DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES INFLUENCING SPOUSAL ABUSE AND POOR MARITAL ROLE ADJUSTMENT AMONG COUPLES IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

Dr. Don-Mark, Martha Halimat[1], Prof. Charles Okechukwu Iwundu[2]

[1]Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling,
Ignatius Ajuru Univerisity of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt
[2]Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling,
Ignatius Ajuru Univerisity of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt

ABSTRACT

The study investigated on demographic variables influencing spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State. Nine research questions and seven null hypotheses were used for the study. The study adopted descriptive survey research design. The population comprised an estimated 3,939,534 married couples in Rivers State. Taro Yamane formula was used to obtain a sample of 400 couples from the population through stratified, systematic, and accidental random sampling techniques. A self structured instrument titled: "Demographic Variable, Spousal Abuse and Poor Marital Role Adjustment Scale" (DVSAPMRAS) was used for the data collection. Face, content and construct validity method was Validity by the researcher's supervisor and three experts in measurement and evaluation. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was determined using Cronbach alpha method with a sample of 30 couples which yielded an index of 0.7. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while independent t-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level of significance. Findings revealed that the religious background of spouse causes verbal attack, age difference between spouse, nature of occupation and educational background influenced spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment. Also, demographic variables such as age difference, nature of occupation, cultural background, educational background, level of income and family size significantly influenced spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment. Based on the findings, it was recommended that couples should learn to imbibe virtues such as tolerance and self-control in order to resolve marital issues amicably instead of unnecessarily criticizing their partners.

KEYWORDS: *Spousal Abuse, Marital Role Adjustment, Couples, Demographic Variables*

INTRODUCTION

The marriage institution is experiencing a myriad of challenges that threaten the cohesion of couples and other family members. These include poverty, lack of communication due to perceptual incompatibility, childlessness, infidelity, and gender biases all contributing to marital instability. Among these issues, spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment have particularly grievous consequences, encompassing separation, divorce, suicide, homicide, and broader family disintegration. These are global phenomena, drawing attention from researchers, policymakers, and communities worldwide.

Spousal Abuse also referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) as "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors." This encompasses physical, verbal, emotional, economic, reproductive, religious, and sexual abuse, as well as coercive control and marital rape. These behaviors can range from subtle, coercive psychological control to overt physical violence such as hitting, strangling, and acid attacks all often aimed at intimidation and control (Heise, 2023; Stewart et al., 2025).

Recent prevalence data highlight the alarming global scope of IPV. A Lancet Global Health analysis of 53 low- and middle-income countries revealed that 37.2% of women experienced at least one form of IPV in the past year; physical IPV was about 29.6%, and psychological IPV about 25% (Heise, 2023). The Eastern Mediterranean region showed the highest prevalence (47.3%), while the Western Pacific reported 11.3% (Heise, 2023). According to UN Women (2024), about 640 million women aged 15 and older around 26% globally have suffered

IPV in their lifetime, with nearly 736 million women (about 30%) having experienced some form of physical or sexual violence.

Marital role adjustment refers to the ongoing cognitive and behavioral efforts spouses exert to reconcile with the standards, values, and demands of married life a psychological process essential for coping with new marriage-related pressures (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Before marriage, individuals typically enjoy singular freedoms; post-marriage, these must be recalibrated to accommodate mutual life goals, encouraging adjustments in personality, social activities, finances, in-law relations, sexual expectations, work roles, gender roles, and authority patterns (Tamuno, 2017; Sampson, 2009).

Demographic variables including age disparity, occupation, cultural and religious background, education, income level, and family size play key roles as either risk or protective factors for IPV and marital adjustment. For instance, low-income couples may face elevated financial stress, potentially triggering conflict, infidelity, or IPV (Amadi, 2007; Luke-man, 2011; Omerioha, 2013).

