

Law, Religion, Health and Healing in Africa



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19 RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) or Covid-19, a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. The WHO thereafter began efforts to contain the disease through recommending preventive non-medical measures, such as frequent hand washing, wearing of personal protective equipment and physical and social distancing from others. In furtherance of the WHO's measures, different countries declared lockdown at different times.² The first case of Covid-19 in Nigeria was confirmed on 27 February 2020, after which several others were confirmed, and a lockdown was declared on 29 March 2020.³ The lockdown kept family members together under the roof without the usual daily "escape" to social gatherings, schools and workplaces. On the home front, it led to excessive familiarity, frequent quarrels, and inadequate finances. Coupled with the physical and social distancing, the Covid-19 pandemic had significant implications on the mental health of people worldwide.⁴

Mental illnesses, like other medical problems, are based on a combination of physical, emotional and psychological factors. Women with mental health disorders are more likely to have experienced domestic abuse in the past, and domestic violence is seven times more likely for women with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Women who have schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are also more likely to have witnessed at least a form of intimate partner violence.⁵

Domestic violence is a major public and social health issue all over the world. In their lifetimes, one in every three (30%) women in the world has been subjected to

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- 2 Xiaoni C, Pengxiang W and Zhun W. 2021. "Emergency use of Covid-19 vaccines recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) as of June 2021", *Drug discoveries & therapeutics* 15(4):222-224.
- 3 Adegboye OA, Adekunle AI and Gayawan E. 2020. "Early transmission dynamics of novel coronavirus (Covid-19) in Nigeria", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17(9):3054.
- 4 Muktar S. 2020. "Mental health and emotional impact of Covid-19: Applying Health Belief Model for medical staff to general public of Pakistan", *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* 87:28-29.
- 5 Dogar FA. 2021. "The impact of domestic violence on mental health", *OlaDoc.com*, 16 July.

physical, emotional and/or sexual assault by their intimate partner.⁶ The Covid-19 pandemic lockdown is said to have exacerbated domestic violence all over the world because of the lockdown orders that required victims to stay at home with their abusers,⁷ reducing their chances of being able to escape a violent situation.⁸ The lockdown altered the rhythms of everyday life for Nigerians who struggled with income deficits and the daily expenses of the family,⁹ and it heightened social tensions leading to more aggression and violence.¹⁰ Victims felt culturally compelled to remain silent,¹¹ and in a risky family environment that can lead to immediate and long-term adverse mental health effects.

Mental health issues are culturally stigmatised in Nigeria.¹² Thus, people are often forced to remain in silence until their situation gets worse. When domestic violence occurs, the perpetrator often uses religious justifications to justify their behaviour and attribute violence to their religion.¹³ However, many of those who seek help seem to prefer help from religious communities, either because they are religious themselves or because they perceive health facilities to be inadequate and expensive. Some religious communities indirectly contribute to domestic violence by suggesting that a man is the family's leader and has the ability to reprimand rebellious family members, including his wife. Some religions believe that every

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- 6 World Health Organization (WHO). 2013. "Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-partner Sexual Violence", *WHO.int*, 20 October.
 - 7 UN Women. 2020. "Covid-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls". New York: UN Women.
 - 8 For global literature on the mental health effects of Covid-19 stay-at-home orders and the rise of domestic violence, see Hamadani JD et al. 2020. "Immediate impact of stay-at-home orders to control Covid-19 transmission on socioeconomic conditions, food insecurity, mental health, and intimate partner violence in Bangladeshi women and their families: an interrupted time series", *The Lancet Global Health* 8(11):e1380-e1389; Piquero AR et al. 2021. "Domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from a systematic review and meta-analysis", *Journal of Criminal Justice* 74:art 101806; Berniell I and Facchini G. 2021. "Covid-19 lockdown and domestic violence: Evidence from internet-search behavior in 11 countries", *European Economic Review*, 136:103775.
 - 9 Onah NG. "Socio-cultural and religious impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria", in Labeodan HA, Amenga-Etego R, Stiebert J and Aidoo MS (eds). *Covid-19: African Women and the Will to Survive*. University of Bamberg Press, 187-226.
 - 10 See Nzeadibe A et al. 2022. "Nigeria's pandemic lockdown measures were hard on informal workers", *The Conversation*, 28 February; Fawole OI, Okedare OO and Reed E. 2021. "Home was not a safe haven: women's experiences of intimate partner violence during the Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria", *BMC Women's Health* 21:art 32.
 - 11 "Breaking the silence on domestic violence", *Vanguard*, 6 April 2017.
 - 12 Armiya'u AY. 2015. "A review of stigma and mental illness in Nigeria", *Journal of Clinical case Reports* 5(1):1000488.
 - 13 See Ngwoke PN. 2021. "Religious manipulation and domestic violence within Christian homes in Nigeria", *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 11(1):121-136; Umar MA. 2012. "The perspective of Shari'ah on domestic violence", *Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence* 3(2012):170-181.

