowed to interact in the church in the same way as men. For example, in some churches, women are asked to keep quiet in submission in the church<sup>5</sup> in accordance with the bible text that speaks on women speaking in activities of the church. Since religious institutions draw boundaries around gender in this way, they are usually extrapolated out into society and used to create gender structures outside of the church that placed men above women. It is important to highlight though that these Christian values which were used to separate women are based on people's understanding of the bible, because certain churches tell women to be silent, while others disagree citing female religious leaders in the bible. Yetunde shared this example to show how women's positioning in the church and household is very subjective and based on people's understanding of the bible:

Misunderstanding of the bible is what made them to relegate women when it comes to religion. When you look at the old testament when a woman is doing her period she was not allowed to go to church, but it's not like that. A woman can go to church on her period

This situation highlights another way in which the individual interpretation of the bible forms the building blocks of society. Whether or not the bible does say women should be silent in the church is beyond the scope of this paper, but Nigerians have taken the bible quote and interpreted it in different ways that could be positive or negative to people's experiences. And these experiences don't stop at the church but have gone deeper now into the way households' function.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 2:11-14 (NKJV)- Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.

Another one of society's increased expectations of women is seen in the pressure for women to be increasingly modest. Women are expected to be modest in the ways they dress, in the way they behave, and especially in their interactions with men. These messages were increasingly present for women over men and placed the impetus of propriety on the woman's shoulders. Participants expressed that this corresponds with the bible's teaching that women should be modest, as they are the guides for purity in the world<sup>6</sup>. One way temperance is practiced is through the dressing. A popular Nigerian saying is a way you dress is the way you would be addressed. A woman who wears short skirts or revealing blouses is said to be automatically stirring the interaction with men to be sexual. The belief is that if a woman is seen to wear an outfit that is more modest, then the man would be more likely to approach her with less sexual intentions, like a relationship, friendships, or in a professional sense. Adaku, a 28-year-old woman living in Nigeria, discussed how religion was used to shape societal expectations of her as a woman. She, like other women, was asked to temper the way she dressed on behalf of men and women, based on Christian teachings:

...covering your body because of something about a boy, and not because you are covering it for God, really, but because of some boy who would look at you in some way. And that is sick. The thought of limiting myself because of another human being and limiting your choices too is very sick... I really never was comfortable. I didn't wear armless tops, I don't wear trousers, I don't wear makeup. I didn't have a piercing

Women like Adaku feel the pressure to determine their interactions with men through their dressing. People interpreted the bible to mean that the impetus of being pure and modest in relationships should be placed on the woman. However, because this is external pressure, devoid

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<sup>6</sup> 1st Peter 3:3-4 (NIV) Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. <sup>4</sup> Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

of their personal choice, participants shared great discontent with this responsibility. Because the burden of modesty is placed on Christian women, men are permitted to not act modestly. Hence, men are more likely to pursue 'impure' behaviors such as catcalling, groping sexual assault, etc towards women because they were not raised with the same pressure to be modest (Olusanya). Christian women bear the burden of modesty because the interpretation of the bible placed the responsibility to be pure upon them.

Evaluating how Christianity has influenced how women view their relationships with men is beneficial to evaluating how these relationships could lead to negative outcomes like domestic violence. Outside of men being constantly placed above women in formal and informal settings, it is also important to evaluate how gender roles manifest in seemingly equal relationships. This includes platonic, familial, and romantic relationships. So, do Christian values predominantly create the space for physical, emotional, and mental intimacy? Do women feel comfortable building connections with the opposite sex the same way they build them with people of the same sex? If they do not, what societal pressures on gender cause these differences and how did religion play a role in shaping these societal pressures? The way women interact with men in Nigeria plays a huge role in determining how personal relationships are shaped. Participants noted mixed positions when asked about their relationships with men around them. Some of them said it was easy and normal to be friends with men while others denoted a barrier. Abimbola shared that she was not the most comfortable with men because she grew up in a religious community that placed barriers between girls and boys:

In secondary school, boarding school, boys and girls were always different. We were always separated in everything. And it was a religious thing because it was a religious school. We had separate dining halls; we were separated in church; there was a massive division in class; we were separated on the assembly ground. Because this happened in my formative years. It makes me kind of shy away from the male agenda

Boarding schools are a major part of secondary education in Nigeria. They were brought by Christian missionaries to Nigeria. This was because parents at the time were uneducated and the missionaries believed that the students needed to have enough time in a structured environment to grow properly. Boys and girls are usually separated in these boarding schools. The separation of boarding schools was enforced for the sake of purity and to reduce temptation among boys and girls (Riordan 521-522). The adolescent culture that emphasizes the importance of physical attractiveness, adolescent attraction, and heterosexual popularity, was seen as a hindrance to the attainment of educational goals. Same-sex secondary schools or facilities were created to mitigate this culture. Usually, boarding school facilities are separated by gender, and this keeps their experiences apart though they occupy the same physical location and engage in the same activities (Adebumit). This was the case for Abimbola in her childhood. Because boys and girls were separated and she did not have many interactions with them, this made Abimbola less comfortable interacting with men. The structure of the boarding school prevented boys and girls from forming experiences together that would build a bond between them. Raising girls and boys differently makes them see each other as others, living in a separate and distant world from their own. Therefore, this prevents them from being able to build strong interpersonal relationships with them based on understanding, empathy, and trust. Since interactions between boys and girls are not prioritized in child growth, there is no investment in teaching healthy ways to interact with each other in platonic, professional, and romantic relationships. As a result, some Nigerian children grow up with different communication styles, except now as an adult, there is a new expectation for them to settle down and build a life together. Given that they weren't raised with the tools to interact appropriately with each other, this is one of the precursors of conflicts and arguments that advance into violence. The unequal lives, the majority of boys and girls grow up

with in Nigeria go a long way in establishing the physical, emotional, and social boundaries that exist between men and women. Christian beliefs are seen to infiltrate every fiber of these interactions, from the establishment of boarding schools to the otherness seen with gender expectations to Nigeria's electoral fabric, and customary traditions. Every nook which can be turned is subject to people's interpretation of their beliefs. Hence it is important for us to investigate the cultural beliefs that permit IPV in Nigeria and see if they are grounded and justified by religion.

