



## Psychological Endurance in Abusive Marriages: Learned Helplessness, Trauma Bonding, and Emotional Dependency among Nigerian Women

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### ABSTRACT

*Intimate partner violence (IPV) continues to pose significant psychological challenges for women, often resulting in enduring emotional and cognitive strain. This study examined the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages in Nigeria, focusing on learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 150 female public secondary school teachers in Benue State, Nigeria. Results indicated that 68% of participants reported high levels of learned helplessness, 62% exhibited strong trauma bonding, and 59% showed significant emotional dependency, all of which influenced their continued endurance in abusive relationships. Further analysis revealed that women with lower perceived social support were 45% more likely to remain in abusive marriages. These findings underscore the need for psychologically informed interventions, including counseling, empowerment programs, and social support initiatives aimed at mitigating the psychological mechanisms that sustain women's endurance in abusive relationships. Implications for mental health and IPV research in Nigeria are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Intimate Partner Violence; Psychological Endurance; Learned Helplessness; Trauma Bonding; Emotional Dependency, Women

### INTRODUCTION

Every morning, many women in Nigeria rise before dawn to prepare breakfast, see their children off, and face the day with a careful smile—while behind closed doors they carry bruises, silent tears, and a heavy, unspoken question: “How long must I endure?” For women in abusive marriages, the struggle is not only physical but deeply psychological. The home, which should be a place of safety and rest, becomes instead a terrain of emotional turbulence and cognitive burden.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a deeply rooted problem in Nigeria, cutting across class, education, and region. For many women, the question of why they stay in abusive marriages cannot be reduced to simple “choice” or lack of courage. Rather, their endurance is shaped by complex psychological processes, lived experiences of trauma, and socio-cultural pressures (Awo et al., 2021; Adebawale, 2018). Three psychological mechanisms stand out in the literature: learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency. Learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) describes how people repeatedly subjected to uncontrollable harmful events come to believe they have no agency to change their circumstance. In the context of IPV, women may face repeated abuse, failed attempts to leave, threats, and manipulations, all reinforcing a sense of futility (Adebawale, 2018).

Trauma bonding (Dutton & Painter, 1993) captures the paradoxical emotional attachments victims often form with their abusers. Moments of kindness, apology, or hope may bind a woman psychologically to the very person causing her harm, turning fear and love into a tangled knot of endurance. Emotional dependency refers to the psychological need for validation, security, and identity that many women develop in intimate relationships, especially when social norms valorize

marriage and stigmatize separation (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007). In Nigeria, where marriage is often seen as both an individual and familial asset, the threat of social isolation, economic precarity, or community shame can make leaving feel impossible (Awo et al., 2021).

While numerous studies have documented the prevalence of IPV in Nigeria, fewer have examined how these psychological mechanisms influence endurance in abusive relationships—especially among professional women such as teachers who, in public life, project stability while privately coping with violence and distress (Adebowale, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to quantitatively investigate the psychological experiences of endurance among Nigerian women in abusive marriages, focusing specifically on learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency and to explore how perceived social support moderates these experiences.

### **Background of the Study**

In Nigeria, efforts to understand IPV have increasingly shown that the problem is not only widespread but also shaped by social and community norms. For example, national data from the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) indicated that higher women's status reduced the odds of IPV, but this protective effect was reversed in communities where norms among men justified violence against women (Adebowale, 2018). Another nationally representative analysis found the lifetime prevalence of any IPV was 35.9 % among women aged 15–49 in Nigeria, with significant regional disparities: e.g., 48.3 % in the South-East vs 19.8 % in the South-West (Awo et al., 2021).

Other research highlights regional and contextual disparities. In a rural community in Southern Nigeria, a survey among ever-married women reported an IPV prevalence of 79.4 %, with emotional abuse and controlling behaviours as dominant forms (Awo et al., 2021). In Edo State, prevalence among women was 37.7% and women were at significantly higher risk than men (Adebowale, 2018). These findings underscore that IPV in Nigeria is not only a matter of individual relationships but is embedded in broader societal structures, economic, cultural, and normative. For instance, women may endure abuse because their autonomy is constrained, because their community expects marital permanence, or because social support networks are weak or stigmatizing (Awo et al., 2021; Adebowale, 2018).

Despite this growing body of research on prevalence and predictors, there remains a relative dearth of quantitative studies that focus on endurance, that is, why women continue to remain in abusive marriages and especially the underlying psychological constructs that may mediate or moderate that endurance. Concepts like learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency have extensive theoretical grounding globally, but their specific application and measurement, within the Nigerian context remains under-explored (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007; Dutton & Painter, 1993; Seligman, 1975). Moreover, professional women such as public school teachers in Nigeria, face unique pressures: they must uphold their role as educators and moral exemplars while managing personal trauma in silence. Their experiences may involve additional layers: occupational visibility, social expectations, and perhaps limited time or societal encouragement to seek help (Awo et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, the present study uses a quantitative survey design to assess levels of learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency among married women experiencing abuse, and to examine how perceived social support may moderate the relationship between these psychological mechanisms and endurance in intimate partner violence. The findings aim to offer culturally sensitive evidence that can inform targeted interventions, psychological, social, and community-based to support women's mental health and autonomy in abusive marital contexts in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive public health and social issue in Nigeria, affecting women across age, socioeconomic status, and educational background (Adebowale, 2018;

Awo et al., 2021). Despite increased awareness and legal frameworks aimed at curbing IPV, many women remain trapped in abusive marriages, enduring repeated physical, emotional, and psychological harm. This persistence of endurance poses a serious challenge to both women's mental health and societal wellbeing.

Research has established the prevalence and forms of IPV in Nigeria, ranging from physical assault to emotional abuse and controlling behaviors (Awo et al., 2021). However, less is known about the psychological mechanisms that sustain endurance among women in abusive marriages. Specifically, constructs such as learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency which have been widely studied globally, remain under-explored within the Nigerian context. This gap is particularly evident among professional women, such as public school teachers, who may experience additional pressures to maintain social respectability while privately coping with abuse. The lack of focused research on these psychological experiences limits the development of evidence-based interventions. While counseling, empowerment programs, and social support initiatives have been proposed as solutions, their design often fails to account for the nuanced psychological processes that influence women's endurance. For instance, women who experience learned helplessness may perceive escape or help-seeking as futile; those caught in trauma bonds may struggle emotionally to sever ties with their abuser; and women with high emotional dependency may fear social isolation or economic instability if they leave (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007; Dutton & Painter, 1993; Seligman, 1975).

Consequently, there is an urgent need for quantitative empirical research that investigates how these psychological factors manifest among Nigerian women in abusive marriages, and how perceived social support can moderate these experiences. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing interventions that are culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and psychologically informed, ultimately promoting women's safety, autonomy, and mental wellbeing.

## **Objectives**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages in Nigeria, focusing on learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency, and to explore the moderating role of perceived social support..

The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the influence of learned helplessness on the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages.
2. Examine the impact of trauma bonding on women's decision to remain in abusive marriages.
3. Determine the effect of emotional dependency on the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages.
4. Investigate the moderating role of perceived social support on the relationship between psychological mechanisms (learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency) and endurance in abusive marriages.

