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## **Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Study of Male Victims' Experiences With Their Natal and In-Law Families**

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**Intimate partner violence: A qualitative study of male victims' experiences with their natal and in-law families**

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**Abstract**

Research indicates that male victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) are often reluctant to seek help. When they do, they frequently turn to their informal support networks, such as natal and in-law families, rather than formal societal resources. In Nigeria, where the influence of these families is particularly strong, there is a notable absence of studies exploring how supportive these familial relationships are for heterosexual male victims. To address this critical gap in the literature, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 Nigerian heterosexual male victims of IPV. Using content analysis within a grounded theory framework, we identified four key themes. Our findings indicated that regardless of whether natal and in-law families were perceived as supportive or unsupportive, victims experienced negative emotional consequences. Based on these insights, we offer targeted recommendations and implications for both practice and research.

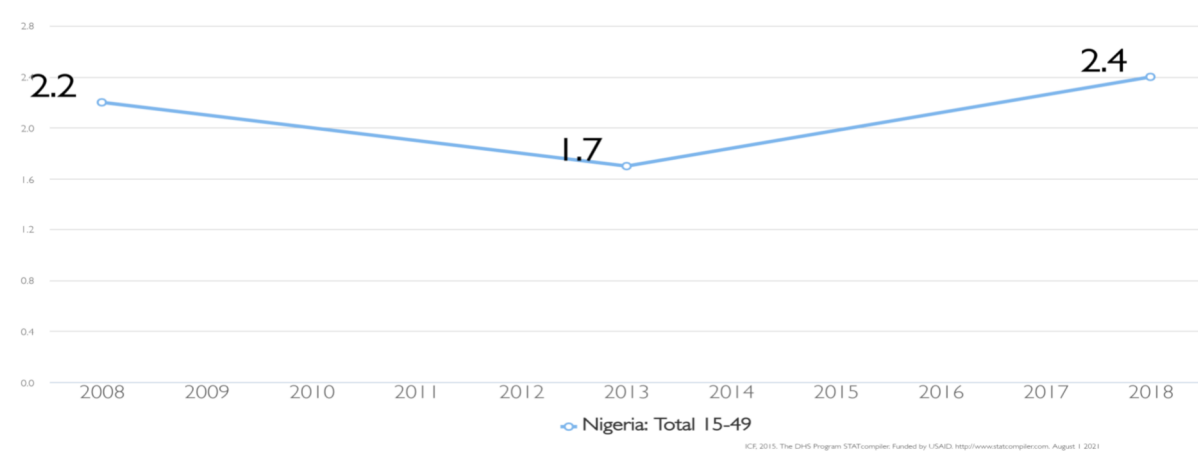
**Keywords:** emotional well-being, informal support network, in-laws, intimate partner violence, male victims, natal families

## Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is characterized as a pattern of behaviour within intimate relationships where one partner exerts control over the other through psychological, physical, or sexual means (Bates, 2019; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Machado et al., 2020). This can manifest in various forms, including verbal abuse, physical assaults such as beating and kicking, and manipulative tactics. The consequences of IPV are severe, leading to both physical and mental harm, which may include broken bones, brain injuries, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and even fatalities (Bates, 2019; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Machado et al., 2020). While IPV disproportionately affects women in heterosexual relationships (Hines & Douglas, 2010; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Oyediran et al., 2023), the prevalence of male victimization across regions including America, Europe, Asia, and Africa raises significant public health concerns (CDC, 2022; Leemis et al., 2022; Lysova et al., 2019; Oyediran et al., 2023; So, 2019; The Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023). Notably, statistics from Canada indicate that over 50% of IPV victims between 2010 and 2014 were men (Lysova et al., 2019). Furthermore, the ONS reported that in 2023, approximately 751,000 men in the UK were victims of domestic violence. In a study utilizing data from the National Demographic and Health Survey conducted after 2010, Oyediran et al. (2023) documented the prevalence rates of psychological, physical, and sexual violence in Cameroon at 26.5%, 24.4%, and 2.3%, respectively, and in Sierra Leone at 23.4%, 14.9%, and 2.7%. Moreover, Figure 1 illustrates the rising trend of reported physical violence against men in Nigeria, as indicated by the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) conducted in 2008, 2013, and 2018 (ICF, M., & NPC., 2009, 2014, 2019; Isangha, 2024c). It is important to note that data from Cameroon and Sierra Leone were collected from male participants and encompasses physical, psychological and sexual violence, whereas data from Nigeria were gathered from female participants highlighting their perpetration of physical violence. Consequently, this discrepancy may not

accurately reflect the true prevalence rate of IPV in Nigeria. Furthermore, the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (DSVA) in Nigeria reported in October 2023 that there were 340 cases of women battering their husbands into submission in Lagos State. Notably, this figure represents more than double the number of such cases recorded between September 2022 and July 2023 (Yusuf, 2023).