### **PART 3: RELIGION'S INFLUENCE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.**

Diving into the social issue this paper aims to focus on, I learnt that participants acknowledge the prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria. Many women shared that they knew friends, neighbors and family members who have or currently encounter some form of assault in their homes. Participants defined domestic violence as a physical assault. Although the verbal, mental or emotional assault was still considered harmful, when domestic violence was mentioned the image that came to their mind involved some form of physical harm. Domestic violence always included but was not limited to a husband physically harming his wife. This helps us place a mental image on the degree of violence Nigerian women are thinking of when they discuss domestic violence in Nigeria. Participants shared examples that were in line with Graham and Flynn's proximal and distal factors that lead to domestic violence. For proximal factors, they pointed to Level III precursors to violence saying that the lack of understanding, communication, and patience could lead to domestic violence. These factors are situational and focus on the interactions between the two individuals in the relationship. Importantly, participants mentioned that level III precursors to violence usually only happened because Level I precursors already existed. Participants did not talk much about Level II precursors i.e, stress,

alcohol and drug abuse, or depression as dominant influencers of domestic violence in Christian households in Nigeria. Instead, level I precursors (most distal) were considered the most influential factors that cause domestic violence. For these, the major distal factors they pointed to were the upbringing of members involved and society's beliefs that reinforce domestic violence.

### People's upbringing

What children see in the relationships around them as they grow up impacts how they shape their relationships as adults. This includes how adults interact with them and how adults interact with each other. The way a household is structured depends on the social structures that they look to as a guide. In very Christian homes, religious structures guide these interactions and how the home is formed generally. How adults interact forms the basis of how children think they should shape their own lives. Participants shared that this concept is one of the major psychological details that form violent relationships in Nigeria. Ife shared that if a child sees his dad abuse their mom, siblings, or themselves, they will think that abuse was the standard of treating people. They will go on to do the same with the individuals they form relationships with, in the future. More importantly, if this form of treatment was defined as love, the person will go on to show this form of "love" to their partner in the future. Thus, the act of violence would be passed across generations. Ife said:

Domestic violence is passed from generation to generation. Most people who abuse other people if you check, they grew up around people who were abused or grew up seeing people abuse other people

Upbringing affects domestic violence distally because it is not a cause that occurs in the past few hours or days of the person, rather it is something that shaped the person's experience from when they were little, and established the grounds on what is permitted in the household relationships they shape for themselves. Just as upbringing in this form shapes the mindset of perpetrators of

domestic violence, it also shapes the mindset of victims. Abimbola explained that people who are raised not to speak up or express their pains or concerns grow up to be unable to speak up for themselves or seek help in situations of danger:

Many people grew up being shut out, regardless of gender. They grow up being shut down saying they are children. They are taught not to speak up right from when they are little. I for sure, know when i was growing up, I was shut down a lot of times but I still talked *\*laughs\**

It is very common for children to be shut down when they try to express their opinions in Nigeria. Abimbola laughed at the end, which further reinforced her disbelief at her speaking up because her speaking was very far from the norm of what was expected. Because Nigeria's culture centers on respect for elders, this manifests in how children are only allowed to speak with permission from elders. This causes many children to feel unable to share their opinions, especially when it might be in dissent to someone with authority. Raising children this way could make them grow up unable to defend themselves in situations of violence or make them hesitant or dishonest about the life they would want for themselves. Consequently, because many women are socialized to obey the rules and not speak up in dissent to authority, they turn to societal leaders like religious leaders or religious institutions for guidance and domestic violence cases.

#### *Society's beliefs that reinforce domestic violence*

In the Christian dominant nation of Nigeria, society's beliefs that keep domestic violence prevalent are upheld with the interpretations of quotes from the bible. The major beliefs participants mentioned are (1) a woman should be submissive and disciplined as an act of love and (2) the aversion to separation and divorce. These views are justified with religious principles.

*The belief that a woman should be submissive and disciplined as an act of love.*

One of the major reasons participants shared that domestic violence occurs stems from the aforementioned religious and cultural belief that the man is the head of the household.



Women are taught to submit to their husbands and obey their authority without dispute. This belief is reinforced by the biblical passages mentioned above. In heterosexual relationships in Nigeria, conflicts arise when a woman attempts to go against this established hierarchical structure. This belief system aligns with feminist and power theory, highlighting societies' encouragement of male dominance and female subordination in relationships (Bell and Naugle 1097-1098). The patriarchal structure of Nigeria gives the power in a relationship to men by default. This means they control the pace the relationship goes i.e emotional and physical intimacy, they have the last say when it comes to decision making, they have financial power in the relationship, and they have lower pressure to commit to the relationship (men are less likely to stay in a relationship because of marital pressure compared to women). On the other hand, women are expected to submit to their husbands by obeying their words without dispute, performing domestic responsibilities, and elevating their husband's needs above their own. Conflict happens when a woman tries to tilt the balance of power by standing her ground in an argument or behaving opposite to her partner's expectations. This power imbalance, combined with other factors e.g., upbringing etc., excavates these conflicts into domestic violence situations. Temi gave an example of an actual situation where this power imbalance led to IPV:

My neighbor was heavily pregnant with her second child. One night, I woke up to the sounds of her running, screaming and crying. Her husband was beating her. I later learned that he did that because she did not want to cook the exact meal he wanted for him, when he returned home. It is not unusual to hear of husbands beating their wives because she didn't obey something he said completely, or because she talked back or because she challenged his authority.