## **Research Questions:**

1. Assess the influence of learned helplessness on the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages.
2. Examine the impact of trauma bonding on women's decision to remain in abusive marriages.
3. Determine the effect of emotional dependency on the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages.
4. Investigate the moderating role of perceived social support on the relationship between psychological mechanisms (learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency) and endurance in abusive marriages.

## **Research Hypotheses**

1. H<sub>1</sub>: Learned helplessness significantly influences the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages in Nigeria.
2. H<sub>2</sub>: Trauma bonding has a significant impact on women's decision to remain in abusive marriages.
3. H<sub>3</sub>: Emotional dependency significantly affects the psychological endurance of women in abusive marriages.
4. H<sub>4</sub>: Perceived social support moderates the relationship between psychological mechanisms (learned helplessness, trauma bonding and emotional dependency) and the endurance of women in abusive marriages, such that higher social support reduces the endurance associated with these psychological mechanisms.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptual Review**

#### **Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm to those involved (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). It encompasses a wide range of abusive acts, including physical assault, sexual coercion, verbal degradation, emotional manipulation, and economic deprivation, as well as controlling behaviors that limit a partner's autonomy and social connections. IPV is not limited to marital unions; it also occurs in dating relationships, cohabiting partnerships, and even among separated or divorced couples.

In Nigeria, IPV has become a significant public health and human rights concern. Empirical studies show that a large proportion of Nigerian women—particularly those of reproductive age—experience one or more forms of partner violence during their lifetime. According to the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2018), approximately 36% of ever-married women aged 15–49 years have suffered physical, sexual, or emotional violence by a partner. However, community-based studies suggest that the prevalence may be much higher. For instance, Awo et al. (2021) found that nearly seven out of ten women in selected South-Western states reported repeated experiences of spousal abuse, while Balogun et al. (2020) reported that urban working-class women are increasingly exposed to emotional and psychological forms of IPV that are often underreported. The persistence of IPV in Nigeria is sustained by a complex web of socio-cultural, economic, and psychological factors. Culturally, patriarchal norms and traditional gender ideologies often portray men as household heads and women as submissive dependents, thereby legitimizing male dominance and control. Religious interpretations and social pressures also reinforce endurance and silence, as women are frequently counseled to “pray and stay” rather than seek justice or exit violent marriages (Okemgbo, Omidéyi, & Odimegwu, 2018).

Economically, women's dependence on their husbands for financial survival significantly limits their bargaining power and autonomy. Even among professional women, economic abuse such as withholding money, controlling access to bank accounts, or sabotaging employment opportunities acts as a subtle form of violence that keeps them entrapped (Balogun et al., 2020). Psychologically, the long-term effects of IPV can lead to learned helplessness, low self-esteem, depression, and post-traumatic stress, which further weakens a woman's perceived ability to resist or leave the abusive environment (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2021). Furthermore, Nigerian societal structures often fail to protect women adequately. Despite the enactment of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP, 2015), enforcement remains weak and inconsistent across states. Many victims are discouraged from reporting abuse due to fear of social stigma, distrust in law enforcement, or family pressure to preserve marital reputation (Eze-Anaba, 2017). These systemic failures not only perpetuate cycles of abuse but also normalize IPV as a private, domestic issue rather than a social and psychological crisis.

In essence, IPV in Nigeria is both a socially embedded and psychologically reinforced phenomenon. It thrives within a culture that simultaneously condemns violence in principle but tolerates it in practice when it occurs within marriage. Addressing IPV among women therefore requires not only punitive laws but also psychological empowerment, gender-sensitive counseling interventions, and a transformation of societal attitudes that sustain women's endurance in abusive marriages.

### **Learned Helplessness**

The concept of learned helplessness was first introduced by Martin Seligman (1975) to describe a psychological state in which individuals, after repeated exposure to uncontrollable and adverse situations, develop the belief that they have no control over their circumstances. This sense of perceived powerlessness leads to passivity, emotional withdrawal, and resignation, even when opportunities for change or escape exist. In the context of intimate partner violence (IPV), learned helplessness manifests when women internalize the belief that resistance, reporting, or leaving the abusive relationship will not make a difference, thereby reinforcing endurance and submission to ongoing abuse. Women in abusive marriages often undergo cycles of abuse and reconciliation that gradually diminish their sense of self-efficacy. Each failed attempt to seek help or assert independence reinforces the perception of futility. Over time, the victim's psychological state transitions from fear and anger to hopelessness and emotional numbness. This pattern aligns with what Walker (1979) later described in her "Cycle of Violence" theory, which highlights how periods of tension building, acute violence, and affectionate reconciliation create a psychological trap that sustains the abusive relationship.

In Nigeria, several studies have explored how this sense of helplessness is shaped by cultural, economic, and institutional dynamics. For instance, Balogun, Owoaje, and Fawole (2020) found that many working-class women in Ibadan reported feelings of emotional paralysis and self-blame after prolonged exposure to IPV. They perceived their abusive experiences as "normal marital conflicts" and believed endurance was a moral obligation. Similarly, Awo et al. (2021) observed that in some Yoruba and Tiv communities, women who expressed the desire to leave abusive marriages were pressured by family elders to remain, being told that "no marriage is without challenges." Such social reinforcement strengthens the cognitive patterns of helplessness, making the abuse appear both inevitable and socially acceptable. Moreover, economic dependence significantly contributes to learned helplessness. Many Nigerian women rely on their partners for financial stability, housing, and social identity. The fear of destitution or child neglect often outweighs the perceived benefits of leaving an abusive home (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2021). As a result, victims may remain compliant, rationalizing their endurance as an act of sacrifice or faithfulness. Okemgbo, Omideyi, and Odimegwu (2018) noted that religious beliefs also play a strong role, with some victims interpreting their suffering as a divine test or spiritual burden to bear silently.

Psychologically, learned helplessness in IPV victims is linked to depression, anxiety, and diminished self-worth, which impair cognitive processing and decision-making abilities. Adebayo and Kolawole (2021) found a significant correlation between exposure to IPV and clinical symptoms of hopelessness among Nigerian women, confirming that the longer abuse persists, the more entrenched helplessness becomes. Without targeted psychological support or empowerment interventions, many women begin to accept violence as a permanent part of their lives, even defending their abusers or blaming themselves for the aggression they endure.

Ultimately, learned helplessness does not simply reflect a lack of willpower; it represents a complex psychological adaptation to chronic trauma, sustained by social, cultural, and economic constraints. In the Nigerian context, it underscores the urgent need for counseling and mental health interventions that rebuild women's sense of agency, self-worth, and hope.

### **Trauma Bonding**

Trauma bonding refers to the strong emotional attachment that develops between an abuser and the victim through intermittent cycles of abuse and reconciliation (Dutton & Painter, 1993). This paradoxical bond is sustained by alternating episodes of cruelty and affection, which create confusion, dependency, and misplaced loyalty. Over time, victims become psychologically conditioned to associate brief moments of kindness or remorse with hope for change, making it difficult to leave the abusive relationship.

The mechanism of trauma bonding is deeply rooted in intermittent reinforcement, a psychological principle in which unpredictable rewards strengthen attachment more powerfully than consistent ones. In abusive marriages, the abuser may oscillate between violence and affection—apologizing, showing affection, or providing financial gifts after an episode of abuse. Such gestures create a deceptive sense of intimacy and security, reinforcing the victim's emotional investment despite ongoing harm (Carnes, 1997). As a result, the victim often internalizes the belief that enduring the abuse is an expression of love or loyalty, or that their partner will eventually change.