member of the family deserves respect. Religion is, thus, perceived as both a cause and a cure for the mental health issues that can come from domestic violence.

It is argued by some authors that domestic violence is a theological and ecclesiastical issue, and that responses by religious organisations are necessary to lessen its high prevalence in Nigeria.¹⁴ It is, therefore, imperative to investigate how various religious communities have responded to domestic violence in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. What prevention and risk mitigation strategies do religious communities put in place as a response to domestic violence and tackle associated mental health issues during the Covid-19 pandemic? This is the key question of the present study, which contributes to the growing body of research on these issues by looking at the socio-ecological framework that the religious communities deploy to address reported incidents of mental health issue linked to domestic violence.¹⁵

FRAMING RELIGION, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, MENTAL HEALTH AND COVID-19

The current study's data was acquired through narratives based on an average of one hour face-to-face, in-depth interviews conducted in English. Interviews were held at the offices of the participants and on the grounds of various religious institutions, as agreed. The interviews were conducted to learn about each participant's experience with domestic abuse and mental health issues as reported by their religious members. It was also to determine the forms of assistance that religious groups could provide to victims and abusers. To assure consistency and the study's reliability, the author conducted and audio-recorded all interviews, which were then transcribed for thematic analysis.¹⁶

Three religious leaders were included in this study, a Muslim imam, a Pentecostal pastor, and a chief priest from the Obatala traditional religion.¹⁷ The rationale for recruiting participants from different religious groups was to represent the diversity of religious affiliation of southwestern Nigerians and the three major religions in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion.¹⁸ Participants were

14 Ogbuji HO. 2022. "Mitigating the prevalence of domestic violence in Nigeria: An Ecclesial and pastoral leadership response". Project Thesis, Boston University School of Theology.

15 For more information on the methodology of social-ecological frameworks, see Stokols D, Allen J and Bellingham RL. 1996. "The social ecology of health promotion: implications for research and practice", *American Journal of Health Promotion* 10(4):247-251; Tolley EE et al. 2016. *Qualitative methods in public health: a field guide for applied research*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

16 See Guest G, MacQueen K and Namey E. 2012. *Applied thematic analysis*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE; Braun V and Clarke V. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2):77-101.

17 Obatala, according to the Yoruba mythology of deity, is the *orisha* of creation and healing. Obatala is the spirit of righteous kindness and justice – a peacemaker.

18 Ngbea GT and Achunike HC. 2014. "Religion: Past and present in Nigeria", *International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research* 17(2):156-174.

selected based on two primary factors: (1) preference for larger congregations and (2) the availability and willingness of the religious leader to grant interview. The imam was a 53-year-old man at the time of the interview and has been married for thirty-five years.¹⁹ He is the circuit missionary of a Muslim sect and has been a religious leader for thirty-four years now. The pastor is a 62-year-old man, married for 32 years to his wife, who works in the same ministry with him.²⁰ The Obatala traditional priest is a 67-year-old man, married to several wives and a devoted worshipper of his deity.²¹

It would have been preferable if more religious leaders had been able to participate in the research and the perspectives of the victims could be considered in the study. Unfortunately, the participants were unwilling to share the contact information of the identified victims within their religious group, since it contradicted their principles and risked jeopardising the privacy of those victims of domestic violence and sufferer of mental illness. After concluding that their experiences were distinctive enough to justify further investigation, the three participants in this study volunteered to participate in the study. The goal of the study was made explicit to volunteers: it was to learn about the lives of victims of mental health issues as influenced by domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic.

