

Extended Abstract

Caged, cowered, or covered? Marital control and freedom from fear in marriage in Nigeria

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Introduction

Although both men and women experience marital control and fear of a spouse, a larger proportion of women experience it, and the debilitating consequences disproportionately affect women (1,2). Recent Demographic and Health Surveys in many countries show that more than 50% of women aged 15-49 years old experience marital control. In sub-Saharan Africa, except in Burundi (35%), and Senegal (16%), 45-83% of women in a union experience marital control, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, 50-73% of women in a union reported experiencing marital control (3). Despite the ubiquitous prevalence of marital control, there is scanty evidence in the literature on the categories of women who are controlled and live in fear of their partners. Marital control and fear negatively impact women's lives, efficiency as mothers and wives, and productivity in economic activities. Women who experience marital control and/or fear their husbands are more likely to experience domestic violence (4,5). Domestic violence may also be a reason for the fear. It constrains women's life prospects (6) and affects marital stability and satisfaction (7). Experiencing negative control in marriage is associated with engaging in potentially health-compromising behaviors (8,9). Unmet need for family planning and unplanned pregnancy is higher among women who experience husband control and fear (1). Inequity and unequal relations in a union perpetrated by patriarchal customs and gender norms are age-long drivers of control and fear in a union. Therefore, anchored on feminist theories, this study examines the proportion of women in Nigeria who experience marital control and fear in a union the associated factors, and the implications for family well-being and gender equality in Nigeria. Caging and cowering women through marital control and fear is ultimately a loss to the family and the nation. It stifles productivity and self-fulfillment. Evidence from this study is useful for assessing Nigeria's progress toward achieving a world free of fear and control and attaining the national and sustainable development goals to eliminate all forms of violence against women, promote gender equity, and design interventions.

Materials and Methods

Data were obtained from the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). The study population comprises a weighted sample of 7,847 women who are currently in a union (legally married and living together with a partner) and who were selected and interviewed for the domestic violence module of the 2018 NDHS. The dependent variables are marital control and fear of a husband or partner. In the 2018 NDHS, marital control was measured with five questions: if husband/partner is jealous or angry if the respondent talks with other men; if he frequently accuses her of being unfaithful; does not permit her to meet your female friends; tries to limit her contact with her family; and insists on knowing where she is at all times. The response options were yes, no, and don't know. All the don't know were dropped in this analysis. They were 0.02-0.37%. The responses to the five questions were aggregated to generate a single variable that was dichotomized to indicate whether a woman experiences control (coded 1), or not (coded 0). The second dependent variable is fear of husband. The respondents were asked if they are afraid of their husbands/partner most of the time, sometimes or never. Those who were afraid most times and sometimes were categorized as afraid, while those who were never afraid were a category coded 0. The distribution of the two dependent variables informed having them as separate dependent variables. They are significantly related but a good percentage (36.9%) of those who experience no control still have fear, indicating that their fear is not because of control. Control was included as one of the independent variables for fear given that marital control may be a reason for fear. The selection of the independent variables was based on existing literature, and the theories underpinning this study. They included individual characteristics such as age, education; family/marriage variables; husband's characteristics; empowerment variables; and contextual variables. All the analyses were conducted with State 17 for Windows. A test of multicollinearity was done to ensure that the variables in the same model were not highly correlated. Shapefiles obtained

from the DHS were used to construct maps in the descriptive analysis. Multivariate analysis was conducted with models of logistic regression. The appropriate weighting factor and the svy command in Stata were used to account for the structure of the DHS data. All analyses were two-tailed and the significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. The models that show how characteristics of women intersect to increase their vulnerability to husband control and fear are in progress.

Results

Close to sixty percent (58.2%) of the respondents experienced husband control, and approximately half (49.7%) reported fear of husband/partner. (Table not shown).

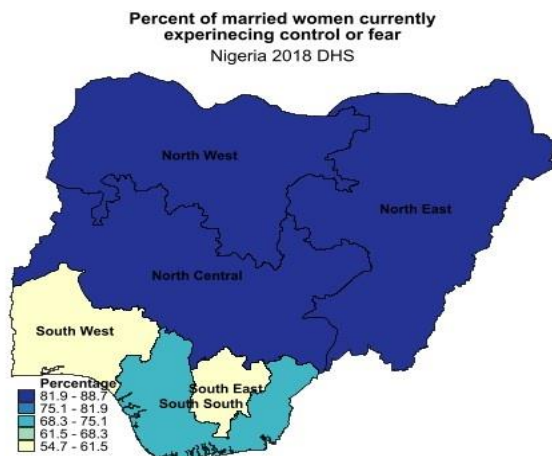


Figure 1.

A large proportion (75%) of the women experienced both marital control and fear of their partners. The lowest proportion in any region is 54.7% to 61.5% in the South West and South East (Figure 1).