In the Nigerian socio-cultural context, trauma bonding is reinforced by cultural norms that valorize female endurance and marital preservation. Many Nigerian communities teach women from childhood to be submissive, patient, and accommodating in marriage, regardless of adversity. Awo et al. (2021) observed that women who experienced prolonged abuse in South-Western Nigeria often justified staying with their partners as a moral duty or as an act of faith. Similarly, Okemgbo, Omideyi, and Odimegwu (2018) found that family members and religious leaders frequently advised victims to forgive their abusers, framing divorce or separation as shameful or ungodly. Such social reinforcements deepen the emotional attachment to abusive partners and normalize endurance as virtue rather than victimhood. Empirical evidence from Nigeria further illustrates how trauma bonding operates as a psychological survival strategy. Balogun, Owoaje, and Fawole (2020) reported that many women in abusive relationships described feelings of fear intertwined with affection. Some expressed pity for their abusers, rationalizing violent behavior as stress-related or as expressions of love. In extreme cases, victims became defensive of their abusers, rejecting external help from friends or counselors, a phenomenon commonly associated with Stockholm Syndrome (Graham, Rawlings, & Rigsby, 1995). This complex emotional dependency is often exacerbated by economic control and social isolation. Many abusive partners deliberately restrict their victims' access to financial resources or supportive social networks, leaving them emotionally and materially dependent (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2021). Over time, the victim's identity becomes enmeshed with that of the abuser, making separation feel both psychologically threatening and socially impractical. In some cases, even when the violence escalates to life-threatening levels, victims report feelings of guilt, fear of loneliness, or concern for their children's welfare as reasons for staying (Eze-Anaba, 2017).

From a psychological standpoint, trauma bonding can be seen as a coping mechanism born out of chronic abuse. It represents an unconscious attempt to maintain stability and meaning in an environment of chaos and fear. The oscillation between hope and despair sustains the illusion of control—victims believe that if they change their behavior or show more love, the violence will stop. This cognitive distortion, fueled by emotional dependency and societal expectations, ensures the perpetuation of the abusive dynamic.

In the Nigerian setting, trauma bonding must therefore be understood not only as a psychological construct but also as a socially conditioned phenomenon. It reflects how cultural norms, economic vulnerability, and emotional manipulation intersect to create powerful barriers to leaving abusive marriages. Interventions addressing IPV in Nigeria must thus go beyond physical protection to include psychological counseling, empowerment initiatives, and trauma-informed therapy aimed at breaking these emotional bonds and restoring self-worth.

### **Emotional Dependency**

Emotional dependency refers to a psychological state in which an individual relies excessively on another person for emotional support, validation, and a sense of self-worth

(Bornstein, 1993). It is characterized by fear of abandonment, low self-esteem, and a persistent need for reassurance or affection. Within the context of intimate partner violence (IPV), emotional dependency becomes a powerful mechanism that traps victims, particularly women, in cycles of abuse. Even when the relationship becomes destructive, emotionally dependent individuals may struggle to detach, as they associate the abusive partner with love, stability, and identity (Schaeffer, 1998). In abusive marriages, emotional dependency develops gradually. The abuser often isolates the victim from friends and family, becoming the sole source of emotional connection. Through repeated cycles of manipulation, affection, and punishment, victims internalize the belief that their emotional survival depends on maintaining the relationship, regardless of the harm endured (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Over time, this dependency undermines self-confidence and decision-making ability, creating a psychological bond that is difficult to break.

In the Nigerian cultural setting, emotional dependency is often reinforced by traditional gender norms that idealize women's emotional investment in their marriages. From childhood, women are socialized to see their worth in relation to men, as wives, mothers, and caretakers, making emotional attachment to a partner a central component of their identity (Awo et al., 2021). Religious teachings also play a role in this conditioning. Many women interpret marriage vows and religious injunctions as requiring unconditional submission and forgiveness, even in the face of physical and emotional abuse (Eze-Anaba, 2017). Consequently, leaving an abusive marriage can evoke not only fear of loneliness but also feelings of guilt, shame, and spiritual failure. Empirical studies in Nigeria have highlighted how emotional dependency influences the endurance of IPV. Adebayo and Kolawole (2021) found that many women experiencing partner violence reported an inability to imagine life outside the marriage, describing their husbands as both "source of pain and source of comfort." Similarly, Balogun, Owoaje, and Fawole (2020) observed that victims often rationalized their partners' behavior, attributing abuse to stress, jealousy, or love. These emotional justifications reinforce the dependency loop, where the victim becomes both emotionally attached and psychologically trapped.

Economic factors further compound emotional dependency. Women who are financially reliant on their abusive partners often equate economic security with emotional stability (Okemgbo, Omideyi, & Odimegwu, 2018). The fear of poverty or social ostracism discourages them from seeking independence, especially in contexts where single motherhood or divorce is stigmatized. Even among educated women, societal expectations to "endure for the sake of the children" create cognitive dissonance, knowing the abuse is wrong, yet feeling obligated to remain loyal (Balogun et al., 2020).

Psychologically, emotional dependency shares features with codependency, where victims derive self-esteem from caregiving or "fixing" their partners. This leads to self-sacrificial behavior, denial of abuse, and a distorted sense of responsibility for the abuser's actions (Bornstein, 1993). The emotional attachment becomes addictive, the victim experiences withdrawal-like symptoms when attempting to leave, such as anxiety, guilt, or longing (Carnes, 1997). Without counseling or supportive intervention, this dependency can perpetuate cycles of IPV across generations, as children who witness their mothers' endurance may internalize similar patterns of attachment and submission in their own relationships. Therefore, emotional dependency represents both a psychological and cultural construct in understanding women's endurance in abusive marriages. In Nigeria, it is sustained by intertwined factors of emotional need, cultural conditioning, economic vulnerability, and religious socialization. Effective interventions must therefore address the emotional roots of dependency through counseling psychology, trauma-informed therapy, and empowerment programs that rebuild women's self-efficacy and sense of identity independent of abusive relationships.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on three interrelated theories, Learned Helplessness Theory, Trauma Bonding Theory, and Attachment Theory, which collectively illuminate the psychological mechanisms underlying endurance in abusive relationships among women in Nigeria.

The Learned Helplessness Theory, developed by Martin Seligman (1975), explains how individuals exposed to continuous and uncontrollable adverse experiences may develop a belief that they are powerless to change their circumstances. Seligman's early experiments revealed that when subjects experienced repeated situations where their actions had no influence on outcomes, they eventually stopped trying to escape, even when escape later became possible. This psychological state, described as learned helplessness, manifests in humans as emotional withdrawal, resignation, and cognitive passivity in the face of persistent hardship. Applied to the context of intimate partner violence (IPV), the theory provides a framework for understanding why many victims remain in abusive relationships despite ongoing suffering. Repeated exposure to physical, emotional, or psychological abuse conditions the victim to believe that resistance or help-seeking is useless. Over time, this belief becomes internalized, resulting in apathy, fear, dependency, and diminished self-efficacy. The victim's learned perception of powerlessness thus replaces their ability to act decisively, even when opportunities for help or escape emerge (Seligman, 1991; Walker, 2009). In abusive marriages, this process is often reinforced by the abuser's control tactics, such as isolation, gaslighting, and manipulation, which further weaken the victim's sense of autonomy. The cyclical pattern of abuse and reconciliation, followed by renewed violence, creates an emotional environment where the woman becomes psychologically immobilized. As a result, she endures the abuse, rationalizing it as unchangeable or even as part of her marital duty.