Marriage is not just a union of two persons but, also a joining of families affiliated to the couple, these family members are commonly referred to as in-laws (Hornby, 2015). The union of both families through marriage creates a situation where family members to an extent have a say in the affairs of the couple. Thus in-laws may intrude into the affairs of married couples in areas which they are not comfortable such as to chores, hospitality, pregnancy, sex of children, and infidelity just to mention a few. This intrusion may put a crack on the harmony of the couple and may result in spousal violence (Onyekuru & Oladayo, 2012). Odum (2011) investigated causes of marital instability among couples in Delta State. It is against this background that the researcher conceived the idea to investigate the demographic variables influencing spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The alarming rate of spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment is worrisome to counsellors and other advocates of marital harmony. The drift from the notion of collectivism in marriage to individualism has made spousal abuse to be on the increase. Poor marital role adjustment has led to divorce and emergence of single parent families, thereby eroding the marital values of our society. The researcher observed that many men in Rivers State, irrespective of their social standing still beat their wives and deprive them of some economic benefits that is due them by virtue of marriage. On the other hand, most women deprive their husbands of sexual intimacy and respond passively to issues as a way of punishing them for their misconduct. Gradually, this leads to separation and/or divorce and the children of such relationship bear the brunt and eventually are more likely to become menace to society. Children who witness parental abuse experience anxiety, depression, poor school performance and negative health outcomes. They often grow up to become abusers, thereby creating a linage of abusers.

This primitive and inhumane behaviour has a great effect on the nation's growth and productivity as it has led to homicide or suicide of most victims and various psychopathological maladies that have constrained individuals who ought to be contributing to the development of the country. Most victims feel trapped and live in perpetual fear of their abusers and the world they find themselves. Poor marital role adjustment has also led to divorce and the emergence of single parent families thereby eroding the marital values of society. If this is allowed to continue, what will become of the children of today who are vicariously learning from adult members of society? These younger ones are the leaders of tomorrow that would steer the wheels of the progress of society. However, some demographic factors such as, age, level of income, educational background, cultural background and family size could contribute to spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment of couples, either negatively or positively. The future will experience a society that has no regards for fundamental human right; where all forms of abuses are celebrated. The Purpose of this study therefore, is to find out the demographic variables influencing spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State of Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted descriptive survey research design. Nwankwo (2013) explained that descriptive survey research design is aimed at determining and reporting the way things are at a particular time of the study. . This design was adopted hence spousal abuse is a phenomenal occurrence in the society and can be described by the subjects.

The population of the study consisted of 3,939,534registered married couples in Rivers State. This constitutes about 49% of the total Rivers State population estimated at 8,039,867 (National population Commission/National

Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Registered couples whose marriages were duly registered in the Local Government marriage registry. The choice of registered couples was because they pass through the legitimate process of marriage.

The sample of the study consisted of 400 couples in Rivers State. This number is made up of 200 men and 200 women. Taro Yamane formula was used to determine the sample size from a total population of 3,939,534(See appendix II for details of the Taro Yamane calculation).

The two stage random sampling techniques (stratified and systematic random sampling) were used to select the sample. This technique ensured equal representation of all categories of couples that was used for the study. According to Kothari (2009) stratified sampling is the method that involves dividing the population into different groups or classes. And these classes or categories are called strata and the sample is drawn from each stratum. First, Rivers state was divided into three (3) strata based on senatorial district including, Rivers West, Rivers East and Rivers South Senatorial Districts. From each of the strata applying systematic random sampling technique, one local government was picked in each senatorial zone. Hence, the most populated local government in the senatorial district was chosen (Asari-Toru, Obio/Akpor and Khana).

The instrument for data collection was a self-developed questionnaire titled "Demographic Variables, Spousal Abuse and Poor Marital Role Adjustment Scale" (DVRSAPMRAS). The questionnaire was divided into two sections A and B. Section A consisted of bio-data such as gender, marital status, religion, age difference, nature of occupation, cultural background, educational background, income and family size. Section B comprised of 63 items statement based on research questions. The items were structured based on the four point modified Likert scale rating scale of VHE = Very High Extent HE = High Extent, L = Low Extent and VLE =Very Low Extent which were assigned a numerical value of 4, 3, 2 and 1 for the positively keyed items while 1, 2, 3, and 4 were assigned to the negatively keyed items.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS
Mean and standard deviation were used to answer all the research questions. While independent t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 alpha level of significance.

