



# GENDER SPACE AND THE MISINTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES IN WOMEN ABUSE: SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION WITH WOMEN IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper x-rayed the spate of violence against women by using Mrs. Osinachi who died due to injuries she suffered from domestic assaults as a case study. It espoused the counsels and teaching of the Christian doctrines and how these are employed to manipulate women to accept and continue to endure the harsh and intimidating relationships with their spouses. The paper also established that the custodians of the Christian doctrines who are mainly men amplify the verses of the Bible that focus primarily on women to be submissive while they are silent about the areas that command men not to abuse their wives. Content analysis was used to analyze secondary data which were comprehensively reviewed and important themes isolated and analyzed based on the goals of the study. The paper recommends that social worker should begin to offer direct services to women in churches and market places through workshop, seminar, symposium and person to person approach in order to liberate them (women) from any manipulation facilitated by religious counsels and teachings.*

**Keywords:** Spousal violence, Osinachi, Christian doctrines, Divorce, Social work.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, abuse against women has become a public concern and as a criminal offence violating the rights and human dignity of women (Wessells & Kostelny, 2022). Women/wives are frequently the major sufferers of the violent behaviour occurring in the home

environment (Khemthong & Chutiphongdech, 2021). Empirical evidences posit that one in every three women experience at least one form of violence in her life time culminating in severe injury or death in certain conditions (Abayomi, 2014 and World Health Organization (WHO), 2005). In the United States of America, 4.8 million women suffer physical assaults and rape from their intimate partner. Record reveals that



1000 to 1600 women die each year in the United States at the hands of their male partners due to enduring and escalating mode of battering. These numbers exclude women who died of self-murder as an escape route from violent intimate relationship or who die living on the street in an attempt to avoid their abuser (Abayomi, 2014).

Report from England alongside wales indicates that 140 women died yearly from uxoricide which is the death of a spouse as a result of the violent behaviour of their male partner (Devaney, 2015). The Nation Police in Peru recorded 28000 cases of women expose to intimate partner violence yearly (Abayomi, 2014). In Nigeria, the beating of wives and children are acceptable normative order as a form of instilling discipline. Hence, when children are beaten, parents are of the opinion that they are instilling discipline in them likewise when husband beat their wives who are seen as children expected to misbehave which must be corrected. This practice becomes more severe in situation the woman is not economically self-sufficient (Aihie, 2009). In addition, domestic violence serve as a tool of enforcing obedience with the roles of a woman within the customary society where her position similar to that of child who must be subordinated. Women experience of violent behaviour from their spouse is perceived as a private matter that should be handled privately within the home environment without external

person interference. This is in compliance to a popular adage in Nigeria which says that “the clothes within the home must be arrange and kept within the home”. This in turn promote the culture of silence reinforces violence against women instead of giving punitive reward to the perpetrator of such crime (Aihie, 2009)

Spousal violence, (which is also known as intimate partner violence against women), is a global epidemic which has resulted in the tortures and maiming of women socially, physically, psychologically, sexually and economically. It can also lead to a victim’s death, and its prevalence and impacts are usually given less attention and emphasis (Khan, 2000; and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2011). Globally, one in three women is a victim of domestic violence (Day & Thakar, 2022) and women are faced with myriad of impediments in accessing justice and protection (UNODC, 2011). As a result of the devastating human rights violations, women and girls are denied equality, security, dignity, self-esteem and the rights to fundamental freedom (Khan, 2000). The resultant effects associated with domestic violence are that it ruins women’s health and general wellbeing, and such effects are usually accompanied by an increased constant break down in mental and physical health, socially withdrawn behaviours (also known as the battered woman