Even though the wife was pregnant, the husband still maintained his expectation that his wife obeys his authority. The wife challenged the power structure when she disobeyed him by making a different meal than he requested. All my participants asserted that domestic violence was always justified using patriarchal viewpoints. Men are viewed as lords over their wives, and

whenever their authority is challenged there must be a consequence. This viewpoint of men as lords over their wives, is said to be backed by God's word in the bible, that tells women to be submissive to their husbands who are the head of the household. Hence when IPV occurs, women feel pressure to endure domestic violence in authority to their husbands because of religious beliefs.

In Nigeria, gender socialization encourages men to take on positions of power and entrusts to them: Invisibility and the belief that they can do no wrong. They are allowed to get away with many behaviors, including being aggressive and hot-tempered in relationships. As a result, when DV occurs, the situation is downplayed, with the woman being told that her experiences are normal and acceptable. Abimbola explained how women are usually told to appease their male partners because men behave that way:

When a man is being aggressive towards them, they are told that, that's how a guy should be. Some people don't even recognize that this person is actually being abusive towards me. They say 'oh he is a man, that is why he is doing this'... a lot of people are taught to tolerate things because that is how things are supposed to be

Men are allowed to portray acts of aggression and violence towards their partners, and this behavior is permitted as the way men behave. Sometimes, domestic violence is justified in Nigeria as a way to discipline the inferior woman. In these cases, the bible is used to substantiate this belief. Temi shared how she had heard the quote in the bible that defends discipline, being used to justify why a man can discipline his wife:

It is not uncommon to hear a Nigerian woman say that a husband 'disciplining' his wife is a sign of love

This bible quote<sup>7</sup> has been interpreted in various religious spaces in Nigeria to justify domestic violence. Women have been told to accept it if domestic violence is done to them because it shows that their husband loves them. It is because of these beliefs that men are permitted to chastise their wives. It is important to point out how women are the ones who share this quote as justification for their position in society. Temi said it's not uncommon to hear a Nigerian woman make this statement. This quote shows how even Nigerian women, the recipients of violence in this case, demonstrate an acceptance of this viewpoint, since it is rooted in religious beliefs.

In Nigeria, the woman is usually blamed in situations of domestic violence. The argument is that the woman did something wrong which triggered her husband to reprimand her for wrongdoing. The way to avoid punishment was to be well behaved, obedient and give in to the position of the man as the head of the household. Since men in Nigeria are believed to be unable to do anything wrong, when a man hurts his wife, the woman is questioned first about what she did wrong. Most times she is asked to return and apologize to her husband. Bose shared an example of a scenario when a woman was blamed for offending her husband to a point where he chastised her:

Some people would say you are trying to disgrace your husband, they would not believe you or they would say the fault is from you. if you had been a good wife, then your husband would not beat you, or if you had been a submissive wife. I was talking to one of my girl friends, and we were talking about a [case of domestic violence] that happened, and all [my girlfriend] had to say [about the case] was that if the wife had been a good woman, the husband would not have been angry enough to beat her

Bose and her friend were talking about a story of a church member. On the day of the incident they were discussing, the church member was the only one at home. She was angry at her

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<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 12:5-6 (NKJV): And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My sons, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.

husband and was talking loudly to herself and yelling profanities upon the name of her husband. Unbeknownst to her, her husband had arrived and heard everything she was saying. When the husband walked in, because he knew all that had happened, he was very angry when his wife tried to act like all was well and raised his hand. The justification was that the husband felt very disrespected by the way his wife spoke about him. Bose's friend defended the husband and said the lady was disrespectful to her husband and she needed to be chastised. This story shows where society stands when it comes to domestic violence and how Christian beliefs are used to sustain this behavior. There are people who see IPV as indefensible. But others see it as necessary, way women are kept in submission to their husbands.

*The church's aversion to separation even in times of conflicts.*

When a woman goes through many occurrences of domestic violence in a relationship, there comes a time when the woman decides to withdraw from the relationship. Something interesting I noticed with participants is that they viewed resolution in cases of domestic violence as a woman leaving the relationship. When participants were asked to share what they would advise people to do in the case of domestic violence, a large majority of them shared variations of creating opportunities for the victim to leave the relationship. Nigeria is a community-centric society, where people weigh the approval and disapproval of the people in the community very strongly. This is seen in the grandiose way weddings and marriages occur in Nigeria but also in the cultural process of getting a divorce. Before a couple decides to separate from each other, they seek the approval of the community implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly, people weigh the opinions of the community by choosing to remain in a marriage because of the fear of how society will view or judge them should they leave the marriage. Explicitly, couples turn to familial, ethnic or religious leaders to seek guidance on whether or not they should stay married.

In a case of domestic violence with a woman being the victim, the woman turns to older women in her family or to her church for guidance on how to handle the situation. Figure 3 shows the survey participants' responses when asked how the church reacts when someone in the congregation files for divorce and cites domestic violence as the reason.