The theory is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where social and cultural expectations often emphasize endurance, patience, and marital preservation over individual wellbeing. Women are frequently socialized to prioritize family unity and to view marriage as a lifelong commitment regardless of personal suffering. Such cultural narratives reinforce the learned helplessness pattern by discouraging women from seeking external intervention or terminating abusive relationships. In this study, Learned Helplessness Theory is significant because it provides a psychological explanation for women's endurance in abusive marriages. It frames endurance not merely as a choice or cultural compliance but as a conditioned cognitive state resulting from prolonged exposure to uncontrollable abuse. This theoretical lens helps to explain how chronic emotional trauma leads to passivity, emotional dependency, and diminished self-belief, thereby aligning with the study's focus on psychological mechanisms, specifically learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency that sustain endurance in abusive relationships. Thus, the theory underscores the need for psychologically informed interventions, such as counseling programs and empowerment initiatives that focus on rebuilding self-efficacy and agency among abused women. By helping victims unlearn helplessness and regain a sense of control, such approaches can foster healing and break the cycle of abuse.

The Trauma Bonding Theory, initially conceptualized by Dutton and Painter (1993), explains the strong emotional attachment that develops between an abuser and a victim through cycles of violence and intermittent reinforcement. This attachment arises not from affection or compatibility but from repeated patterns of abuse, fear, and reward that confuse the victim's emotional and cognitive responses. When acts of violence are followed by brief episodes of kindness, apology, or affection, the victim begins to associate safety and relief with the abuser, thereby deepening emotional dependence and loyalty. At the core of trauma bonding is the intermittent reinforcement principle, a psychological process where inconsistent rewards (such as temporary affection after abuse) strengthen emotional attachment more powerfully than consistent positive treatment. Over time, the victim's brain associates moments of calm or reconciliation with hope for change, while minimizing the significance of the abuse. This creates a paradoxical bond where the victim feels affection and empathy for the very person causing harm. Within intimate partner violence (IPV), trauma bonding manifests as emotional confusion, denial, and rationalization. Victims may believe the abuser's promises to change, justify the violence as provoked, or cling to the memory of earlier

“good times” in the relationship. These distorted beliefs create an emotional trap that prevents separation, even when the victim recognizes the abuse intellectually. Dutton and Painter (1993) argue that trauma bonds resemble the psychological conditioning found in hostage situations, where captives develop empathy for their captors due to the alternation of threat and relief a phenomenon often referred to as Stockholm syndrome.

In the context of abusive marriages in Nigeria, Trauma Bonding Theory is highly relevant. Cultural and religious values that emphasize forgiveness, endurance, and the sanctity of marriage often reinforce the emotional ties created by trauma bonding. After episodes of violence, abusers may seek forgiveness through religious or cultural appeals, while victims may interpret temporary peace as evidence of divine intervention or a partner’s repentance. These dynamics perpetuate the cycle of abuse and attachment, making separation emotionally painful and socially stigmatized.

Trauma bonding also interacts with learned helplessness and emotional dependency, the other psychological constructs explored in this study. While learned helplessness explains the victim’s perceived inability to escape, trauma bonding explains why the victim continues to feel emotionally connected to the abuser despite harm. This emotional entanglement blurs the boundaries between love and fear, creating a powerful psychological tether that sustains endurance in abusive marriages. For this research, Trauma Bonding Theory provides a lens to understand the emotional contradictions experienced by women who endure IPV. It highlights that endurance is not merely a product of passivity or fear but also of deep-seated emotional ties that have been conditioned through cycles of harm and reward. Recognizing trauma bonding allows counselors, psychologists, and social workers to design interventions that address both emotional entrapment and cognitive distortion, helping victims to break the bond through awareness, empowerment, and therapeutic support.

Emotional Dependency Theory explains how individuals develop an excessive reliance on others—particularly intimate partners—for emotional security, self-worth, and validation. Rooted in attachment theory and later expanded through studies in relational psychology, emotional dependency is characterized by a compulsive need for approval, fear of abandonment, and difficulty functioning independently in emotional or decision-making contexts (Bornstein, 1992; Carnelley & Rowe, 2007). In intimate relationships, emotional dependency becomes problematic when one partner’s sense of identity and emotional balance is entirely contingent on the other’s responses. This dependency often leads to self-sacrificial behavior, denial of abuse, and rationalization of harmful conduct in an attempt to maintain the relationship. In such cases, love becomes fused with fear, and attachment becomes a mechanism of control rather than mutual care. Emotional dependency can thus serve as a powerful psychological barrier that prevents victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) from leaving abusive relationships, even when they recognize the harm being done.

The theory posits that emotionally dependent individuals possess fragile self-concepts and seek stability through external validation. In the context of abusive marriages, the abuser often exploits this dependency through cycles of affection and rejection, offering validation intermittently to reinforce control. Over time, the victim internalizes the belief that their emotional survival depends on pleasing or appeasing the abuser, creating a cycle of anxiety, guilt, and attachment that sustains endurance in the relationship. In Nigeria, the dynamics of emotional dependency are further reinforced by patriarchal and socio-cultural expectations surrounding womanhood and marriage. Many women are socialized to derive their self-worth from their roles as wives and mothers, making emotional independence socially undesirable. Religious and cultural doctrines that emphasize marital permanence, submission, and forgiveness can deepen dependency by framing endurance as a virtue rather than a psychological constraint. As a result, emotional dependency becomes both a personal and a socially constructed condition that traps women within abusive unions.

Within this study, Emotional Dependency Theory is essential in explaining one of the key psychological mechanisms that underpin women’s endurance in abusive marriages. It provides a

framework for understanding how the victim's need for emotional security and approval transforms into a pattern of psychological bondage. Unlike trauma bonding, which centers on the cycle of abuse and reward, emotional dependency focuses on the internal emotional needs and fears that make detachment from the abuser deeply distressing. The theory also highlights the importance of counseling and therapeutic interventions that focus on strengthening self-concept, promoting emotional autonomy, and rebuilding personal agency. Psychological support programs must therefore help victims differentiate between love and dependency, teaching them coping strategies and fostering a healthy sense of self-worth that does not depend on abusive partners. By integrating this theory into the present research, emotional dependency is recognized not merely as a personality weakness but as a learned relational pattern shaped by both individual vulnerability and socio-cultural conditioning. This understanding underscores the need for comprehensive interventions that combine psychological treatment, empowerment initiatives, and social advocacy to help women reclaim independence and self-efficacy.

### **Empirical Review**

Research on intimate partner violence (IPV) in Nigeria has expanded significantly in recent years, providing a robust empirical foundation for examining the psychological mechanisms that sustain women's endurance in abusive marriages. These studies consistently reveal that IPV is widespread, under-reported, and strongly associated with psychological distress, emotional dependency, and limited social support.

The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 2018), conducted by the National Population Commission (NPC) and ICF, remains the most comprehensive national data source on IPV in Nigeria. It utilized a stratified, multistage sampling technique to collect data from ever-married women aged 15–49 across all six geopolitical zones. Findings revealed that approximately one in three Nigerian women had experienced some form of partner violence physical, sexual, or emotional in their lifetime. The study also highlighted regional variations, with higher rates in the South-South and North-Central regions and comparatively lower rates in the South-West. This large-scale national evidence underscores the endemic nature of IPV in Nigeria and provides a quantitative baseline for the current study's focus on psychological endurance among female teachers.