syndrome), chronic diseases, and drug abuse amongst other. The victims' susceptibility to anxiety disorder manifests in four different forms, with great possibility of degenerating of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Trevillion; Feder & Howard, 2012). In many societies all over the world, including the Third world nations where gender inequality and male superiority are deeply seated and embedded, domination and the enculturation of women are carried out and practiced to prepare their (women) mind to accept and tolerate. Domestic violence is even rationalized by the society and women are encouraged to keep mute about the violation of their human rights and personal dignity (UNODC, 2011). Similarly, women's passivity is greatly encouraged through the mechanism of the family, community, faith-based organizations, law, medical, and cultural institutions that promote and ensure binary gender roles and expectations (Metz; Calmet and Thevenot, 2019). The factors responsible for the increased risk of violence against women and women's acceptance of it are inadequate education, witnessing violence in the family as a child, early childhood abuses, and internalized attitudes to accept violence and gender inequality as a normal thing (World Health Organization 2016 cited in Metz; Calmet and Thevenot, 2019).

Social worker at different agencies such as ministry of gender and social development, police divisional

headquarters, hospital and counseling centers of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) are daily inundated and overwhelm with reports and cases of women been abuse by their spouses or intimate partners. The preoccupation of social workers in dealing with the avoidable phenomenon of spousal violence and the dilemma associated with the practice have made this area of practice interesting but also associated with burnout because of the time, energy and resource it require to handle the aftermath of spousal violence like battered woman syndrome and dysfunctional marriages and parenting. This is why this issue is in the front burner of social work practice and advocacy in many countries including Nigeria.

## Methodology

The main methodology employs for this paper is literature scoping (journal articles, newspapers, Christian literature and bible) alongside with reflexive research methodology. Reflexive research gives the research the liberty to theorize on events, issues or social phenomenon that occurs or occurring in their context (Muridzo; Mukurazhizha and Simbine, 2022). We adopted the reflexive research because it helps us to critically reflect on the experiences of Christian women in abusive intimate relationship through the reflection on the experiences of Osinachi Nwachukwu who died of the pain inflicted on her by her husband and



she was unable to make a decision to leave the abusive relationship due to her religious beliefs. Through reflexive research methodology, social workers are able to add their voice to liberate and empower oppressed individuals from conditions violating their human dignity and worth. This would however be difficult with other more complex methodologies.

The paper adopted content analysis as the methodology. In this methodology, existing secondary data were comprehensively reviewed and important themes isolated and analyzed based on the goals of the study.

### **Decision Making Process of Christian Women in Intimate Partner Abusive Relationship**

The boldness for women to remain or move out from an intimate abusive relationship usually takes a lot of time for them to make such difficult and complex decisions. The victim takes their time to evaluate series of factor before they decide to leave. Some of these factors include the presence of children, societal stigma, economic constraints and emotional bond with the abuser (Barnett, Miller-Perrin and Perrin, 2005). Besides the aforementioned considerations, Christian women give critical consideration to religious beliefs which to a large extent is a major determinant whether or not and how they (abused women) move out of abusive relationship and also whether

they receive significant encourage/support to make transition (Wang, Horne, Levitt and Klesges, 2009).

Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark (1997) asserted that a large population of Christian women resort to seeking stakeholder within the church communities and religious leaders counsel in the process of moving out of abusive relationship. Again, the study conducted by Ake and Horne (2003) shows that Christian women with strong religious beliefs reported that the doctrine, perceive attitudes from their church communities and their status in ministry have been part of their consideration in the process of moving out of abusive relationship. Also, in a study conducted by Giesbrecht and Sevic (2000) reported that in churches whereby their doctrine give so much emphases to wives loving and obedient submission to their husbands serve as a major constraint for abused women to leave abusive relationship.

Wang, Horne, Levitt and Klesges (2009) and Nason-Clark (2004) asserted that Christian women who remain in abusive relationship based on their religious beliefs that a godly Christian woman should learn to sacrifice and forgive and also offer prayers to God for change of behaviour for their husbands. Levitt and Ware (2006) in a qualitative study report that religious leaders do not consider violence against women in



marriage as a sufficient reason for divorce. Hence, divorce or separation should be consider as a last resort on the ground that counseling or religious interventions had been tried and failed. This sometimes serves as a delay measure to further make the abused women to remain in abusive relationship. More so, 15 percent of the Christian leaders in the study reported that it will be against their religious beliefs to approve of divorce after due counseling and admonition fails to end the abuse as the Bible cites only on ground of infidelity and desertion as approve grounds for divorce.