Figure 1 Percentage of ever-married women aged 15-49 who have committed physical violence against their husband or partner ever



**Source:** ICF, 2015. The DHS program STATcompiler. Funded by USAID. <https://www.statcompiler.com/en/> 1<sup>st</sup> August 2021

Despite the significant prevalence of IPV, traditional gender norms that dictate men should be strong, assertive, and emotionally reserved create substantial barriers to help-seeking among male victims (Corbally, 2014; Taylor et al., 2022). Moreover, most interventions are primarily designed to address the needs of female victims, with few tailored specifically for male victims. As a result, interventions for men are often integrated into those for women, rendering them less visible and accessible (Isangha, 2024c; Taylor et al., 2022). In under-resourced settings like Nigeria, the scarcity of interventions aimed at male victims is particularly pronounced (Isangha, 2024c). This lack of resources is deeply rooted in cultural factors. Nigerian society is characterized by a strong patriarchal structure and rigid gender

norms, leading to unequal treatment of women and a high incidence of violence against them in intimate relationships (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Oyediran, 2021). Consequently, interventions have overwhelmingly prioritized female victims, often sidelining the unique experiences and needs of male victims in the process.

Moreover, despite the constraints posed by traditional gender norms and the scarcity of targeted interventions, evidence indicates that when male victims seek help, they predominantly turn to informal support networks, such as their natal and in-law families, rather than formal support services (Ameh et al., 2012; Huntley et al., 2019; Simmons et al., 2018; Tenkorang et al., 2021). In Nigeria, natal and in-law families have long been recognized for their critical role as informal marital counselors, often intervening in disputes, including cases of IPV (Odero et al., 2014; Okenwa et al., 2009; Rotimi, 2005). This reliance on familial support underscores the importance of understanding the dynamics of these relationships, as they can significantly influence the emotional and psychological well-being of male victims as they navigate their experiences of violence. However, there has been a notable lack of research focusing on male victims' experiences of support with their natal and in-law families (Bates, 2019; Hogan et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2022). In contrast, the experiences of female victims regarding support from their natal and in-law families have been extensively documented. Research indicates that natal families often serve as a vital source of support for women, providing emotional and practical assistance during difficult times. Conversely, in-law families have been identified as a potential risk factor, complicating the support dynamics for female victims (Ahmad-Stout et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2021; Balogun & John-Akinola, 2015). This study comprehensively examines how both supportive and unsupportive family dynamics affect male victims, highlighting their significant impact on overall well-being. Understanding these experiences can empower practitioners such as social workers, counselors, and psychologists

to develop targeted interventions that equip natal and in-law families with the knowledge and skills needed to support this underserved population effectively.

## **Background**

Generally, male victims of IPV are less likely to seek help, whether through formal or informal channels. This reluctance is often driven by prevailing gender norms and the fear of emasculation, which frequently overshadow their recognition of vulnerability and the detrimental effects of IPV on their well-being (Donne et al., 2018; Joseph-Edwards & Wallace, 2020; Simmons et al., 2016). Moreover, research from developed countries, including Austria, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has identified key barriers that male victims face when seeking assistance. These barriers include issues related to affordability, the suitability of available services, and overall accessibility, all of which significantly hinder their ability to obtain the support they need (Donne et al., 2018; Huntley et al., 2019; Komlenac et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2022). This disparity arises because most of the time and resources dedicated to formal support services for IPV victims have historically prioritized female victims. When male victims are addressed, their needs are often subsumed within interventions designed for female victims, rendering their specific challenges less visible and making it more difficult for them to access appropriate support (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Emery et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2022).

Given prevailing gender norms and societal stereotypes, male victimization remains an under-discussed topic, leading many male victims to be unaware of their own victimization. Even when they do recognize their situation, they often perceive existing services as inconvenient and ill-suited to their needs, largely due to a one-size-fits-all approach that prioritizes female victims or because of fears related to emasculation. For instance, victims in Wales have reported a lack of awareness regarding available services and uncertainty about how to access them, further compounding their challenges (Wallace et al., 2019). In a study



conducted in the UK, some victims, including those who are British, Australians/New Zealanders, Americans, Canadians, and other backgrounds, reported experiencing or anticipating negative reactions when seeking help. These reactions included feelings of not being believed, being perceived as physically and mentally weak, and being viewed as pathetic, all of which were largely attributed to societal perceptions related to their gender (Bates, 2019).