Table 1. Predictors of husband control, and fear of husband/partner

Variable	label	aOR	95% CI	aOR	95% CI
		Husband control		Afraid of husband/partner	
Household wealth index	Poorest (Ref)				
	Poorer	0.82	0.66 - 1.03	1.43**	1.15 - 1.77
	Middle	0.93	0.74 - 1.17	1.43**	1.09 - 1.87
	Richer	0.81	0.62 - 1.07	1.35	1.00 - 1.82
	Richest	0.69*	0.50 - 0.95	1.11	0.79 - 1.56
Region of residence	North central (Ref)				
	North East	1.93***	1.49 - 2.50	1.42**	1.12 - 1.80
	North West	1.04	0.79 - 1.39	1.47**	1.11 - 1.95
	South East	0.69*	0.48 - 0.99	0.45***	0.28 - 0.72
	South South	1.06	0.81 - 1.39	0.30***	0.23 - 0.39
	South West	0.23***	0.17 - 0.32	0.98	0.73 - 1.30
Employment status	Not working (Ref)				
	Employed not for cash	1.38**	1.08 - 1.76	1.07	0.83 - 1.38
	Employed for cash	1.15	0.99 - 1.34	0.90	0.77 - 1.06
Age at first cohabitation	<18 Ref)				
	18-24	1.07	0.92 - 1.26	1.06	0.91 - 1.22

	25-29	0.88	0.68 - 1.14	0.95	0.75 - 1.21
	30-48	1.04	0.78 - 1.39	0.71*	0.51 - 0.99
Currently residing with husband/partner					
	Staying elsewhere	0.99	0.82 - 1.20	0.70**	0.56 - 0.88
Type of union	Monogamy (Ref)				
	Polygyny	1.02	0.87 - 1.21	1.40***	1.20 - 1.64
Use of internet	Never used (Ref)				
	Ever used	0.96	0.75 - 1.22	0.58***	0.44 - 0.75
Husband/partner's highest education	No education (Ref)				
	Primary	1.18	0.90 - 1.55	0.93	0.74 - 1.17
	Secondary	1.40*	1.08 - 1.81	0.94	0.73 - 1.21
	Higher	1.73**	1.24 - 2.43	0.88	0.64 - 1.20
Husband/Partner's work status	Not working/irregular (Ref)				
	worked last 7 days	1.96***	1.52 - 2.53	1.04	0.81 - 1.35
Spousal education gap	Wife more educated (Ref)				
	Same level of education	0.81*	0.67 - 0.98	0.97	0.80 - 1.18
	Husband more educated	0.76*	0.61 - 0.94	1.09	0.88 - 1.37
Husband/partner control	No	-	-		
	Yes	-	-	1.96***	1.74 - 2.22

Note:*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05. CI - confidence interval. Other variables in the models that are statistically insignificant variables - spousal age gap, religion, number of living children, place of residence, ownership of a mobile phone, and ethnic origin.

The results of the adjusted logistic regression models predicting husband control and fear of husband/partner are presented in Table 2. The odds of husband control reduce with increasing wealth quintile, but the odds are significantly lower only in the richest households than the poorest. In contrast, the likelihood of being afraid of one's husband/partner most of the time or sometimes is higher in the higher household quintile compared to the poorest household, but the odds are statistically significant in poorer and middle households. Marital control is significantly higher in the North East, and lower in the South East and South West compared to the North Central. A similar pattern is observed for fear. The odds of being afraid of one's partner are significantly higher in the North East, and North West and lower in the South East and South South compared to the North central region. Women who work but not for cash are 38% as likely to experience control than those who are not working. The odds of being afraid of a partner are significantly lower among women whose first union took place between ages 30 and 48. Women not residing with their husbands are 30% less likely to fear their partners than those who co-reside with them. The odds of fear of a partner are significantly higher in a polygynous union compared to a monogamous union. Internet use significantly lowers the odds of fear of a partner/husband. Control of the wife is significantly higher among women whose husbands/partners' highest attained education is secondary and higher. The odds of husband control are higher among women whose husbands worked in the last 7 days. The likelihood of marital control is significantly lower when the woman has the same level of education as her partner or her husband/partner is more educated. Husband control significantly predicted fear of a husband/partner.

Discussion of the findings

This study examined the experience of husband control and fear of a partner among women of reproductive age in a union in Nigeria. The result shows that a large proportion of women in a union in the country still experience husband control and report being afraid of their husbands/partners. The high prevalence of marital control and fear in a union in the country may be explained by prevalent traditional gender norms. Nigeria ranks low in the gender development index being 168 among 171 countries, with 0.680 in 2021 (10). The share of people in Nigeria with no gender social norms bias is among the lowest in the world. Evidence for 2017-2022 shows that 0.87% of women and 0.00% of men in Nigeria have no gender social norms bias, and the national average shows little improvement over time. It slightly improved from 0.28% in 2010-2014 to 0.42 in 2017-2022 (10). Efforts have been made by the government of Nigeria to promote the right of everyone to live free of control and fear. For instance, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015 among other forms of violence and harmful practices prohibits placing a person in fear of physical injury willfully; deprivation of liberty; forced financial dependence or economic abuse; forced isolation or separation from family and friends; emotional, verbal and psychological abuse; and intimidation (11). Despite this, acts of violence and control are prevalent in homes. Arrests and convictions on account of these are rare, particularly when the perpetrator is an intimate partner.

The odds of fear of a husband are higher in better-off households than in the poorest. However, the higher odds decrease with a higher wealth index and indeed become insignificant in the richer and richest households. The fact that husband control is also significantly lower in the richest households indicates some positive transition for women in better-off households. But women whose husbands work regularly experience more control. Given that the marker of masculinity in Nigeria is increasingly associated with money and power, men who make more money than their wives will also exhibit fearsome attitudes, particularly if the women are financially dependent on them and have limited access to information. The odds of reporting marital control and fear of husband is higher in the eastern and western north regions than in the southern and north central regions, among women who marry early and have never used the internet. The two northern regions have more traditional patriarchal norms anchored on religion than the southern regions, and a larger proportion of women in those regions marry early and have never used the internet (12). The feminist theories posit that unequal gender relations founded on patriarchal norms that promote male superiority are the major drivers of control and fear in the home (13,14). Therefore, there is a need for a more efficient and effective enforcement of the VAPP in Nigeria if the country must see more women who are not caged and cowered in their unions due to fear of their partners and marital control.

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