Wang, Horne, Levitt and Klesges (2009) asserted that Christian women who belong to the conservative Christian denominations are highly affected by religious beliefs than women who belong to the liberal denominations in the decision making process of whether to remain or move out of abusive relationships. The conservative Christian denomination strongly emphases the traditional beliefs of male domination and superiority over women and perceived the women as the men's property. In addition, the conservative Christian denomination also stresses the importance of marital reunion in the event of dispute. The leadership of conservative Christian denomination who often are male dominated ensures that divorce/separation is inaccessible to abused women based on the sanctity of marriage vows (Levitt &

Ware, 2006). Responses from abused women and religious leaders from conservative denomination reveal that the continuous emphases on the need for women to remain submissive to the authority of their husband as the church to the authority of God. Hence, abused women are manipulated through the misinterpretation of the scripture in the favour of men to endure and pray to God for their abusive partner to change (Wang, Horne, Levitt and Klesges, 2009; Levitt & Ware, 2006 and Foss & Warnke, 2003). The Christian women from conservative denomination who are bold enough to move out from abusive relationship often suffer from spiritual guilt and dispel. This is because the decision to move out from such abusive relationship is not just an offense against the church's doctrine and counsel about marital sanctity and vows but also an offense to the will of God (Wang, Horne, Levitt and Klesges, 2009).

### **Spousal Abuse: The Experiences and Death of Mrs Osinachi Nwachukwu**

Mrs. Osinachi Nwachukwu was a gospel singer and a Christian faithful who believed that divorce was a sin against God. According to her family members and friends, Osinachi died of bruises and injuries she got from her husband domestic violent behaviour. The children of the gospel singer stated that their mother went through series of domestic abuses in the hands of her husband (their father) who they



said made them to take oath so that they will not disclose the domestic violent experiences in their home (Akinwotu, 2022). Her death was occasioned by cluster of blood in her chest which was the result of the kicks and blows she received from her husband during the incessant fights. Prior to the incident that led to her death, she constantly experienced domestic violence which she decided to keep away from her family members although she confided in some of her close associates, but she stopped them from interfering because she believed that God will change her husband and all will be well. Another event that demonstrated the series of domestic violence Osinachi was exposed to in her marriage was the one her younger sister witnessed while in the same car with Osinachi and her husband, on their way to the burial ceremony of Osinachi's father. As the husband was driving on a high speed, Osinachi told him to take it easy and his responded by giving Osinachi a slap on her face, and her sister reacted, Osinachi pleaded with her to remain calm. Even when she was in the hospital bed and when her twin sister visited her, she had to beg her husband to allow the twin sister stay with her in order to help her nurse the excruciating chest pain she had but her husband refused and sent the sister out of the hospital.

In order to allow peace to reign, Osinachi pleaded with her twin sister to leave since her husband refused to

allow her to stay. Moreover, in another event, her husband requested for her YouTube music channel password and when Osinachi refused he spat on her and informed her that she was no longer going to have access to her money in his possession. Also whenever Osinachi was invited to minister in any program as gospel artist, the husband who was also her manager will insist that the honorarium be paid into his personal account, while Osinachi received little or nothing. She was so caged to the extent that her husband did not allow her to have any contact with her siblings let alone for them to visit (Umeh, 2022). Osinachi put in tremendous effort to make her marriage work and refused to seek for divorce because of her internalized Christian religious beliefs. She also did not want to be a bad role model to her followers in the event of being a divorced gospel minister.