RESULT

Table 1: Demographic Variables that Influence Spousal Abuse

S/N			VLE	LE	HE	VHE	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	Our different religious background leads to verbal attack with my spouse.	F	0	250	44	106	2.64	.873
		%	0.0	62.5	11.0	26.5		
2	Age difference between me and my spouse is the major cause of disagreement on family up-keep	F	0	247	35	118	2.68	.900
		%	0.0	61.8	8.8	29.5		
3	The nature of my job contributes to disagreement and physical fight with my spouse.	F	0	243	49	108	2.66	.875
		%	0.0	60.8	12.3	27.0		
4	My cultural background most times affects our marital roles negatively.	F	51	253	40	56	2.25	.852
		%	12.8	63.3	10.0	14.0		
5	My educational background most times contributes to verbal fight on sensitive issues with my spouse.	F	0	204	120	76	2.68	.774
		%	0.0	51.0	30.0	19.0		
6	Low level of income most times leads to verbal assault of my spouse.	F	5	268	73	54	2.44	.737
		%	1.3	67.0	18.3	13.5		
7	Our family size most times contributes to emotional abuse from my spouse.	F	26	210	92	72	2.52	1.14
		%	8.0	52.5	22.8	16.8		
	GRAND MEAN						**2.55**	**.372**

The table above showed the demographic variables that influences spousal abuse. From an item of seven factors, four including religious background causes verbal attack ($\bar{x}$= 2.64; SD = .873), age difference between spouse ($\bar{x}$=

2.68; SD =.900), nature of occupation (x̄= 2.66; SD = .875) and educational background (x̄= 2.68; SD = .774) were found to cause spousal abuse among married couples in Rivers State. On the other hand, cultural background (x̄= 2.25; SD = .852) and level of income (x̄= 2.44; SD = .737) were rejected. However, the set mean (x̄= 2.55; SD = .372) depicts moderate level of spousal abuse among couples in Rivers State.

Table 2: Demographic Variables That Influence Poor Marital Role Adjustment

S/N			VLE	LE	HE	VHE	MEAN	SD
8	I find it difficult adjusting to the religious demands of my spouse.	F	0	304	69	27	2.31	.591
		%	0.0	76.0	17.3	6.8		
9	Age difference between me and my spouse makes it difficult for me to make decision at home.	F	0	329	19	52	2.31	.689
		%	0.0	82.3	4.8	13.0		
10	I hardly cooperate with my spouse due to the nature of my job.	F	24	354	0	22	2.05	.527
		%	6.0	88.5	0.0	5.5		
11	I most times feel lonely even though am married due to the cultural background of my spouse.	F	21	302	0	77	2.33	.845
		%	5.3	75.5	0.0	19.3		
12	I am always in dispute with my spouse due to our different educational background.	F	32	210	91	67	2.48	.864
		%	8.0	52.5	22.8	16.8		
13	I am most times humiliated by my spouse due to low level of income.	F	0	329	19	52	2.31	.689
		%	0.0	82.3	4.8	13.0		
14.	The large number of our children most times affects my domestic roles negatively.	F	70	200	76	54	2.29	1.04
		%	17.5	50.0	19.0	13.5		
	GRAND MEAN						**2.30**	**.372**

The table above presents the responses to demographic variables influencing poor marital role adjustment. The table was presented with mean (x̄=2.31, 2.31, 2.05, 2.33, 2.48, 2.31, 2.29) for item eight (8) to fourteen (14) respectively. These values are all below criterion mean and are thus rejected. Hence, none of the listed factors was implicated as cause of poor marital role adjustment.