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The study explored the relationship between domestic violence and mental health issues during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in religious settings from the perspective of diverse religious leaders and their organisations. The discussion below highlights the responses of selected religious leaders based on recurring themes, such as domestic violence from religious perspectives, types of mental health issues identified and kinds of religious care and social support provided.

Domestic violence as a religious problem

Domestic violence in this study refers to any type of abuse that occurs between spouses or partners, between parents and children or against older relatives. Participants in the study were asked to explain what their religion says about domestic violence and how their religion reacts to domestic violence. The participants affirmed that their religion preaches and advocates for peace, fairness and tolerance between a domestic couple and within the home.

19 Interview with a Muslim imam by OO Ekundayo, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 7 April 2022. The imam was the most versed in Quranic understanding at the largest mosque visited in Ile-Ife, Nigeria as at the time of the interview.

20 Interview with a Pentecostal pastor by OO Ekundayo, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 18 March 2022. The pastor was the most senior pastor of the largest and most populated church in Ile-Ife, Nigeria at the time of the interview.

21 Interview with an Obatala chief priest by OO Ekundayo, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 30 March 2022. The chief priest was the traditional religion leader at the World Obatala Temple located in Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

The Muslim imam explained that Islam frowns at domestic violence and at violence in whatever form and encourages peaceful and happy homes. The Quran enjoins peace, equity and fairness. He emphasised the importance of peace, equity and fairness in families and within couples, as encouraged by the Quran. When each spouse or member of the family dutifully maintains their responsibilities in the home, as pointed out by the Quran, there can rarely be violence in the home. The imam further quoted from the Quran a passage which states that “among His wonders is that He created from you mates out of your own kind, so that you may incline toward them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you; in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think.”²² Muslim men are encouraged to assume complete responsibility for their wives, caring for them as much as possible. Wives are also admonished to sexually satisfy their husbands. If a husband or wife decides to defy the Quran’s admonition by denying the other spouse the marital pleasure of sexuality, the partner is advised not to resort to violence.

The Pentecostal pastor similarly emphasised that domestic violence is against God’s wish and that Christianity frowns at it. According to the scripture, humans are commanded, “Let everybody be slow to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not propose the righteousness of God.”²³ The pastor further reiterated that domestic violence comes with a lot of anger, and God is against it.

In the same view, the Obatala traditionalist maintained, “Our religion is a very peaceful religion. We don’t condone violence in whatsoever form. We are peace lovers. A man and his wife cannot engage in any form of violence be it physical, sexual, or verbal because there are laid-down rules that guide relationships either with your spouse or your children. There are hierarchies and respect accorded to each person. Humans are treated with dignity and honour, even children because each person is an entity that MUST be respected.”

Participants in the study attributed the importance of peace and tranquility in homes as attested to in all three religions. They rejected domestic violence, even in the tense times of the pandemic. They believed that religion should be the system that upholds society’s morality and strong bonds, as well as teaching respect and defining the duties and responsibilities that people should have towards each other, essentially guiding how we behave in our homes, schools, communities, places of work and society at large.

Women as “weaker vessels”?

Domestic violence is a pattern in which one person attempts to dominate or control another. It is a pattern of abuse in which the perpetrator consistently seizes control of the victim. Domestic abuse manifests itself in a variety of ways. It is a fact that women and children are usually the victims of domestic violence. Although men

²² Quran, 20:21.

²³ Bible, James 1:19-20.

also experience domestic violence, studies reveal that women and children are more likely to suffer physical or psychological harm from domestic abuse than men are. Could this be as a result of women and children being seen as weaker than men as implied in the biblical command: “You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as like a weaker vessel”?²⁴

When asked why women are sometimes referred to as “weaker vessels”, religious leaders express a number of different perspectives. The pastor said of the women as “weaker vessels” proposition, “Basically, I agree. I think I have a hundred per cent agreement ... even according to the bible that women are weaker vessels and they should be treated with love. So, I agree that women are weaker vessels in marriage.” The Obatala priest took a different view, saying, “Women are stronger than men ... even the reign of women is stricter and better than that of men.”