**Figure 4. Participants response on how the church would respond when a person in the congregation files for divorce and cites domestic violence.**

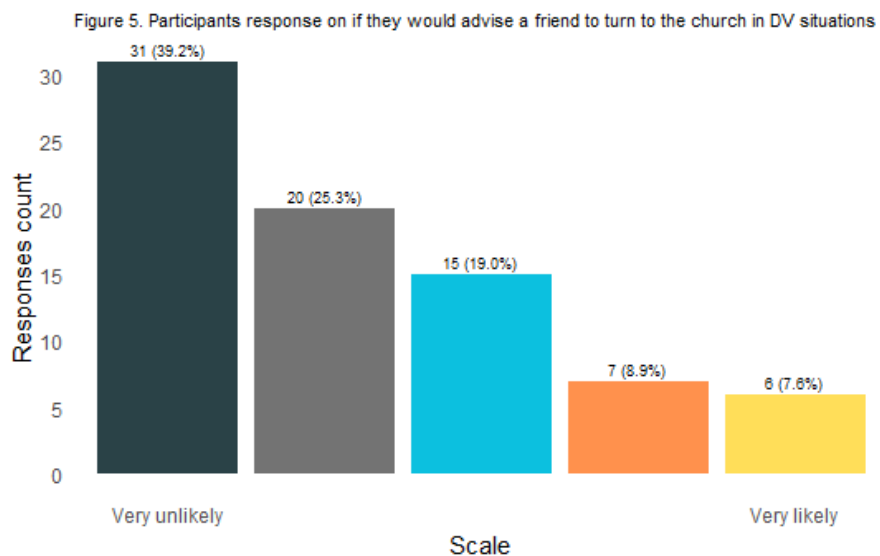
	Total (N=79)	
	(n)	(%)
Investigate whether domestic violence is really present	50	63%
Believe divorce may be the best decision	10	13%
Believe they should never divorce	12	15%
Believe domestic violence is not really present	2	3%
Believe domestic violence is really present	5	6%
Total	79	100%

63% of participants shared that when a person in the congregation files for divorce because of domestic violence, most members will probe the person first to determine whether domestic violence is truly present. Many churches in Nigeria still operate with the belief that the man is the head of the household and so if a woman claims that domestic violence was done to her, there is hesitation. People will want to know if domestic violence happened, or if what happened was because the woman needed to be disciplined. The focus would be on exploring whether this was a real cry for help, or if it was warranted. Ola, a 22-year-old fashion designer living in Nigeria shared how the church would probably respond and ask questions to a woman who claims that they are encountering IPV. Overall, she says the church would usually ask women to stay:

The church would ask you to stay in your marriage. What have you done to anger your husband? What have you not done to please your spouse? Why is your spouse reacting this way? Sometimes the church, religion-Christianity, advises you to stay in the marriage and other times it could also ask you to leave, but it depends on the people you ask for advice

Ola's response reflects the information which we saw in Figure 4. One thing the church would do is investigate whether domestic violence happened in the marriage. There was little variation in the numbers on if the church was more likely to ask people to leave or to stay. However, quantitative data and interviews from participants shared that people would first check to see if domestic violence occurred first before they decide what to do. And the metric that shows if IPV occurred depends on if it was warranted in the first place.

Survey participants and interviewees were asked to share how likely they were to advise their friends to turn to the church in a situation of domestic violence. Figure 5 shows how participants responded when they were asked to rank their responses on a scale of 1-5. Figure 5 shows how survey participants responded. 1 means they are very unlikely to recommend their friends to the church. 3 means they are neutral, and they might recommend it depending on other factors and 5 means they would strongly ask their friend to go seek help in the church. Given how prevalent religion is in Nigeria, and the church's stronghold on people's behavior, it is important to explore this question to see if people saw the church as a place that would provide comfort, support, and desirable solutions in IPV situations.



39% of participants shared that they were very unlikely to ask a friend to turn to the church in IPV situations. The percentage of people who are likely to do so, decreased as we went down the scale. This means that a lot of people are very averse to reaching out to the church for help when domestic violence occurs. Ife shared that she was more likely to reach out to friends, or the parents of her partner, who he respected to talk with him to change if this was the first time, it was occurring:

I won't reach out to church because I feel like there is nothing they can do. Except if we met in church, that would never be the first thing, second or third thing on my mind. It is the people I know he would respect that I would reach out to

One of the reasons interviewees mentioned that they would not reach out to the church is because they do not feel like a harmful partner would take the sayings of a church in high regard. A church that would want to advise the husband to change his ways, may not be the best group of people to reach out to the husband because he might respond badly to the wife, or simply not think highly of their guidance, because he doesn't respect the church members.

Another reason why people are averse to asking friends to turn to the church is because they believe the church is very averse to the idea of separation. Regardless of what a person is going through in their marriage, they would be asked to remain in the marriage because God opposes separation and divorce. Temi shared that:

The church in Nigeria is still very averse to the idea of separation. It is very common for abuse victims in marriages to be encouraged to endure, while also earnestly praying to God for a change in the abuser. So the church would not be the first place I would advise an abuse victim to turn to

Many participants shared this sentiment and fear. They believed that if their friend turned to church, they would be asked to stay in a violent marriage and pray to God for change in the abuser. Until this change comes, if it does, they would be asked to remain in the marriage. The church would not provide help in the marriage because it is averse to separation. Since the

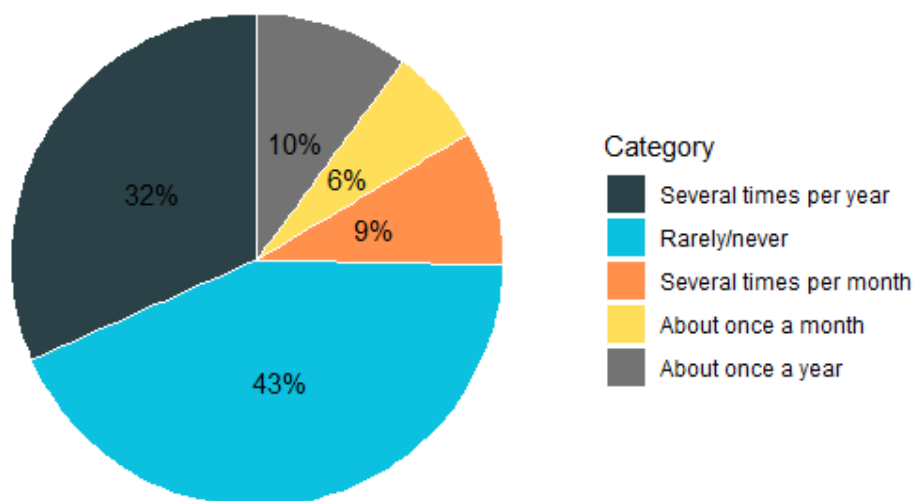
church is the place where individuals recite the wedding vows that state for better and for worse, members are more likely to advise you to see through the marriage as IPV is the worst part of the marriage.