Test of Hypotheses
H_{o1} Religious background does not significantly influence spousal abuse and poor marital adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

Table 3 Independent t-test on Difference in Spousal Abuse and Poor Marital Role Adjustment Based on Religious Background

	Religion	N	Mean	SD	T	df	sig
Spousal Abuse &	Christianity	290	2.43	.277			
Poor Marital Role Adjustment	Islam/Others	110	2.42	.263	.458	398	.647

From the table above, descriptive analysis of the variable showed mean of spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment of Christians as $\bar{x}$ = 2.43, SD =.277and Muslims/others as $\bar{x}$ = 2.42, SD =.263. The t-test result, t(398)= 0.458, p= .647. The result implied that there is no significant difference in the spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment of couples in Rivers State based on religion. Based on the result, the null hypothesis is accepted. Hence, Religious background does not significantly influence spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State.
H_{o2} Age difference does not significantly influence spousal abuse and poor marital adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

Table 4 Independent t-test on Difference in Spousal Abuse and Poor Marital Adjustment Based on Age difference

	Age difference	N	Mean	SD	T	df	sig
Spousal Abuse & Poor Marital Role Adjustment	<46	310	2.48	.281			
	46 & Above	90	2.24	.123	11.625	339.5	.000

From the table above, descriptive analysis of the variable showed mean of spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment of those below the age of 46 as $\bar{x} = 2.48$, SD =.281 and those at 46 years and above as $\bar{x} = 2.24$, SD =.123. The t-test result, t(339.5)= 11.625, p= .000. The result implied that there is significant difference in the spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment of couples in Rivers State based on age difference. Based on the result, the null hypothesis is rejected and restated. Thus, Age difference significantly influence spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

H_{o3} Cultural background does not significantly influence spousal abuse and poor marital adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

Table 5 Independent t-test on Difference in Spousal Abuse and Poor Marital Adjustment Based on Cultural Background

	Cultural Background	N	Mean	SD	t	df	sig
Spousal Abuse & Poor Marital Role Adjustment	Hospitable	206	2.32	.193	9.188	329.5	.000
	Non-hospitable	194	2.55	.295			

From the table above, descriptive analysis of the variable showed mean of spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment of those from hospitable background as $\bar{x} = 2.32$, SD =.193 and those from non-hospitable background as $\bar{x} = 2.55$, SD =.295. The t-test result, t(329.5)= 9.188, p= .000. The result implied that there is significant difference in the spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among those from hospitable and non-hospital background in Rivers State. Based on the result, the null hypothesis is rejected and restated. Thus, cultural background significantly influences spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

H_{o4} Educational Background does not significantly influence spousal abuse and poor marital adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

Table 6 Independent t-test on Difference in Spousal Abuse and Poor Marital Adjustment Based on Educational Background

	Educational Background	N	Mean	SD	t	df	sig
Spousal Abuse & Poor Marital Role Adjustment	SSCE & Below	220	2.54	.297	11.283	332	.000
	Tertiary Education	180	2.29	.146			

From the table above, descriptive analysis of the variable presented mean of spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment of those who had SSCE and below as $\bar{x} = 2.54$, SD =.297 and those who attained tertiary education as $\bar{x} = 2.29$, SD =.146. The t-test result, t(332)= 11.283, p= .000. The result implied that there is significant difference in the spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among those who had SSCE or below and those who attained tertiary education in Rivers State. Based on the result, the null hypothesis is rejected and restated. Thus, educational background significantly influences spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1 revealed that demographic variables such as religious background of spouses, age difference between partners, nature of occupation, and educational background influenced spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment among couples in Rivers State. This finding aligns with Akinlabi and Adebayo (2020), who argued that perpetrators of spousal abuse often maintain control over victims by restricting access to family resources such as money, food, and shelter. Similarly, the finding of the present investigation supports Eze and Alabi (2022), who observed that partners with lower educational attainment, limited income, and low occupational status were more likely to perpetrate spousal abuse, thereby reducing marital role adjustment. In the same manner, the finding of this study is consistent with Nwankwo and Okorie (2021), who reported that verbal abuse was common among married persons in South-East Nigeria. Likewise, it resonates with Okafor and Hassan (2023), who highlighted that income disparity and occupational differences between spouses were strongly associated with verbal and emotional abuse that weakened marital bonds. Conversely, the present finding disagrees with Ogunyemi and

Peters (2024), who noted that age difference and educational background did not significantly influence spousal abuse in certain regions of Nigeria.