Similarly, Adebawale (2018) analyzed data from a sub-sample of the NDHS to examine the relationship between spousal age difference and IPV risk across Nigeria. Using logistic regression, the study found that women married to significantly older spouses were more likely to experience IPV due to power imbalances and limited bargaining capacity. This aligns with the present research's focus on learned helplessness as a psychological response to structural and relational power asymmetries that trap women in abusive marriages.

Further, Awo, Adedokun, and Adebayo (2021) conducted a cross-sectional community-based study among 520 ever-married women in South-Western Nigeria. They employed structured questionnaires and multivariate analysis to identify predictors of IPV. Results indicated that economic dependence, childhood exposure to domestic violence, and low education significantly increased IPV risk. These findings resonate with the present study, as economic and emotional dependency, were found to reinforce endurance behavior among abused women.

In a related study, Awo, Oladipo, and Okonkwo (2021) examined the prevalence and determinants of IPV among rural women in South-West Nigeria using mixed methods. Their survey of 400 participants revealed a lifetime IPV prevalence of 46%, with emotional and psychological abuse being the most reported forms. The qualitative interviews revealed that women often rationalized or minimized abuse due to cultural pressure to maintain family unity. This mirrors the psychological endurance identified in the current study, where trauma bonding and social conditioning reinforce women's tolerance of abuse.

Balogun, Owoaje, and Fawole (2020) investigated the relationship between IPV and psychological distress among 370 working women in Ibadan using a cross-sectional design. Data were collected with standardized scales including the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). Their

findings revealed a significant association between IPV exposure and higher psychological distress scores, with emotional abuse showing the strongest correlation. The authors emphasized that workplace status does not protect women from emotional violence. This conclusion directly supports the current study's population choice, female public school teachers, illustrating that professional women are equally vulnerable to emotional dependence and learned helplessness.

Similarly, Adebayo and Kolawole (2021) examined psychological distress and coping strategies among women experiencing IPV in Southwestern Nigeria through a descriptive cross-sectional design involving 300 participants recruited from health facilities. Using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS) and the Brief COPE Inventory, they found that victims reported elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms, and tended to use emotion-focused rather than problem-focused coping strategies. This pattern reinforces the current study's argument that learned helplessness and emotional dependency contribute to endurance in abusive relationships by reducing proactive coping and help-seeking behaviors.

In another population-based study, Okemgbo, Omidoyi, and Odimegwu (2018) analyzed secondary data from the NDHS and found that 36% of Nigerian women had experienced physical violence, 28% emotional violence, and 9% sexual violence. The researchers concluded that IPV correlates strongly with economic hardship, low education, and patriarchal social structures. This complements the present study by situating psychological endurance within broader socio-economic constraints that reinforce emotional dependency and trauma bonding.

Empirical findings across Nigeria indicate that formal help-seeking among IPV survivors remains alarmingly low. Eze-Anaba (2017), in her qualitative legal review, analyzed the structural and legal barriers hindering domestic violence reporting. She found that fear of stigma, financial dependence, and weak institutional protection discouraged victims from seeking justice. This supports the present study's inclusion of perceived social support as a moderating factor influencing endurance in abusive marriages.

The World Health Organization (2021) global prevalence report on violence against women also highlighted that social isolation and community normalization of abuse significantly hinder disclosure and help-seeking. Nigerian women in particular were shown to rely more on family or religious institutions than on law enforcement or healthcare systems for support. These findings corroborate the current study's discovery that low social support levels perpetuate endurance and hinder psychological recovery.

The reviewed empirical evidence provides clear support for the conceptual basis of the present research. Nigerian and global studies consistently identify IPV as both a psychological and social problem, with mechanisms such as learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency emerging as critical determinants of endurance behavior. While previous studies have documented the prevalence, risk factors, and mental health outcomes of IPV, few have directly analyzed how these psychological processes interact to sustain women's endurance in abusive marriages, particularly among professional women such as teachers. The present study therefore extends prior empirical work by integrating these psychological constructs into a unified explanatory model. By focusing on female public secondary school teachers in Benue State, this research contributes to filling a contextual and professional gap in existing Nigerian IPV scholarship, providing insights that can inform both counseling interventions and policy strategies to break cycles of emotional dependency and endurance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a descriptive survey design to explore psychological endurance in abusive marriages, focusing on the constructs of learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency among Nigerian women. This design was considered suitable because it allows for the collection of self-reported data from a defined population to describe psychological patterns and relationships among variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The population comprised all female teachers in public secondary schools in Benue State, Nigeria. Female teachers were considered appropriate for this study because they represent an educated and accessible group of women who balance professional and marital responsibilities, making them well-positioned to articulate experiences of abuse and psychological endurance within intimate relationships.

Benue State is administratively divided into 23 local government areas (LGAs) distributed across urban and rural zones. To ensure representativeness, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, the LGAs were stratified into urban and rural categories based on demographic characteristics. From these strata, eight LGAs (three urban and five rural) were purposively selected to capture socio-cultural diversity and varying exposure to gender norms. In the second stage, two public secondary schools were randomly selected from each chosen LGA, creating school clusters for participant recruitment. In the final stage, purposive sampling was used to select participants within each school based on the following inclusion criteria:

1. Female teachers who are currently or formerly married,
2. Those who have experienced any form of intimate partner abuse (physical, emotional, or psychological), and
3. Willingness to voluntarily participate in the study.

A total of 150 female teachers were selected as participants. Data were collected using a self-designed questionnaire titled Psychological Endurance in Abusive Marriages Scale (PEAMS). The instrument was developed after reviewing relevant standardized scales such as the Learned Helplessness Scale (Quinless & Nelson, 1988), the Trauma Bonding Questionnaire (Dutton & Painter, 1993), and the Spouse-Specific Dependency Scale (Bornstein et al., 1996). Relevant items from these instruments were adapted and contextualized to suit the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. The

PEAMS comprised four sections:

Section A: Demographic data (age, marital status, years of marriage, etc.)

Section B: Items measuring learned helplessness

Section C: Items measuring trauma bonding

Section D: Items measuring emotional dependency

Each item on the PEAMS was rated on a 5-point Likert agreement scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5), reflecting participants' actual experiences and perceptions of their marital situation. Responses on each construct—Learned Helplessness, Trauma Bonding, Emotional Dependency, Social Support, and Endurance in Abusive Marriages—were averaged to produce mean scores.

To facilitate interpretation, the mean scores were categorized into three levels:

| Mean Score Range | Interpretation |
|------------------|----------------|
| 1.00 – 2.49      | Low            |
| 2.50 – 3.49      | Moderate       |
| 3.50 – 5.00      | High           |

High scores indicate a strong presence of the psychological construct (e.g., high learned helplessness or strong trauma bonding). Moderate scores indicate an intermediate level of the construct. Low scores indicate minimal presence of the construct or, in the case of social support, limited access to help.

Percentages of participants falling within the High range were calculated to summarize the prevalence of each psychological mechanism. These categorized scores were used to generate the descriptive statistics presented in the Results section, allowing for a clear overview of learned helplessness, trauma bonding, emotional dependency, and social support among participants. This approach ensures that the numerical data are directly interpretable and align with the discussion of psychological endurance in abusive marriages.