### **Christian Doctrines, Divorce and Misinterpretation of the Holy Bible and the Manipulations of Women: A Critical Analysis**

The death of Osinachi sent shockwaves across Nigeria's Christian communities and the wider society. It brought to the front burner questions about domestic violence and the extent to which Christian religious admonitions, teachings, counsels and societal values condemn divorce, regardless of the prevailing circumstance of the married couples. Some of the Christian counsels and



narratives presented to be logical and sensible on the surface but shielded intimate partner violence and the objectification of women as men's property (Akinwotu, 2022). As spousal violence continue to overwhelm Osinachi, friends and family members pleaded with her to come out of the marriage but Osinachi resisted their plea and maintained that she had faith that God was against divorce and that marriage was for better for worse according to the holy ordinance. Some Christians form a doctrine and a belief system for themselves which cripple their rational reasoning capacity and defy their human dignity. This is further enhanced when their religious leader and acclaimed spiritual father emphasizes things that are capable of manipulating their minds and often times, such manipulations are not in tandem with the Bible.

One of the Bible passages concerning divorce states that "God hates divorce". This is commonly referred to and recited by Christians. It is unfortunate to note that majority of the Christians are not aware that the usually quoted part is incomplete and often taken out of context. The complete passage of the Bible states that "For I hate divorce say the Lord, the God of Israel." "To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty, say the Lord of heaven's armies." "So guard your heart, do not be unfaithful to your wife" (Malachi 2:16). The amplified version of this particular

Bible passage makes it difficult for quick and complete quoting, hence the abridged version. The abridged and incomplete quote is a manifestation of the age long ignorance which has and favoured promoted abusive, domineering, oppressive and coercive partners to retain their victims in an abusive marital relationship. The death of Osinachi is allegedly the outcomes of the injuries she sustained from domestic violence and the public was shocked to see one of the messages of her pastor where the pastor said that there were no Biblical grounds for divorce. This is a teaching and counsel that may have persuaded Osinachi to stay in the abusive and coercive marital relationship in which she was allegedly brutalized and ultimately died.

Also, the Christian doctrines on premarital counseling and the counseling of spouses when they are experiencing marital conflict or disagreement are usually not favourable to women. The authorities of the marital counseling committee usually advice thus: "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord." "For a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the church; and Christ is himself the Saviour of the church, his body" (Ephesians 5:22-24). Hence, women must submit completely to their husbands just as the church submits itself to Christ. This same verse in King James Version (KJV) is further misinterpreted by custodians of the



Christian doctrines to weaken the rights and voices of women not in any way challenge their husbands or be bold enough to take divorce as an option to abusive marital relationship. “Therefore as the church is subjected to Christ, so let the wives be to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:22-24). The custodians of the Christian doctrines emphasis less on the other part of the Bible passage which states that “Husband, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it” (Ephesians 5:22-25). No man wants to give up his life for his wife yet some persons amplified the fact that the Bible said that wife must be submissive to her husband in everything. The Bible made it clear that men should love, cherish and not to treat their wives in a harsh or violent manner: “Men ought to love their wives just as they love their own bodies.” “A man who loves his wife loves himself.” “For no man hates his own flesh; but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church” (Ephesians 5:28-29). The Christian doctrines are male dominated and fail to make men realized that if they truly love and cherish their wives just as the Bible commanded them, they will not subject their wives to any form of emotional, physical, and sexual violence because of their wives’ shortcomings. More so, the custodians of the Christian doctrines are often men who are usually biased. They always downplay what the Bible says in Ephesians 5:28-29 that “In this

same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:28); “For no man hates his own flesh, but nourishes and carefully protects and cherishes it, as Christ does the church” (Ephesians 5:29).