Likewise, the result presented in Table 2, which revealed that age difference, level of income, educational background, and occupational type influenced poor marital role adjustment, contrasts with earlier studies such as Anigala and Abidde (2017). However, the present findings are in line with recent works (Akinlabi & Adebayo, 2020; Okafor & Hassan, 2023), which established that demographic characteristics such as age and income directly shape patterns of abuse and the quality of marital adjustment.

The result of hypothesis one is in partial agreement with Eze and Alabi (2022), who investigated the role of religious orientation and found that while religious attendance was not always directly associated with marital adjustment, the importance attached to religion shaped emotional and sexual intimacy within marriage. On the contrary, this finding differs from Nwankwo and Okorie (2021), who found that religious affiliation significantly influenced marital stability among couples in South-East Nigeria. It also contradicts the results of Mhaka-Mutepfa (2009), who argued that spousal abuse was less prevalent in highly religious families in Zimbabwe.

The findings from hypothesis two are in slight agreement with Ogunyemi and Peters (2024), who noted that middle-aged women often report higher levels of marital distress compared to younger or older counterparts, indicating that midlife remains a critical point for spousal conflict and poor marital role adjustment. This resonates with international literature which has long highlighted that psychological well-being and marital satisfaction decline during midlife, particularly when couples are raising teenage children (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1987).

The result from hypothesis three is consistent with Nwankwo and Okorie (2021), who demonstrated that cultural background remains one of the strongest predictors of marital adjustment and spousal conflict in South-East Nigeria. Similarly, Ogunyemi and Peters (2024) confirmed that cultural variations among communities in Rivers State shaped differences in spousal abuse patterns. However, this finding diverges from Suleiman (2001), who reported that cultural background did not significantly influence spousal violence in Ondo State. The difference in outcomes may be attributed to cultural homogeneity in Ondo compared to the wider variety of cultures present in Rivers State.

Hypothesis four found a significant difference in spousal abuse and marital role adjustment between spouses with SSCE (secondary school certificate) or less and those with tertiary education. Specifically, spouses with SSCE or below reported higher levels of spousal abuse and poorer marital role adjustment compared to those with tertiary education. Likewise, lower-educated spouses especially those who are illiterate or primary school graduates tended to score higher on measures of abuse and adjustment challenges. In contrast, spouses with university or postgraduate education, as well as those whose partners held such degrees, consistently reported the lowest abuse and adjustment difficulties. This aligns with Oluwagbemiga, Johnson, and Olaniyi (2023), who found that Nigerian women with higher education levels experienced significantly less intimate partner violence (IPV) across all forms (physical, emotional, sexual).

CONCLUSION
The current study determined critical demographic characteristics of married couples that are directly related to their increased risk of spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment. The conclusion that may be drawn as a result of the findings is that, there is prevalence of spousal abuses with emerging low level of poor marital role adjustment among couple in Rivers State Nigeria. Also, demographic variables such as age difference, cultural background, educational background, level of income and family size were found to significantly influence spousal abuse and poor marital role adjustment in the study area.

The relationship between demographic variables and marital role adjustment of Couples, points to Marital adjustment is a lifelong process, although in the early days of marriage one has to give serious considerations. Understanding the individual trait of the spouse is an ongoing process in marriage because even if two people know each other before or at the time of marriage, there is a possibility that people change during the life cycle. Marital adjustment, therefore, calls for a maturity that accepts and understands growth and development in the spouse. If this growth is not experienced and realized fully, a dearth in a marital relationship is inevitable.

Recommendations
The following recommendations are put forward as a result of the findings and conclusion reached.

1. Spouses should develop mutual respect for themselves and thus refrain from taking their berating partners based on financial grounds.
2. Couples should have a thorough understanding of their partners so as to avoid issues that may trigger off anger and thereby prevent emergent abuses and its consequent poor adjustment.
3. Couples should learn to imbibe virtues such as tolerance and self-control and resolve marital issues amicably instead of unnecessarily criticizing their partners.
4. Married persons (especially male spouse) should desist from the practice of ridiculing or snubbing their wives but regard them as people who deserve some form of respect.
5. State government should establish counselling centres in various communities in the state.
6. Professional counsellors (especially marriage counsellors) should be employed to man such centres so as to handle marital issues that could lead to spousal abuse.

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