### *The influence of religious leaders*

Many women turn to the church through religious leaders- male and female pastors. Religious leaders play a major role in connecting the bible to society. They are regarded as God's servants and representatives on earth, so they are very influential in interpreting the bible and defining religious narratives in Nigeria. Many people believe the word their religious leaders say as law and turn to them for guidance when they need to make decisions. Religious leaders shepherd how the bible is interpreted and imbibed into daily experiences in Nigeria. This happens as well, in situations of domestic violence. Though women turn to their pastors on what to do when domestic violence happens, participants shared that one of the reasons why they won't ask their friend to turn to a pastor is because the pastor will do nothing and be unhelpful. Survey participants (Figure 6) expressed that their pastors do not speak very frequently on domestic violence and sexual violence issues in their church.



Figure 6. Participants response on how often their pastors speaks about IPV



44% of participants shared that their pastors rarely or never spoke in sermons or large group messages about IPV. This is not specific to talking about whether or not IPV is bad, but talking about IPV in general. Religious leaders rarely broach this issue in Nigeria though they have a significant role to play in influencing the behavior of their members (perpetrators and victims) and in influencing the narrative around domestic violence. Pastors usually dictate the premise around how comfortable church members are to talk about domestic violence. If pastors do not speak about domestic violence, then other members in the church would remain in silence though they are victims of violence. Adaku shared that her church was one where the pastor never really spoke about domestic violence. She shared how she felt silenced when she spoke with her mom about a situation of abuse that occurred in the church. When she told her mom, her mom said:

So you want me to go and break their home now? You want me to drag it and go and break their home now. And that thing just silenced me with it

In Adaku's church they did not speak about sensitive topics, and this translated to how her mom reacted when her daughter brought up a sensitive topic to her. Many religious leaders

keep their teachings easily digestible to a large audience and stay away from triggering topics. Not talking about these topics though makes it extremely difficult and unusual for a member to cite domestic violence as the source of their worries.

Interviewees shared that one of the reasons why they do not think religious leaders are helpful when it comes to domestic violence is because of the gap in the understanding of gendered differences between most victims of domestic violence and religious leaders. Most victims of domestic violence are women and most religious leaders are men. Hence, most religious leaders still believe in patriarchal values because it benefits them. Dayo shared that though most women go to men, they receive advice to keep praying for God to change their partners because the leaders they are turning to are also men:

And I know that they reach out to their religious leaders. But most of the time these religious leaders also influence the entire patriarchy too. They are men already and who knows they might also be abusing their own spouses. Most of them came from homes where abuse was a norm too

Women usually reach out to their religious leaders but when they reach out to these religious leaders, they do not react well or decide to turn a blind eye. That goes a long way in influencing the congregation's actions and beliefs around domestic violence. The role of religion and of a religious leader was exemplified in the story of the gospel singer who allegedly passed away due to intimate partner violence from her husband.

#### **PART 4: THE CASE OF OSINACHI NWACHUKWU**

The case of Osinachi Nwachukwu is a very famous one in Nigeria. I decided to center this case to this study because of how frequently participants in the initial phase of data collection mentioned it in conversations around domestic violence. It uniquely features the different stakeholders this paper highlights: Christian women, religious interpretations that influence gender norms, religious leaders, and domestic violence. Though there is no guaranteed

information about this case yet, evaluating the likely factors that influenced Osinahchi's situation is useful to this paper because of how reactive Nigeria's culture was to her case. Osinachi Nwachukwu was a gospel artist who passed away in April 2022. She was featured on the 2017 Nigerian hit gospel song "Ekwueme", which at the time this paper was written has 95 Million views on YouTube. Initial reports stated that she had been sick with throat cancer. But her family denied that, alleging that she had been a victim of domestic abuse (Olaoluwa). Osinachi, as she is fondly called, was a lead singer at the Dunamis International Gospel Center, a church headquartered in Abuja, Nigeria. It is a large church with a 100,000-capacity auditorium. She is survived by her husband and four children.

When Osinachi passed away and her family spoke up about the possibility of domestic violence, many of her colleagues and close associates pointed fingers at her husband and accused him of being responsible for the gospel singer's death. Musicians that worked with Osinachi, and testified in the ongoing trial against her husband, shared that her husband would always say harsh words towards Osinachi in public and had no regard for anyone. If he did so in public, one can only imagine what he did in private. The singer's co-workers shared during the trial that they saw the singer cry on multiple occasions after she spoke to her husband because he always yelled at her or put her down even after performances. The family also expressed that they made many efforts to resolve the dispute between Osinachi and her husband, but it was to no avail until she passed away. Many Nigerian Christians have reacted with great sorrow and anger towards the news of her death. They believe Osinachi passed away due to many occurrences of IPV from her husband.