Similarly, Colossians 3 verse 19 says “husbands love your wives, and do not be harsh to them” (Colossians 3:19). This made it very clear that the Bible which is the bedrock of the Christian doctrines forbids men from engaging in any form of violent or abusive and discriminatory behaviour towards their wives. Because of the selfish and patriarchal nature and upbringing of men that dominates the authorities in the church, they have been silent about these particular passages of the Bible and they watered it down to continue to maintain their hegemony and enslave women in all ramifications. The men dominated authorities of the church amplified these verses in the Bible that concern wives loyalty and submission in order to deceptively make them remain submissive to their husbands’ will and caprices even when their husbands are abusive, coercive, and always violate their rights and dehumanized them. This continue to make them accept and tolerate violence ridden marital relationships and use the denial defensive mechanism to justify their reasoning faculty that has been incapacitated by myriad Christian religious admonitions, teachings,



counsels and societal values that abhor divorce with the stereotyped incomplete bible verse “God hates divorce”: just as Osinachi allegedly put it.

In addition, the Christian doctrines interpreted so many Bible passages in order to make both men and women form a mental image between wife and husband as a master and slave relationship. For example, that the husband is the authority and master which must be respected, obeyed, and worshipped at all times just as the church do to Christ, and his actions and reactions must never be questioned. The wife on the other hand must be submissive and obey the husband regardless of any inhuman treatment of her. The Christian doctrine counselors and teachers use first Timothy 2 verse 12 which states that “I do not permit a woman to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet” (1Timothy 2:12) to buttress this. In any attempt for wives to act, react and speak out in order to liberate themselves from violence ridden marital relationship, the Bible is misinterpreted again to remind her to be submissive to her husband in “everything” and that submission to her husband authority at all times is the virtue of a virtuous woman. She is further subdued through the misinterpretation of the book of Titus 2 verse 5 which says “To be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind and submissive to her own husband, that the word of God

may not be revile” (Titus 2:5). This passage of the Bible is what most cultures around the world have wrongly interpreted that a woman’s office is in the kitchen and that women should be working at home. Finally, the last stroke that broke the camel’s back so to say in this narrative says “The wisest of women builds her home, but folly with her hands tears it down” (Proverb 14:1). In tandem with this premise, no woman wants to appear foolish or willing to destroy her home. With her children as the primary source of concern, she remains in the abusive home returns to their shell suffering and smiling and sometime in fasting and in prayers behind closed doors and hoping that God will change her abusive and cruel husband. The manners in which Christian doctrine teachers and counselors misinterpret the Bible in their teachings, counseling and narratives prompt women to be victims of spousal violence with the flimsy excuses that they are not submissive enough to their husband, even when the husbands refuse to love, nourish, cherish and give his life for his wife.

## Result

From the analyses so far, it is evident that Christian women are use religious counsels to endure intimate partner violence because of the fear of being labeled as a bad influence to the young generation particularly when they (Christian women) occupy position such gospel minister. In addition, they



do not to be labeled as hypocrites (do what I say do not do what I do) as they often time appear to the public that everything is well with their home/marriage as such it becomes difficult for them to walkout of abusive marriage. The custodians of the Christian doctrines are often men who are usually biased. They always downplay what the Bible says in Ephesians 5:28-29. Selfish and patriarchal nature and upbringing of men that dominates the authorities in the church, they have been silent about these particular passages of the Bible and they watered it down to continue to maintain their hegemony and enslave women in all ramifications.

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## Discussion

The experiences of Mrs Osinachi as analysis in this paper is in tandem with the finding of Wang, Horne, Levitt and Klesges (2009) that when a Christian woman decide to move out from abuse intimate relationship, her

decision and actions is perceive to have violated the will of God concerning marriage. This explains why Mrs Osinachi fails to listen to family members and close associate when violent behaviour towards her persisted. Secondly, the factor that made Mrs Osinachi remain the abusive relationship support the finding of Nason-Clark (2004) that godly Christian women prefer to keep praying and trusting God to change their abusive husband than to leaving the violent relationship. When family member and her close associate made attempt to intervene, she constantly stopped them from interfering because she believed that God will change her husband and all will be well.