For his part, the imam stated that, as far as he is concerned, women are not weak. He elaborated, “You know they contribute their own quota to the society, so as far as I’m concerned, they are not weak in any form. They’re stronger than men, because they take more responsibilities nowadays and absorb marital shocks. Women go through a lot of pain in childbirth, and some are even assaulted by their spouses, but they still come out stronger.” Contrary to the pastor, who agreed strongly with the biblical notion of women as weaker vessels, the imam and the Obatala priest opined that women are most of the time stronger than men, because they are better leaders, emotionally stronger and absorb pressures associated with the responsibilities of life. Women are stronger than men, as against biblical claims. Nevertheless, they are weaker when it comes to dealing with their husbands or partners who threaten them and physically abuse them.

A victim of domestic violence, regardless of her religion, may suffer tremendously if no one helps her to come out of such a traumatic experience, especially during in the context of an event like the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁵ Unfortunately, most women continue to be the victims of domestic abuse and violence in Nigeria and around the world. Women often live under the rule of men and are treated as inferior and oppressed creatures in most parts of the world, including some religions.

Varieties of domestic violence

Religious leaders reported encountering varying types and degrees of domestic violence in their congregation, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The different forms of domestic violence identified by the religious leaders among their congregation, particularly during the Covid-19 lockdown, was physical and sexual violence towards spouse.

²⁴ Bible, 1 Peter 3:7

²⁵ Linde A and González Laya A. 2020. “What the Covid-19 pandemic tells us about gender equality”, *World Economic Forum*, 9 May.

Physical and emotional violence

Physical violence towards spouse involves punching, shoving, clutching, biting, pulling hair and similar actions. This sort of abuse also includes denying a partner medical care or pressuring them to use alcohol or drugs. According to the most recent, pre-Covid statistics of the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS), 14% of married women in Nigeria experienced physical violence over the course of a year in 2018.²⁶ But domestic violence, notably, also includes emotional violence. According to reports from the Nigerian national population commission, women are exposed to emotional IPV from their current partner or husband at a lifetime rate of 19%, physical IPV at a rate of 14%, and sexual IPV at a rate of 5%.²⁷ The use of words to undermine the self-confidence of the wife, husband, or other intimate partner victims is referred to as emotional abuse. Using coercion, deceit, stalking, name-calling, and other tactics on one's spouse occurs at a rate of between 31% to 61% of households in Nigeria.²⁸

With regard to physical violence, the Pentecostal pastor interviewed for this study said, "We have seen cases of wives killing their husbands, we've seen cases of wives who have wounded their husbands. I think the most reported form of violence among my church members is from husbands to wives and you see wives report their husbands ... most times they raise their voices against their wives, even in public. That's a form of violence." This narrative from the pastor describes how both husbands and wives physically and verbally assault their spouses among his church members. The pastor reiterated that both women and men are victims of emotional violence, such as name-calling and humiliation. "The form of domestic violence that is often reported in our sect is verbal violence, and this goes both ways – the husband and wife verbally abusing each other."

Contrary to the pastor, the Obatala priest said that in his religion "there is no form of domestic violence, either between husbands and wives or from parents to their children." Among the Obatala worshippers, domestic abuse was rarely reported, since the group maintained a zero-tolerance policy against physical, verbal and sexual violence, says the Obatala priest. However, it could also be that the leader's strong position on the subject makes it difficult for members of this sect to disclose domestic violence, even when it occurs in their own homes. Members may also wish to avoid bringing up their wives or husbands for fear of setting a bad example in the congregation. In contrast to the extreme stance held by the Obatala priest, the pastor and the imam reported the existence of physical and emotional domestic violence

26 Nigerian Population Commission (NPC), Federal Republic of Nigeria and ICF International. 2019. *Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2018*. Abuja, Nigeria and Rockville, MD: NPC and ICF International.

27 National Population Commission (NPC), Federal Republic of Nigeria and ICF International. 2014. *Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2013: Final Report*. Abuja, Nigeria and Rockville, MD: NPC and ICF International.