Every participant I interviewed was aware of this story. Participants mentioned the story many times before I explicitly began to inquire about the story in later interviews. Interviewees



Another group of interesting reactions that surfaced was the feeling of it being “common”, “numb”, “indifferent”, “and unsurprised”. This showed how desensitized people are to stories of domestic violence in Nigeria. DV’s prevalence has made people apathetic to its occurrence, and this is reflected in how close friends of Osinachi reacted when they got a glimpse into how her husband was treating her and said nothing. Though IPV is prevalent in Nigeria, there is still a stigma on people speaking up about the issue. Those who speak up usually have to deal with a lack of response because IPV is normalized or they would be blamed for their role in causing it to happen. Other times people also do not speak up in Nigeria because there are no good social structures, resources, or policies that provide women with support through the situation. There are very few NGOs in Nigeria that provide a safe space for victims of domestic violence (Okunola).

Nevertheless, Osinachi’s incident and death shed a lot of light and attention on this issue. The government quickly began investigating the case and her husband’s role in it because it got a lot of attention. Her husband is currently on trial for the case with two court sessions passed. Nigerians, men and women alike, took to social media to share their grievances. Temi shared that conversations were had everywhere in the church, homes, schools, at public functions and mainly on social media.

It caused a big shift. Conversations on domestic violence were had everywhere: in homes, at church, in school, at functions. Everywhere...I remember my pastor repeatedly saying that while the church does not support divorce, it supports a temporary separation for issues like this because life is the most important thing

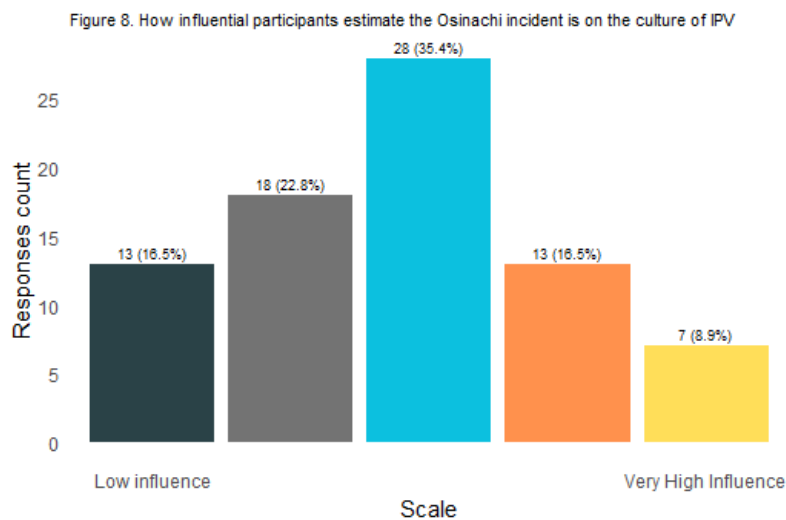
There was a shift in the stigma around domestic violence. Many people began to speak up about their stance on the issue. Osinachi being a gospel singer also placed the church under a lot of scrutiny because of the role the church played and could have played in preventing her death. Churches modified their teachings to encourage people to speak more about domestic violence.

This incident also challenged people’s viewpoints on domestic violence. Participants shared that many women became more aware of their relationships with their partners and mentioned an increased willingness to step back if they notice any symptoms of violence. People generally became more hesitant to blame the victim in situations of domestic violence. Temi shared a story of a friend who changed the way she talked about domestic violence after the incidence:

I also remember a female friend making excuses for the beating of a mutual friend by her husband because she is ‘too stubborn and doesn't listen’. After the Osinachi incident, I heard these same people condemn domestic violence in conversations

Interviewees shared that the majority of the people they knew condemned the incident and believed that the husband should be persecuted.

Although interviewees acknowledged the role this case played in changing the conversation around domestic violence, they were hesitant. There was no telling whether this case would make a short- or long-term impact. Putting this to the test, survey participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1-5 how influential the Osinachi Nwachukwu case was in reducing the prevalence of domestic violence.



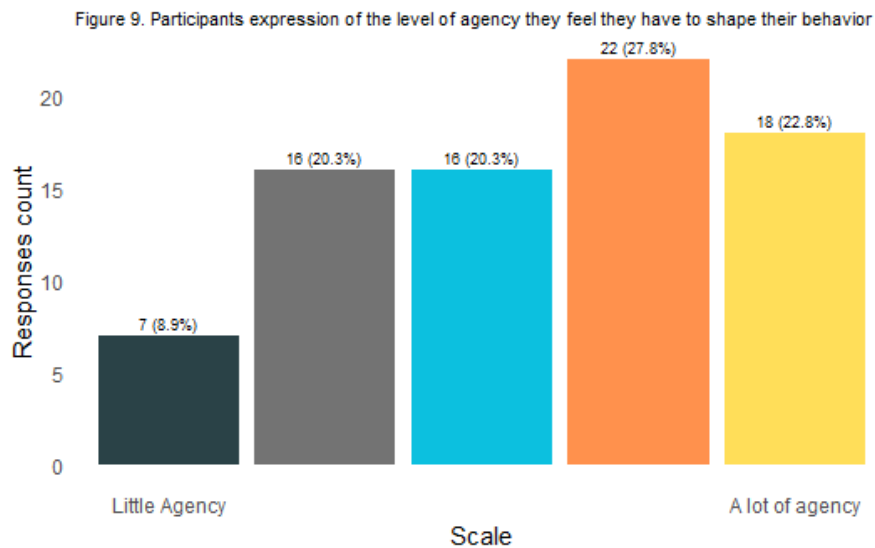
Most people rated the case a 3 with more than 70% thinking it was between a 1-3 meaning not as influential. This reflects the response from the interviewees about people's skepticism that the case would change the scene of IPV. Regardless, the case amplified the conversations around domestic violence and allowed many women to come out of the closet about their experiences in the household.