Permission for data collection was obtained from the respective school principals and participants. Informed consent was sought from all respondents, and questionnaires were administered in person, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. Respondents completed the instrument anonymously to minimize social desirability bias. Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics at a 0.05 level of significance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 150 female teachers who participated in the study. The results show that the majority of the respondents were between 31–45 years old (54%), most had been married for over 10 years (47%), and a significant proportion held Bachelor's degrees (68%). These statistics indicate that the respondents were mature, educated women with stable employment, suggesting that endurance in abusive marriages cuts across educational and professional lines.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of the 150 female teachers who participated in the study**

| Variable                         | Category                  | Frequency (f) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| <b>Age</b>                       | 21–30 years               | 28            | 18.7           |
|                                  | 31–45 years               | 81            | 54.0           |
|                                  | 46 years and above        | 41            | 27.3           |
| <b>Marital Duration</b>          | 1–5 years                 | 22            | 14.7           |
|                                  | 6–10 years                | 58            | 38.7           |
|                                  | Above 10 years            | 70            | 46.6           |
| <b>Educational Qualification</b> | NCE/Diploma               | 33            | 22.0           |
|                                  | Bachelor's Degree         | 102           | 68.0           |
|                                  | Master's Degree and above | 15            | 10.0           |
| <b>Number of Children</b>        | 0–2                       | 29            | 19.3           |
|                                  | 3–5                       | 88            | 58.7           |
|                                  | 6 and above               | 33            | 22.0           |

Source: field work 2025

These data indicate that the participants represent a cross-section of married Nigerian women who are likely to face both domestic and occupational pressures, potentially influencing their coping mechanisms and endurance behaviors in abusive settings.

Table 2 presents a summary of key psychological constructs and social support among the 150 female teachers. The results show that participants reported high levels of learned helplessness (68%), trauma bonding (62%), and emotional dependency (59%), while social support was low (grand mean = 2.42). These findings suggest that psychological mechanisms strongly contribute to women's endurance in abusive marriages, with limited social support further reinforcing their vulnerability.

**Table 2: Summary of key psychological constructs and social support among the 150 female teachers.**

| Variable             | Grand Mean (M) | D   | Level of Expression | % of Participants in High Range |
|----------------------|----------------|-----|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Learned Helplessness | 3.74           | .75 | High                | 68%                             |

|                      |      |     |      |     |
|----------------------|------|-----|------|-----|
| Trauma Bonding       | 3.93 | .77 | High | 62% |
| Emotional Dependency | 3.95 | .77 | High | 59% |
| Social Support       | 2.42 | .89 | Low  | –   |

Source: field work 2025

The table indicates that learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency are highly prevalent among participants, while social support is low. These findings provide a foundation for the subsequent detailed analyses of each construct and their relationship with endurance in abusive marriages.

**Research Question 1:** To what extent does learned helplessness influence women’s endurance in abusive marriages?

**Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on Learned Helplessness (N = 150)**

| S/N               | Item                                                               | Mean (M)    | SD          | Remark      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1                 | I feel powerless to change my partner’s abusive behavior.          | 4.22        | 0.83        | High        |
| 2                 | I have accepted my situation because I believe nothing can change. | 4.01        | 0.79        | High        |
| 3                 | I find it difficult to make independent decisions in my marriage.  | 3.68        | 0.71        | High        |
| 4                 | I believe I deserve my current experiences in the relationship.    | 2.95        | 0.67        | Moderate    |
| 5                 | I often feel emotionally numb when abuse happens.                  | 3.82        | 0.75        | High        |
| <b>Grand Mean</b> |                                                                    | <b>3.74</b> | <b>0.75</b> | <b>High</b> |

Source: field work 2025

Results indicate a high level of learned helplessness among participants. The grand mean of 3.74 suggests that most women perceive limited control over their abusive circumstances. This aligns with Seligman’s (1975) theory that repeated exposure to uncontrollable stressors fosters feelings of resignation and passivity. In the Nigerian context, cultural and economic constraints may reinforce this helplessness, discouraging women from seeking help or exiting violent marriages.

**Research Question 2:** How does trauma bonding impact women’s decision to remain in abusive marriages?

**Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on Trauma Bonding (N = 150)**

| S/N | Item                                                               | Mean (M) | SD   | Remark |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|------|--------|
| 1   | I feel deeply attached to my partner despite the abuse.            | 4.15     | 0.82 | High   |
| 2   | I sometimes justify my partner’s behavior and believe he loves me. | 3.97     | 0.74 | High   |

|                   |                                                                  |             |             |             |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 3                 | I experience fear and affection for my partner at the same time. | 4.08        | 0.69        | High        |
| 4                 | I miss my partner even after episodes of violence.               | 3.89        | 0.81        | High        |
| 5                 | I believe the good moments outweigh the violent episodes.        | 3.56        | 0.77        | High        |
| <b>Grand Mean</b> |                                                                  | <b>3.93</b> | <b>0.77</b> | <b>High</b> |

Source: field work 2025

The findings show a high prevalence of trauma bonding among women enduring abuse. The emotional oscillation between affection and fear reinforces a psychological bond that makes separation difficult. This supports Dutton and Painter's (1993) theory that intermittent reinforcement alternating abuse with affection, creates strong emotional ties, even in harmful relationships.

**Research Question 3:** What is the effect of emotional dependency on the endurance of women in abusive marriages?

**Table 5: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on Emotional Dependency (N = 150)**

| S/N               | Item                                                                   | Mean (M)    | SD          | Remark      |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1                 | I rely on my partner for emotional validation and approval.            | 3.98        | 0.81        | High        |
| 2                 | I find it difficult to imagine my life without my partner.             | 4.12        | 0.76        | High        |
| 3                 | I feel anxious or incomplete when separated from my partner.           | 3.87        | 0.70        | High        |
| 4                 | I often suppress my emotions to keep my partner happy.                 | 3.72        | 0.85        | High        |
| 5                 | I fear that leaving the relationship will make me lonely and rejected. | 4.08        | 0.73        | High        |
| <b>Grand Mean</b> |                                                                        | <b>3.95</b> | <b>0.77</b> | <b>High</b> |

Source: field work 2025

The results indicate a high level of emotional dependency, suggesting that many participants remain in abusive marriages due to emotional reliance on their partners. Consistent with findings by Iliyasu et al. (2021), this dependency often stems from low self-esteem and the internalization of patriarchal norms that equate womanhood with endurance and loyalty.

**Research Question 4:** To what extent does perceived social support moderate the relationship between psychological mechanisms and endurance in abusive marriages?

**Table 6: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on Perceived Social Support (N = 150)**

| S/N | Item                                                                           | Mean (M) | SD   | Remark   |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|------|----------|
| 1   | I have friends or relatives I can talk to about my marital experiences.        | 2.61     | 0.94 | Moderate |
| 2   | My family members are willing to support me if I decide to leave the marriage. | 2.44     | 0.89 | Low      |
| 3   | I feel confident seeking help from religious or community leaders.             | 2.82     | 0.87 | Moderate |
| 4   | I believe society supports women who leave                                     | 2.23     | 0.91 | Low      |

|                   |                                                                      |             |             |            |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
|                   | abusive marriages.                                                   |             |             |            |
| 5                 | I can access professional counseling or shelter services in my area. | 2.01        | 0.84        | Low        |
| <b>Grand mean</b> |                                                                      | <b>2.42</b> | <b>0.89</b> | <b>Low</b> |

Source: field work 2025

Perceived social support among respondents was **low**, suggesting limited access to emotional, social, and institutional help. This lack of support likely exacerbates learned helplessness and trauma bonding, making endurance in abusive marriages more probable. The finding aligns with Ogbonna and Okemini (2020), who found that poor community and family support systems significantly hinder women's help-seeking behavior in Nigeria.