28 Mapayi BM et al. 2013. "Impact of intimate partner violence on anxiety and depression amongst women in Ile-Ife, Nigeria", *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 16(1):11-18.

in their congregations. For them, when families or couples are cooped up in a house during a lockdown, there will undoubtedly be conflict, but misunderstandings and conflict should be resolved in love and peace.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence is any action that intimidates one's spouse into having unsafe sex or participating in sexual behaviour in which they do not want to or that otherwise utilises sex to control or degrade them. Forced intercourse, assaults, threats and other forms of sexual violence are all examples of sexual violence. According to the NDHS, a significant number of Nigerian women in the age bracket of 15 years to 49 years have been sexually abuse by an intimate partner.²⁹ Another study from Nigeria have shown the prevalence of intimate partner violence to range from 31 to 61% for psychological/emotional violence, 20 to 31% for sexual violence, and 7 to 31% for physical violence.³⁰ Based on the population of Nigeria, these statistics are high and scary.

The Pentecostal pastor claimed that sexual deprivation of a husband by his wife was a form of sexual violence towards the man. Hence, a sexually deprived man might want to claim his sexual right from his wife forcefully. According to the Muslim imam, the most reported forms of domestic violence in his congregations is sexual abuse by husbands to their wives. However, the Obatala priest claimed that sexual violence by husbands or wives had never been reported to him by anyone in his congregation. He feels it is because his congregation understands fully the sanctions meted out to anyone who goes against the doctrine of peace and "zero tolerance for violence". According to him, anyone who is violent, with bad temper, impatience and anger outburst will not enjoy the favour of Obatala.

RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The two participants who had cases of domestic violence reported to them during the Covid-19 pandemic responded in diverse ways. For the Pentecostal pastor, the first step in case of life-threatening domestic violence situations was separation, with the survivor relocated to an apartment owned by the church until the perpetrator was properly rehabilitated. The Muslim imam and the Pentecostal pastor indicated that there was a system put in place in their congregations to handle domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic. These systems operated through committees consisting of legal personnel, security agencies, social welfare and spiritual heads. Both also indicated that the committee's members were duly respected by both genders. Both also referred the couple to counselling by committees involved with the welfare of congregation members with the involvement of legal and security

29 NPC and ICF International, *Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2018*.

30 Mapayi et al, "Impact of intimate partner violence on anxiety and depression".

personal. Various sorts of sanctions are also applied to the culprit within the Muslim community.

When the religious leaders were asked what their responses had been to domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic, the pastor said that in cases of life-threatening violence, they rescue the victim first and report the perpetrator to the appropriate law enforcement authorities. They provide support system for the victim through the welfare unit of the church or mosque. The pastor further explained that they have counsellors who can spiritually guide and counsel the spouse towards reconciliation. In a similar fashion, the imam said, "We actually investigate through the through the marital committees in conjunction with welfare officers. The only reaction is to use scriptures and prayers to settle the difference between the spouses." The imam continued, "If the husband beats the wife, the man is reprimanded for his actions by appearing before a committee that guides him to unlearn his actions and to relearn love and peace. Islam does not give permission to any man to beat any woman, Islam does not do that one."

Participants in the study were in agreement that violence, especially domestic violence, is not condoned by their religion in any way. The religious leaders asserted that domestic abuse is frowned upon throughout the three major religions and that perpetrators are punished and victims receive spiritual and physical rehabilitation when it occurs. When security and legal personnel are required, they are invited to participate to guide the religious body appropriately.

These religious leaders also reported that the most common types of mental health symptoms associated with domestic violence that were reported to them were sadness, outbursts of anger and physical violence towards children and social withdrawal during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the survivors of domestic violence in these religious groups reported symptoms of withdrawal from social interactions and social engagements. They also reported signs of depression, such as persistent sadness and social withdrawal. In light of this, the religious leaders posited that there is link between domestic violence and mental health outcomes based on the exposures they have had with of their members of their congregations who are victims or perpetrators of physical, sexual and emotional violence.