This case provides a practical example of how religion intersects with domestic violence. The themes we discussed above on how religious narratives influence IPV can be drawn out throughout this case. Osinachi was quiet for a long time while the situation was happening, and this could have been due to how she was brought up and socialized to interact in the world. She could have also submitted to her husband's authority and demands because he is the head of the household. Seeing this situation occur on a larger scale in this way, goes further to demonstrate the prevalence of domestic violence in society. Nigerian Christian women acknowledge the severance of domestic violence in Nigeria. Hearing of Osinachi's case brought the underlying factors around this situation to light, however, participants said they were unsure if this would change anything or temporarily pass.

#### **PART 5: HOW WOMEN RATIONALIZE THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE HOUSEHOLD AND SITUATIONS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.**

Nigerian women admit to being aware of the social beliefs around gender norms, and religion's role in them. But there is a conflict, as some Nigerian women shared that they have agency in defining their experiences and feel like they can evade encountering domestic violence. Others were unsure. Some interviewees felt confident that they would be able to create a household that is repellent to IPV while, others felt constrained and helpless to it all. When participants were asked in the survey about how much agency they felt as women to shape their

behavior in society, in the presence of social expectations there was mixed reactions. In Figure 9, participants were asked to rank this viewpoint on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being very little agency, and 5 being a lot of agency and there was a roughly equal number of people across the board who ranked the numbers on the scale.



More women felt like they had total agency over no agency at all, but the numbers across the board did not increase across the scale or decrease, it roughly remained consistent. This highlights the current tension that exists in Nigerian women between their wants and needs and the expectations of society for them. When it comes to how women build their households, or their relationships, as seen in how women define their religion, some women feel confident to determine the parameters around this themselves, other times, they do what is expected of them. Understanding whether women make decisions based on their wants or needs or in obedience to cultural norms, will allow us to understand how external factors like religion and culture affect the behavior and response of women in the household.

Nonetheless, interviewees pointed to a generational shift, happening in Nigeria that is causing more Nigerian women to question religious standards and cultural expectations. The



presence of social media, which allows people to say their truths anonymously to a wide range of people, is building strength amongst younger women to define their behaviors, outside of societal expectations. Adaeze, a 21-year-old Nigerian girl studying in the US, talked about how this generational shift is what is affecting the former intense influence religion had on culture saying:

I think it depends on the generation. So, I feel like for the older generation. It was definitely like a 5. But now for the younger generation, it is more towards a 3 . Like for my generation, it is a 3 because we are not just looking at Christianity anymore. We are also trying to do what works for us

Younger women express greater tension between societal expectations and what they want. Although they are still Christian, interviewees shared that there is a greater push to seek happiness and discover the self, which pushes younger people to challenge the status quo. It would be interesting to explore how the behaviors of the new generation would influence how the home is shaped in Nigeria.

### **BROADER IMPLICATIONS**

Religion has a deeply ingrained impact on the way of life of people in Nigeria. For Christians to worship God in a way that they believe is effective and right, they have to incorporate God's word into their lives. To do this, they must take the broad sayings in the bible and interpret it into a form that is practical and implementable into their lives. However, in the case of women's rights and domestic violence, sometimes these Bible's teachings have been interpreted harmfully. Women are treated as second-class citizens, and this is justified with the teachings of the bible. Because religious principles are considered supreme, these harmful interpretations of the bible have been drawn out into policy and how the state recognizes the struggles of women in the household. Although Nigeria has economic and political restraints to implementing long lasting policies to improve people's lives, the unfavorable position women

stand in Nigeria should not be disregarded, as doing so would only keep Nigeria stagnant. Nigeria cannot progress into stability and prosperity if it ignores the demands of half of its population for better social and cultural standards of living.

Domestic violence, gender inequality and gender norms need to be discussed in all areas of socialization i.e at home, in schools, church, workplaces etc. It is important for Nigerians to look back into the fabric of the country pre-and post-colonialism to evaluate the ways in which western values, religions and beliefs formed the harmful mentalities we assume of the role of individuals in society. Why do we teach little girls to clean the house or to behave a certain way, while teaching the boys to behave differently? Where does this belief come from? Do our traditions, for example, the Yoruba indigenous traditions, actually reinforce these differences? In what ways are these beliefs causing more harm than good? As a society and country, Nigeria has to acknowledge the prevalence of domestic violence and search deeply to determine where and why the beliefs that hurt another actually exist. It is important we evaluate our interpretations of religious scripture and call out biblical myths that manipulate women to accept their own oppression, cooperate to maintain it and resist their liberation. It would require years of work and may take time to come to fruition, but one that is most necessary for the country to move forward when it comes to gender equity. It is an individual challenge as well as a communal one.

In Addition, there needs to be increased concentration culturally and in policy for the socioeconomic development of women. Because women are seen as inferior and dependent on men, the government does not see the need to invest sufficiently in the issues specific to them. But then women are more dependent on men because there is a limited number of strong institutions that exist to promote their independence and financial stability. It is Catch 22. As a result, many women stay in toxic relationships because it is their only option. They have no

means to take care of themselves and raise their children should they leave their relationship. Since women are usually blamed by the community for the negative occurrences in their marriage, they receive no support from their family and the community either.

The government needs to invest in providing social services and support to women in harmful relationships. This support could be mental health support, safety shelters, police protection, child support credits etc. This support should be easily accessible to women who find themselves in unhealthy environments. There should also be social support to help women recreate their lives if they leave an unfavorable relationship. This support could be assistance with finding a new job, new place of stay, enforced restraining orders etc. Contrary to what is currently being done, providing support to women in abusive relationships should be prioritized and backed with financial support from state and local governments.