Another reason she decided to remain in the abusive intimate relationship is because of her internalized Christian religious beliefs due to the fact that she did not want to be a bad role model to her followers in the event of being a divorced gospel minister. This support the position of Ake & Horne (2003) that Christian women with strong religious beliefs reported that the doctrine, perceive attitudes from their church communities/general public and their status in ministry have been part of their consideration in the process of moving out of abusive relationship.

Finally, Mrs Osinachi decision to remain in the abusive intimate relationship is in line with the assertion of Wang, Horne, Levitt and Klesges (2009); Levitt & Ware (2006)



and Foss & Warnke (2003) that abused women are manipulated through the misinterpretation of the scriptures in the favour of men to endure abusive intimate partnership. Some of the Christian counsels and narratives presented to be logical and sensible on the surface but shielded intimate partner violence and the objectification of women as men's property (Akinwotu, 2022). The authorities of the marital counseling committee usually advice thus: "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord." "For a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the church. The Christian doctrines are male dominated and fail to make men realized that if they truly love and cherish their wives just as the Bible commanded them in (Ephesians 5:28-29) they will not subject their wives to any form of physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal violence because of their wives' shortcomings.

### Social Work Intervention Strategies in Spousal Abuse

The global identity of social work practice and professional activities reflect empowerment and liberation of people, astute commitments to human rights, social justice and empathic understanding of people-in-situation. Social workers play significant roles in the intervention of violence against women. Hence in this context the intervention takes place in varying forms such as direct service provision, policy initiatives, legislative reforms,

research and advocacy. These are meant to change oppressive social structures that are needed to maintain and reinforce the beliefs system, cultural heritage, religious philosophies and ideologies that perpetuate violence against women. Social work professionals and the service they render are indispensable to the delivery of support and intervention services to women in abusive intimate relationships. The profession is deeply rooted in the belief that all individuals have the right to live free, devoid of fear and violence in their homes and the broader society. Social work professionals operates from structural, feminist, human rights, social and justice perspectives and it develops and plans interventions within a client empowerment framework. The Australian Association of Social Workers (2019) espoused various levels of intervention strategies through which social workers provide interventions for women in abusive intimate relationship. These is person-to-person intervention which provides psychosocial needs to the person-in-situation; group intervention advocates for change in their group beliefs, philosophies and ideologies; community/societal intervention advocates for policy change at the entire community level in relation to attitudinal change. Personal intervention ensures that their practice is ethical by giving attention to factors of violence and not reproducing inequitable gender norms, safety



planning, risk management, and advocacy. It also provides interventions in collaborating with policy implementation, child protection and other relevant authorities in counseling. They also targets therapeutic interventions aimed at safety, empowerment and recovery trauma which focuses on cognitive behavioural therapy, mental health support and interventions. social workers with perpetrators of gender-based violence (including individual and group behaviour change work), develop culturally and faith-based appropriate therapeutic interventions and support victims to be self-advocates.

## Conclusion

Violence within the family has both prevalent and preventable characteristics. Violence against women has enduring negative effects on individuals, children, communities and the society. The enduring negative effects are accompanied by the consequences of impeding the wellbeing of people, family, community and the society. The social work professionals are important in providing solution-centered intervention to victims and survivors of violence against women, in line with their deep commitment to the belief that every woman has a right to live free without fear and violence in her home. In Nigeria, there is no better time other than now for social work intervention and emergency response

to be the first point of call in the event of domestic violence.

## Recommendations

Based on the above elucidation the following recommendations are advanced for the remediation of the anomalies of spousal violence in Nigeria.

1. The Nigeria Association of Social Workers (NASW) should begin to offer direct services to women in churches and market places through workshop, seminar, symposium and person to person approach in order to liberate them from any manipulation facilitated by religious counsels and teachings.
2. Policy on abuse of women should be enacted in Nigeria to provide guidelines for social workers to apply when providing services to abused women.
3. Women need to be encouraged to be bold enough to report cases of spousal abuse at its onset to appropriate authorities.
4. Women need to be bold enough to come out of abusive relationship without considering “what people will say”.

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