These constraints are particularly pronounced in the highly patriarchal context of Nigeria, where few formal support services for male victims are integrated into interventions designed for female victims. This lack of tailored support exacerbates the challenges faced by male victims, as highlighted by Dienye and Gbeneol (2009) and Taylor et al. (2022). Victims in Nigeria have expressed that the current design of available services creates a perception of safety concerns and financial barriers, making them feel unsafe and reluctant to utilize these resources (Isangha, 2024c). It is essential to explore alternative sources of support in the interim. Natal and in-law families can serve as crucial pillars of assistance for male victims, offering emotional and practical support during their time of need (Akangbe, 2020; Ali et al., 2021; Okenwa et al., 2009). Their critical role in addressing marital issues faced by their children underscores the necessity of investigating the extent to which these families can be either supportive or unsupportive of male victims (Odero et al., 2014; Okenwa et al., 2009; Rotimi, 2005). Understanding this dynamic is vital for developing effective support systems. Moreover, past studies in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular have focused on abuse prevalence (Oyediran et al., 2023; Tenkorang et al., 2023), drivers or causes (Amole et al., 2016; Ayodele, 2017; Brisibe et al., 2012; Conroy, 2014; Gateri et al., 2021), impact (Dienye & Gbeneol, 2009), coping (Isangha, 2024a, 2024b) and help-seeking (Ameh et al., 2012; Tenkorang et al., 2021). However, there is a notable absence of studies that specifically explore the experiences of male victims with their natal and in-law families. This gap in literature highlights a significant area for further research.

*Family systems and social support theory*

Family systems theory highlights the family's function from a multigenerational perspective (Burke & Post, 2024; Murray, 2006), focusing on the close relationships among grandparents, parents, children, and even great-grandchildren. Interactions within these families are influenced by historical context, cultural practices, and shared experiences. In this interconnected structure, the impact on one member reverberates throughout the entire family system (Hardesty & Chung, 2006; Murray, 2006). This interconnectedness often fosters support during significant life events, including intimate relationships, marriage, IPV, and divorce (Akangbe, 2020; Ali et al., 2021; Frías & Carolina Agoff, 2015). We applied social support theory to enhance and complement family systems theory, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing victims' well-being. Social support is a complex concept that presents challenges in conceptualization, definition, and measurement. For this study, we define social support as "the degree to which an individual perceives that his or her needs for support, information, and feedback are adequately met" (Procidano & Heller, 1983). This definition highlights the subjective nature of social support and its vital role in the well-being of male victims. Drawing on social support theory, having supportive family members acts as a protective buffer against IPV and significantly enhances victims' resilience and overall well-being (Choi et al., 2021; Howell et al., 2018; Mhaka-Mutepfa et al., 2015; Procidano & Heller, 1983; Wright, 2015). Conversely, lower levels of social support have been consistently linked to poorer mental health outcomes (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005). Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that families play a crucial role in supporting female victims by intervening to de-escalate abuse (Deuba et al., 2016; Fernandez, 1997; Frías & Carolina Agoff, 2015). Research shows that support from both natal and in-law families is vital for stabilizing romantic relationships (Giles-Sims, 1983) and fostering resilience among female victims (Howell et al., 2018). However, there are also cases where

families hesitate to intervene, victim-blame, escalate IPV, or are complicit as co-perpetrators (Ali et al., 2021; Choi, 2022; Frías & Carolina Agoff, 2015; Jewkes et al., 2019). Notably, a lack of familial support often has detrimental effects on the victim's well-being (Gupta et al., 2018; Jewkes et al., 2019). Research on male victims of IPV through the lenses of family systems and social support theory is significantly underexplored, highlighting the urgent need to investigate their perceptions of support from natal and in-law families. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for elucidating their impact on male victims' well-being and for developing targeted interventions to enhance their support systems.