Policy makers need to acknowledge the connection between private family life, the social and the political to establish good standards of living that would allow everyone to thrive.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many women in Nigeria have a firm belief in religion. By virtue of socialization and the way Nigeria is structured, many women gain strength in believing in the supernatural being. For our case study, this is believing in the power of God and following his principles. Some follow these principles more tightly than others, as is normal in every religious society. In Nigeria, Christianity's influence in culture has amplified beyond being an individual's experience to becoming a national one. People bring their religious beliefs into court, politics, to school and it carries more weight sometimes over the law. The two have become inseparable. But then these religious beliefs are hard to define, especially in today's situations. Since the bible is nondefinitive, because its stories and contexts happened thousands of years ago, it leaves room

for people to assign their understanding to it. People turn to religious leaders or social norms to determine how they should apply religion to their lives. But these interpretations have taken many different directions and sometimes become more harmful than positive. Over time in Nigeria, the “teachings” from the bible have been used to benefit a specific group or harm others. When it comes to gender norms, women’s household experiences, and domestic violence, interpretations of the bible have been used to justify harmful narratives that subject women to negative situations under the guise that it is God’s will.

Previous studies demonstrated the role of cultural beliefs, and patriarchal norms on domestic violence. Studies also show how cultural beliefs are influenced by religion. But none of them focused on Christian women as a specific population or outlined the distal connection between religion and domestic violence. In this paper, using theoretical frameworks, I drew out how religion is understood in women’s lives, in gender norms and when it comes to domestic violence.

The findings of this study are salient when it comes to exploring the cultural structures that foster domestic violence in Nigeria. Participants acknowledge the role religious beliefs have in shaping the way they think and the way they create their household. Christian women interpret religion in their lives in different ways but regardless, they are all beholden to keeping up with religious practices. Because most Christian women in Nigeria do this, this has shaped how people make decisions, and define their relationships with men. When it comes to domestic violence, religious beliefs such as the view of men as the head of the household with the power to discipline their wife have created some of the norms that foster toxic environments of violence. On the other hand, women also surrender to these beliefs and unfortunately, abet these situations by remaining silent. Society advances these negative environments by pressuring an

unhealthy couple to stay together, sometimes using religion as justification. All these factors come together and take part in cultivating the prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria. We saw a practical example of how this manifested in the story of Osinachi Nwachukwu.

Though this research provides novel findings, there is more research that needs to be done. The connection drawn between religion and domestic violence is an implicative one that needs more quantitative and qualitative data to verify. Moreso, this paper utilizes research from a specific population that is affected by domestic violence. I speak homogeneously about the role of Christianity in the lives of women, but this may differ from culture to culture. I also tested only the Christian population in Nigeria. To fully understand how religion affects social behaviors and issues, it is important to test Islamic and traditional religious populations. It would also be helpful to translate this framework to the male population and explore how religion affects their behavior and role in domestic violence. In addition, it would be helpful to explore how women rationalize and feel about society's beliefs on them more deeply, highlighting the broader themes, and the varying positions that exist when it comes to this topic.

This research elucidates an essential component that sustains domestic violence in Nigeria and gives activists, sociologists, theologians, and policymakers the conceptual structures to discuss it. I hope by exploring how the supremacy of religious beliefs is a distal motivator to domestic violence, this would push individuals, social and religious leaders to re-evaluate their interpretations of religious texts and make amends to rectify the ones that are harmful.

## APPENDIX

### *A. Selected Questions from the intersectional theological feminist framework.*

*Source: Uchem*

- a. Please tell me about your experiences as a woman in the Igbo culture and in the Catholic Church. I am interested in knowing what you [as a woman] enjoy, what makes you happy or unhappy, what you like or do not like; what makes you mad.
  - i. Following the above suggestion, please describe how you feel and what you see about being a woman in the Igbo culture [If you can, please give some examples, including other women's experiences, as you see them].
    1. What changes will you like to see?
    2. Are there changes women must make?
  - ii. What obstacles do you foresee in bringing about such changes?
  - iii. And what are your recommendations for overcoming those obstacles?
- b. Following the suggestion given earlier, please describe how you feel and what you see being a woman in the Catholic Church. [If you can, please give some examples, including other women's experiences as you see them].
  - i. What changes would you like to see?
  - ii. Are there changes women must make?
- c. Are there obstacles other people must make? [like who? Please give examples]
  - i. And what are your recommendations for overcoming those obstacles?

### *B. Interview Protocol*

- a. Section 1: Biographical Question
  - i. What is your name? Where are you from? What is your age? What is your employment status? Do you go to school? Where? What do you study?
  - ii. What does your day to day look like?
- b. Section 2: Religion and Childhood
  - i. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the least and 5 being the most, how much does religion affect your actions?
  - ii. Tell me about your family? Siblings?
  - iii. Define being religious and how your practice deviates from this?
  - iv. Is your family religious? What religion and how does this shape your childhood?
  - v. How did you get involved with religion?
  - vi. To what level do you consider yourself religious?
  - vii. How much does religion affect your actions? Examples?
  - viii. Do you remember a story of a time when they decided to turn to prayer because of religion?
  - ix. How do you think religion shapes culture in Nigeria?
- c. Section 3: Gender norms in Nigeria and domestic violence
  - i. What is your relationship with men closest to you? Who are these people? How does religion shape this relationship
  - ii. How would you describe gender norms that exist in your life right now and in Nigeria?
  - iii. How does religion affect gender norms?

- iv. How does religion affect domestic violence?
- v. To your knowledge, what are the factors that cause domestic violence in homes? Why do these things happen?
- d. Section 4: Religion and domestic violence
  - i. In reality, How do you respond to the incidence of domestic violence that happened to you? How would you respond?
  - ii. Did you reach out to religious institutions? How did they support you there?
- e. Osinachi- Ekwueme woman who passed away due to domestic violence
  - i. When did you hear about it and what was your first reaction?
  - ii. How do you think people in Nigeria have reacted to this?
  - iii. How has this shaped domestic violence conversations in Nigeria?

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