The pastor opined that the most common mental health symptoms that he noticed and identified among women who have been domestically violated or abused is withdrawal. "You see a lady who has been very vibrant in serving God and involved in the church's activities suddenly withdrawn. She rarely exchanges pleasantries after service. Most times they have been physically battered; they wear excess makeup and clothes to cover up", said the pastor. "During the pandemic lockdown, a lot of ladies withdrew into themselves and for those who didn't withdraw, they talked excessively". Pastors had to go out of their ways during the Covid-19 lockdown to encourage member to join virtual meetings and to look out for plausible signs of pain and withdraw from their members. Among the pastor's Pentecostal congregation, the most prevalent mental health symptoms documented

among the women who have been abused or violated by their husbands include social withdrawal, social unreliability and mental instability. The imam also opined that domestic violence has caused havoc in his congregation, leaving the victims with physical injuries, with some becoming socially backwards and depressed as a result of being physically violated.

RELIGIOUS INTERVENTIONS FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

The religious leaders who participated in the study described the different ways that they have worked in their congregation to care for survivors with mental health issues associated with domestic violence. Some of the prevention and mitigation measures that they highlighted included counselling, prayers, deliverance, medical care, financial care and support and collaboration with legal and security personnel in their town to protect the rights of survivors in their congregations.

Counselling sessions

Counseling is a well-established and viable style of therapy that is multifaceted and applies to a wide range of contexts and roles. During the therapy process, religion can aid in the facilitation of positive change. The three religious leaders emphasised the necessity of marital dispute counselling. The Pentecostal pastor opined that counselling is a means that has helped families in difficult times to adhere to the biblical admonition to live peaceably with all men. The pastor's counsellors were described as men and women of integrity who are knowledgeable in biblical doctrines and who have been happily married for decades.

According to the Muslim imam, counsellors have been readily available to counsel and help the distressed person who cries out for help. They engaged in counselling, prayers and activities for members during the Covid-19 pandemic. Victims of domestic violence are supported by the congregation, so that they may rehabilitated. There are two committees dedicated to family affairs within the congregation. The imam also described strategies put in place to curb the domestic violence menace, such as regular seminars to enlighten congregation members to enlighten them, including such as character seminars, marital seminars, orientation seminars and age-group seminars. "We teach men and women strategies to enjoy and cope in a relationship. We further encourage our women to join martial art to learn defence techniques against physical violence."

Based on the narratives of the imam and pastor, it is evident that there is a need for support groups to provide comfort, care and counselling to both the victim and the perpetrator until they are rehabilitated together and there is healing and restoration in the marriage. This process highlights the importance of organising seminars to educate and prepare youths towards building a happy and peaceful marriage. Both pre-marital counselling and marital or family counselling in times of distress helps build and restore peace in families.

Legal and security support

There is reportedly good collaboration between the selected religious communities and the legal and security agencies around them. The legal and security agencies have guided and advised religious leaders appropriately on the way out of dire situations prior to Covid-19 pandemic and they were also willing partners when crises erupted during the Covid-19 lockdown. According to the Muslim imam, there are legal teams in the congregation who are also overseeing the crisis that may likely arise in families. If the case is serious, such as husband beating or threatening the life of his wife, this can be reported to the legal authority. The legal agencies would then advise on the best way such situation can be handled. The Pentecostal pastor, in a similar view, said that “when it is a life-threatening situation, we report the perpetrator to the legal authority”. In the case of the church, the legal team are not all members of the congregation but include respected members of the society who are police officers, civil defence and lawyers. These legal persons are most times employed or engaged as secular agents, who are working at either the state or federal level in Nigeria, but sometimes they are members of the congregation as the Muslim imam pointed out. The implication of engaging members who are legal or security agents as enforcers of law and order in these religious organisations is that there is likely to be smooth transition between the knowledge of the law of the land and the law of the religious organisation. The understanding of both laws – law of the state and religious law – can bring about a wholistic change.

Based on the imam’s and the pastor’s reports, it is critical to build a positive rapport and bilateral interaction between religious organisations and the town’s security services because such services were specifically needed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The established relationship contributes to the development of law and order, as well as peace, in religious organisations, families, the home, and society as a whole.