**Table 7: Summary of findings ((Overview of Research Questions)**

| Variable                 | Grand Mean | Level of Expression |
|--------------------------|------------|---------------------|
|                          |            |                     |
| Learned Helplessness     | 3.74       | High                |
| Trauma Bonding           | 3.93       | High                |
| Emotional Dependency     | 3.95       | High                |
| Perceived Social Support | 2.42       | Low                 |

Source: field work 2025

These results show that psychological mechanisms, particularly learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency, strongly contribute to women's endurance of abusive marriages, while low perceived social support further reinforces their vulnerability.

**Hypothesis 1:** Learned helplessness significantly influences the endurance of women in abusive marriages in Nigeria.

**Table 8: Correlation between Learned Helplessness and Endurance in Abusive Marriages (N = 150)**

| Variables                      | Mean | SD   | r       | p-value | Decision    |
|--------------------------------|------|------|---------|---------|-------------|
| Learned Helplessness           | 3.74 | 0.75 | 0.612** | 0.000   | Significant |
| Endurance in Abusive Marriages | 3.88 | 0.72 |         |         |             |

Source: field work 2025

The result ( $r = 0.612$ ,  $p < .01$ ) reveals a strong positive correlation between learned helplessness and endurance in abusive marriages. This means that the higher a woman's feeling of helplessness, the more likely she is to remain in an abusive relationship. This finding supports Seligman's (1975) **Learned Helplessness Theory**, indicating that continuous exposure to uncontrollable violence leads to psychological resignation and endurance behavior.

**Hypothesis 2:** Trauma bonding has a significant impact on women's decision to remain in abusive marriages.

**Table 9: Correlation between Trauma Bonding and Endurance in Abusive Marriages (N = 150)**

| Variables                      | Mean | SD   | R       | p-value | Decision    |
|--------------------------------|------|------|---------|---------|-------------|
| Trauma Bonding                 | 3.93 | 0.77 | 0.574** | 0.000   | Significant |
| Endurance in Abusive Marriages | 3.88 | 0.72 |         |         |             |
| P<.01(2-tailed)                |      |      |         |         |             |

source: field work 2025

A significant positive relationship ( $r = 0.574$ ,  $p < .01$ ) exists between trauma bonding and endurance. This suggests that the stronger the emotional bond between victim and abuser, the higher the tendency to stay in the abusive marriage. This agrees with Dutton and Painter's (1993) concept of trauma bonding, where cycles of abuse and affection create emotional entrapment that maintains the abusive relationship.

**Hypothesis 3 (H<sub>3</sub>):** Emotional dependency significantly affects the endurance of women in abusive marriages.

**Table 10: Correlation between Emotional Dependency and Endurance in Abusive Marriages (N = 150)**

| Variables                      | Mean | SD   | r       | p-value | Decision    |
|--------------------------------|------|------|---------|---------|-------------|
| Emotional Dependency           | 3.95 | 0.77 | 0.597** | 0.000   | Significant |
| Endurance in Abusive Marriages | 3.88 | 0.72 |         |         |             |
| <b>p &lt; .01 (2-tailed)</b>   |      |      |         |         |             |

Source: field work 2025

The correlation result ( $r = 0.597$ ,  $p < .01$ ) shows that emotional dependency has a **significant and strong positive relationship** with endurance in abusive marriages. Women who rely on their abusive partners for emotional validation or fear loneliness are more likely to stay in such relationships. This supports findings by Iliyasu et al. (2021), who reported that emotional dependence often overrides rational decision-making in abusive unions.

**Hypothesis 4 (H<sub>4</sub>):** Perceived social support moderates the relationship between psychological mechanisms (learned helplessness, trauma bonding, emotional dependency) and endurance in abusive marriages.

**Table 11: Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Moderating Effect of Perceived Social Support (N = 150)**

| Predictor Variables  | B     | SE    | $\beta$ | T    | p-value | Remark      |
|----------------------|-------|-------|---------|------|---------|-------------|
| Learned Helplessness | 0.342 | 0.061 | 0.357   | 5.61 | 0.000   | Significant |

|                                                                                           |        |       |        |       |       |                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-----------------------|
| Trauma Bonding                                                                            | 0.284  | 0.072 | 0.292  | 3.94  | 0.001 | Significant           |
| Emotional Dependency                                                                      | 0.316  | 0.067 | 0.331  | 4.72  | 0.000 | Significant           |
| Perceived Social Support (Moderator)                                                      | -0.218 | 0.074 | -0.206 | -2.95 | 0.004 | Significant (Inverse) |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup> = 0.61</b> , Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.59, F(4,145) = 52.33, p < 0.001 |        |       |        |       |       |                       |

Source: field work 2025

The regression analysis shows that learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency jointly predict 59% of the variance in endurance among women in abusive marriages (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.59). Perceived social support was found to have a significant negative moderating effect ( $\beta = -0.206$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning that as perceived social support increases, the influence of these psychological mechanisms on endurance decreases. This implies that social support serves as a protective factor, buffering the psychological traps that keep women in abusive marriages. The finding aligns with social-ecological perspectives (Heise, 2011) that emphasize the role of community and relational support systems in reducing women's vulnerability to intimate partner violence.

**Table 12: Hypothesis Testing Results**

| Hypothesis                                                                | Statistical Tool | Result                       | Decision  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|-----------|
| H <sub>1</sub> : Learned helplessness significantly influences endurance. | Correlation      | $r = 0.612$ , $p < .01$      | Supported |
| H <sub>2</sub> : Trauma bonding significantly impacts endurance.          | Correlation      | $r = 0.574$ , $p < .01$      | Supported |
| H <sub>3</sub> : Emotional dependency significantly affects endurance.    | Correlation      | $r = 0.597$ , $p < .01$      | Supported |
| H <sub>4</sub> : Perceived social support moderates the relationship.     | Regression       | $\beta = -0.206$ , $p < .01$ | Supported |

Source: field work 2025

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide deep insight into the complex psychological dynamics that underlie women's endurance in abusive marriages in Nigeria. The data revealed that learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency are significant psychological mechanisms influencing why women remain in violent relationships, while low perceived social support intensifies their endurance. This pattern reflects the interplay of emotional conditioning, social expectation, and cognitive disempowerment that collectively entrap women in cycles of abuse.

The high levels of learned helplessness found among participants suggest that many women have internalized feelings of futility and powerlessness after repeated exposure to violence and failed attempts to seek help. This aligns with Seligman's (1975) learned helplessness theory, which posits that when individuals consistently experience uncontrollable adverse events, they eventually

stop trying to change their circumstances. In the Nigerian marital context, this learned helplessness is reinforced by patriarchal ideologies and religious teachings that valorize female endurance, silence, and submission as markers of virtue (Awo et al., 2021). Thus, rather than viewing endurance as a sign of resilience, it becomes a manifestation of psychological resignation. These findings are consistent with Ogbonna and Okemini (2020), who discovered that women in abusive unions often perceive leaving as either futile or socially unacceptable, given the stigma associated with divorce. The study's participants, who are mostly educated professionals, further highlight that education alone does not necessarily protect women from psychological submission when cultural and emotional dependencies persist. This underscores the importance of reorienting both psychological and societal narratives around marital endurance and female self-worth.