Prayer and deliverance sessions

Prayer is a spiritual conversation with the highest divinity. Prayer and deliverance sessions are organised as part of the religious care against domestic violence and mental health issues resulting for violence within the family setting. Prayer and deliverance practices were common to all of the religious traditions and congregations consulted for this study.

The Muslim imam expressed his profound belief in the power of prayer for the couple whose marriage is affected by domestic violence such that their mental health is in jeopardy. The imam said, “Yes, we do have prayer sessions like *tahjud* (mid-night prayers) *solatul-duha* (prayer before sunrise) and so on for victims who have been abused domestically and are gradually displaying symptoms of mental illnesses.” The imam further noted, “Usually members come together to organise prayers for distressed families in order to bring back together in peace. We harness all the resources to make sure that we retain that family in the congregation.”

The imam pointed out that there are types of prayers offered at midnight and at sunrise to help restore peace and tranquility in distressed homes. In the same vein, the Pentecostal pastor said, “there are sessions of prayers and deliverance. Whatever the issue is, we pray because we are strong believers in the efficacy of prayer.” The pastor and the imam both believed in the efficacy of prayers for the victims and the perpetrators of domestic violence. Particularly during the trials of the Covid-19 pandemic, they believed that such prayers would deliver the perpetrator from anger and rage and restore the victim to love and peace.

Medical care via religious organisation

Another collaboration that exists between the religious organisations and their communities is with health care personnel. The participants reported establishing rapport with medical personnel who are members of the organisation or who reside near them. The imam reported that doctors and other medical persons in his congregation attended to members who needed medical attention by doing the relevant medical examinations and assessments during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the medical personnel were trained in cases involving physical and sexual violence. Furthermore, as reported by the pastor, doctors and other medical professionals who have received training in handling cases of domestic violence provided care for members of his congregation who needed it. They also provided treatment in cases of sexually transmitted disease during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Obatala priest also confirmed a strong collaboration between his religious organisation and local medical personnel. In his congregation, mentally disturbed members are sometimes treated with synthetic drugs, as prescribed by the invited medical doctors, along with local herbs. In this way, he claimed that mental health issues are treated holistically – by prayers, administration of drugs, sacrifices, and by performance rituals peculiar to their religion.

The relationship between the religious and medical personnel makes healing and health effortless. Medical personnel who are members or reside around these religious organisations have been of tremendous assistance to members of who medical help. Some have personally visited victims of domestic violence in their homes to provide personalised care, such as treatment of physical injuries, monitoring of blood pressure and prescription of drugs, both before and during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Financial care and support

The three religious leaders in this study attested to giving financial aid to member of their congregation during the Covid-19 pandemic. More aid and necessary resources were given to families with particular hardship and distress during the lockdown. When asked what type of support the religious bodies gave to their members during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Muslim imam affirmed that the congregation was able to come together to donate financial resources and food items, which were then divided among those in need. The Obatala priest said members were taken

care of during the Covid-19 pandemic and that members had access to the temple to seek any form of support, especially financial and food support. By his account, no one lacked, hence there was no aggression, anger or any form of mental breakdown among any community member.

The Pentecostal pastor also said that the congregation made sure that as many members as required financial and material help during the Covid-19 lockdown were given such assistance. Therefore no one had mental health issues as a result of domestic violence, which could come about through conflicts over lack of money or food items in the home. The pastor claimed that his church has an apartment where members who were in distress or homeless could be housed prior to Covid-19 and during the lockdown. Members who were separated from their spouses for some time due to domestic disputes were accommodated and fed until the process of reconciliation is concluded.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the pastor's congregation appears to have received financial, monetary, feeding and lodging assistance, with special care and attention given to victims of domestic violence. The imam explained that during the Covid-19 pandemic, members of their congregation received assistance from contributions made by wealthy members of the congregation. The Obatala priest testified that during the Covid-19 pandemic, members were especially encouraged to live a communal life in which they shared resources. As a result, it was clear that the three religious groups offered a support structure for their members to live a stress-free life before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lack of resources – money, food, clothing and shelter – sometimes leads to frustration and aggression, as the Obatala priest noted.

UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

This study engaged religious leaders from different religious sects to report their members' experiences of domestic violence and mental illness during the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The results are particularly relevant for Nigeria, a multi-religious country where religion plays a crucial role in determining the fate of families and each family member in terms of social norms and morals. As a result, religious leaders are major stakeholders in the country's response to domestic abuse and related mental health symptoms. They are often the first point of contact for domestic violence survivors seeking help, healing and guidance during the pandemic. Considering the strictness of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown measures, it was difficult for families and the religious sector to play these crucial roles. The prospect of poor mental health outcomes associated with domestic violence became menace in that context, but it was clear that religious leaders and their organisations had the capacity to play a major role in its eradication.

The study participants spoke of the views and perspectives on domestic violence from the three major religions in Nigeria – Islam, Christianity and African traditional religion. They referred to scriptures and teachings that emphasised peace in the

home between spouses, parents and their children. No violence – physical, emotional or sexual – is encouraged by the three religions. The indigenous Obatala traditional religion particularly emphasised that each person is a spiritual being and must be respected as such; hence, battering of spouses and or children or wards is prohibited. All three major religions condemn domestic violence. When it occurs, offenders are reprimanded and victims receive both spiritual and physical rehabilitation and reconciliation where possible. This supports the view of other studies that when violence or divorce occurs, concerned couples should seek reconciliation.³¹ Religious care has significant role in influencing domestic violence and mental health issues which result from it.

The present study suggests that domestic violence was rampant during lockdown, in line with existing studies.³² Anxiety, depression and social withdrawal were the mental health issues caused by domestic violence, as reported by members of all three religions. Counselling sessions, prayer and deliverance, medical care, financial care, enlightenment and orientation programmes were some of the interventions the religious institutions deployed during the pandemic. The incorporation of religious care interventions within religious communities indicates that these communities had means to tackle the problem through measures that were helpful for victims and the perpetrators. These religiously based interventions had the same impact as other psychological and non-psychological treatments.³³ Forms of religious care and congregation-based support thus contributed to addressing domestic violence and mental illness during the pandemic and are worthy of further study.

It is important to note that, while religious care and support for victims of domestic violence and mental illness was a resource in the pandemic, it was not always without problems or as seamless as Nigerian religious leaders may have reported. In some cases, religious leaders tended to focus more on their congregants' visible and external representations of their well-being, most of which usually conformed to their religion's expected norms, especially during trying times like the Covid-19 pandemic. In that sense, religious leaders who insisted what there was no or little domestic violence in their communities may have reflected either a failure of religious leaders to pay closer attention to their members' actual mental health or attitudes that discouraged some victims from coming forward. Even, religious

31 Ademikuka SO. 2019. "Reading 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 in the context of intimate partner violence in Nigeria", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40(1):art 1926.

32 Obeid S et al. 2020. "Factors associated with fear of intimacy among a representative sample of the Lebanese population: The role of depression, social phobia, self-esteem, intimate partner violence, attachment, and maladaptive schemas", *Perspectives in psychiatric care* 56(3):486-494; Mautong H et al. 2021. "Assessment of depression, anxiety and stress levels in the Ecuadorian general population during social isolation due to the Covid-19 outbreak: a cross-sectional study", *BMC psychiatry* 21(1):1-15.

33 Sorrentino AE. 2021. "Mental health care in the context of intimate partner violence: Survivor perspectives", *Psychological services* 18(4):512; Galovski TE. 2022. "Massed cognitive processing therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder in women survivors of intimate partner violence", *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice, and policy* 14(5):769.

19. Religious responses to domestic violence and mental health issues...

leaders who reported that domestic violence was rampant during the pandemic lockdown acknowledged that this also put additional strain on their procedures in place to address domestic violence, particularly because physically evacuating the victim was difficult in conditions of lockdown and social distancing. These factors also made it extremely difficult for the victims to request and accept assistance. Further, even though there were relations between religious organisations and local legal, security and medical personnel, there is need for improved coordination among key government agencies and religious institutions on how to respond to domestic abuse in order to reduce mental health issues during lockdowns or times of distress.