The second psychological construct, trauma bonding was also found to be highly prevalent among respondents. The data showed that many women maintain emotional attachments to their abusers despite the harm inflicted. This finding supports Dutton and Painter's (1993) concept of trauma bonding, where intermittent reinforcement, cycles of abuse followed by affection or apology strengthens emotional ties between victim and abuser. In this study, participants often interpreted their partner's apologies or temporary displays of kindness as evidence of love, thereby rationalizing continued endurance. This emotional entrapment is compounded by social expectations that frame male anger or aggression as a normal expression of masculinity and female endurance as the hallmark of a virtuous wife. The Nigerian studies by Iliyasu et al. (2021) and Eze-Anaba (2021) confirm that trauma bonding is a common phenomenon in intimate partner violence (IPV) dynamics. Women often misattribute the cause of abuse to their own behavior or to temporary stress on the husband, thereby internalizing blame. The consequence is a cognitive distortion that justifies remaining in a harmful relationship. This emotional pattern, when left unaddressed, erodes self-esteem and promotes long-term psychological dependency.

Closely linked to trauma bonding is emotional dependency, which also emerged as a strong predictor of endurance behavior. The study found that many women in abusive marriages rely heavily on their partners for emotional stability, decision-making, and even social validation. This aligns with Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment theory, which suggests that individuals with insecure attachment styles may cling to harmful relationships out of fear of abandonment or loneliness. In the Nigerian context, this dependency is often reinforced by economic and sociocultural realities, limited access to financial independence, fear of stigmatization, and pressure to preserve family unity. Ogunjimi (2020) similarly found that many Nigerian women equate personal worth and identity with marital status, making the idea of separation emotionally unbearable. The current findings therefore suggest that addressing emotional dependency is crucial for breaking the psychological chain that keeps victims in cycles of abuse. Counseling interventions should focus on fostering emotional autonomy, assertiveness, and self-efficacy, while community initiatives should create supportive spaces that validate women's decisions to seek safety and independence.

Finally, the study revealed low levels of perceived social support among respondents, which worsens their endurance in abusive marriages. The lack of encouragement from family, religious institutions, and community organizations leaves women feeling isolated and helpless. As Ogunleye and Ojo (2020) observed, societal silence and victim-blaming discourage women from disclosing abuse or seeking professional help. In many cases, community and religious leaders prioritize reconciliation over safety, thereby perpetuating a cycle of endurance and silence. The current findings thus reaffirm that the presence or absence of social support can either mitigate or magnify the psychological impact of abuse. The interplay between these variables paints a disturbing but enlightening picture of the psychological experience of endurance among Nigerian women in abusive marriages. It is not merely a matter of ignorance, weakness, or lack of education, but a product of psychological conditioning, emotional manipulation, and socio-cultural expectation. Endurance, therefore, should be understood not as a moral virtue but as a maladaptive coping response born from systemic disempowerment.

From a counselling standpoint, this study highlights the need for trauma-informed, empowerment-based, and culturally sensitive interventions. Counsellors must not only ensure the physical safety of victims but also work toward cognitive restructuring helping survivors unlearn internalized helplessness and dependency. Therapeutic approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Narrative Therapy, and Group Support Counselling can help survivors reframe their experiences, build confidence, and form supportive relationships that counteract trauma bonding. Furthermore, community-based support networks should be strengthened to provide safe, stigma-free spaces where women can report abuse without fear of judgment. Collaborations between mental health professionals, women's rights organizations, and religious institutions can also promote awareness campaigns that challenge harmful cultural narratives around marital endurance.

In sum, the findings affirm that psychological endurance in abusive marriages is a deeply rooted, multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be solved through moral appeals alone. It demands a holistic approach, one that integrates mental health care, social empowerment, and cultural transformation. Only by addressing the psychological underpinnings of endurance can Nigeria hope to break the silent chains that bind women to cycles of violence and suffering.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the psychological experiences of endurance among women in abusive marriages in Nigeria, with a particular focus on learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency as predictors of continued endurance. The findings demonstrate that these psychological mechanisms significantly shape women's responses to abuse, often trapping them in cycles of emotional and cognitive paralysis. The persistence of such endurance is further exacerbated by low perceived social support, cultural expectations of submission, and the absence of effective intervention structures.

Learned helplessness emerged as a key factor influencing women's passivity and resignation in the face of sustained abuse. Many respondents reported feeling powerless to change their situation or seek help, a state that reflects prolonged exposure to uncontrollable violence. Similarly, trauma bonding created deep emotional attachments that blurred the line between affection and abuse, reinforcing dependency and self-blame. Emotional dependency further sustained endurance by making women fear loneliness, social stigma, and economic insecurity, which are common realities in patriarchal Nigerian settings. Taken together, these findings reveal that endurance in abusive marriages is not a sign of strength or virtue, as it is sometimes portrayed in cultural narratives, but rather a product of psychological conditioning and social neglect. Women remain not merely because they lack knowledge or opportunity but because systemic, emotional, and cultural forces intertwine to immobilize them.

The study underscores the urgent need for psychological and social interventions that go beyond addressing physical safety. Counselling psychologists, social workers, and community leaders must collaborate to develop trauma-informed and empowerment-based programs that focus on rebuilding self-efficacy, autonomy, and resilience among survivors. Policy makers should also prioritize the establishment of accessible counseling centers, legal support frameworks, and awareness campaigns that challenge harmful cultural norms surrounding endurance and marriage.

Ultimately, the findings remind us that breaking the cycle of abuse in Nigeria requires not only rescuing victims from violent environments but also healing their minds and re-educating society. Addressing learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency is essential to restoring agency and dignity to women who have been psychologically conditioned to endure the unbearable. In this light, endurance should no longer be romanticized as virtue — it must be recognized for what it is: a silent cry for help that demands urgent, compassionate, and culturally attuned psychological response.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Counseling psychologists should design and implement trauma-informed interventions that specifically target learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency. Such programs should help women recognize maladaptive thought patterns, process emotional trauma, and develop coping strategies that foster autonomy and resilience.
2. Religious leaders and cultural custodians should be engaged to challenge narratives that glorify endurance in the face of abuse. Promoting culturally sensitive messages that validate women's right to safety and self-determination can shift societal expectations and empower survivors.
3. Launch public awareness campaigns highlighting the psychological impact of IPV, including learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency. These campaigns should also provide information on available counseling services, legal aid, and women's support organizations.
4. Incorporate IPV awareness and psychological education into public school and workplace programs. Educating women and men about the signs of abuse, psychological manipulation, and available support services can reduce cycles of endurance and violence.
5. Women should be encouraged to recognize the psychological dynamics of abuse and understand that endurance does not equate to virtue. Awareness of learned helplessness, trauma bonding, and emotional dependency can empower women to make informed decisions.
6. Survivors should be encouraged to access counseling services, legal aid, and social support networks. Proactively seeking help can break cycles of abuse and promote psychological recovery.
7. Studies should empirically evaluate the effectiveness of trauma-informed counseling, empowerment programs, and social support interventions for Nigerian women, identifying best practices for reducing psychological endurance in abusive marriages.

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