## **Methods**

### **Research design overview**

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a type of research in which the researcher or a designated co-researcher collects and interprets data, making the researcher as much a part of the research process as the participants and data provided (Corbin & Strauss 2015). Often, qualitative methods are appropriate for studying a population or group, hearing muted voices, empowering participants to share their stories, gaining a comprehensive understanding of a multifaceted problem, and understanding the context or milieu within which participants in a study deal with stressful situations (Creswell, 2007). Due to prevailing gender norms and societal stereotypes, male victimization is often overlooked in discussions of IPV. Many male victims experience significant fear of emasculation, which contributes to their reluctance to disclose their abuse. This hesitance is compounded by a cultural narrative that stigmatizes male vulnerability, further silencing their experiences and hindering access to necessary support (Joseph-Edwards & Wallace, 2020; Corbally, 2014). Consequently, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for addressing the research questions while maintaining victims' anonymity.

Using content analysis within the framework of grounded theory methodology, we systematically analyzed the interview data (Chaiyawat & Jezewski, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) with a focus on male victim's experiences of support from their natal and in-law families. This approach allowed us to identify and organize key themes and patterns, facilitating a deeper understanding of the victims' experiences and how it impacts their emotional well-being. Grounded theory research "is underpinned by symbolic interactionism which focuses on the nature of social interaction and, essentially, is a theory about human behaviour that sees humans as both actively creating the social environment and being shaped by it" (Coyne & Cowley, 2006, p. 501). Grounded theory is typified by the constant comparison or comparative analysis through facilitation of a concurrent process of data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Participants recruitment and sample settings**

The participants were drawn from three different zones in Nigeria's southern region to participate in a larger study on coping and well-being among male victims of IPV (Isangha, 2024a). While there are significant differences in ethnicity, culture, and language in the South, Christians constitute a large portion of the population. According to Bent-Goodley (2021) diverse perspectives foster inclusion, respect, and a broader understanding of differences. Participants in this study were Nigerian male victims 18 years and above, selected purposively across 12 states in the Southern region. Data were purposively collected from 35 male victims through interviews. The sample was unevenly spread across the different zones and states in the Southern region due to difficulty in recruiting male victims (Brooks et al., 2017; Chan & Tsang, 2017; Sita & Dear, 2020). The Northern region of the country was excluded because of security concerns, primarily terrorism and kidnappings.

Participants (n=20) were recruited through a non-governmental organization (NGO) known as Gnosis Help Initiative whose primary work is focused on domestic violence. The

study was advertised on their weekly radio programme for weeks, and participants who showed interest were referred to the researcher after a preliminary interview by the founder of the NGO to determine eligibility. Upon contact, the researcher asked questions about their experiences like the kind of physical, psychological and sexual violence to further ascertain their eligibility (See Isangha, 2024a for details). Fifteen other participants (n=15) that made up the total of 35 came from social networking. They contacted the researcher through the phone numbers on the flyers that were posted on different community establishments like barber shops, churches, and social welfare institutions, and the soft copies of the flyers that were sent to family and friends to post on their social media pages and chat groups on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Friends and families were also asked to watch out for eligible participants (victims) on social media and around their environment. The researcher also interviewed them briefly to ascertain eligibility. In Table 1, we present background information regarding the study participants.

### **Data collection and interview protocol**

Data is part of a larger study which was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted over a period of six months in Nigeria (January – June 2022) (Isangha, 2024a). A pilot study with two participants ensured the interview guide effectively elicited the intended information (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The interviews focused on victims' IPV experiences, coping strategies, and well-being, including exploring their support experiences with natal and in-law families, which is the core focus of this study. The primary research questions were: Did you seek help from your extended family? If not, how did they become involved? Would you kindly give a detailed description of your experiences with your extended families? Based on your experiences with them, how would you describe its impacts on your well-being? All interviews were conducted in English at the convenience of the participants lasting between 30-130 minutes (*M* average = 76.2 minutes).

Table 1 Participants background information

Respondent	Type of abuse	Age	Location	Educational level	Occupation	Number of children	marital status	length of relationship	Religion
Kingsley	Physical/ Psychological	45	Lagos	HND	Advertising and Marketing	2	Married/Separated	9yrs	Christianity
Christopher	Physical and Psychological	44	Lagos	BSc.	Media consultant and a movie producer	1	Married/Divorced	8yrs/	Christianity
Jimmy	Physical and Psychological	61	Lagos	Diploma	Optician	3	Married	40yrs	Christianity
Kayode	Psychological	46	Ogun	MBA	Oil and Gas Sector	1	Married/Separated	12yrs	Christianity
Preye	Physical and Psychological	34	Bayelsa	NCE	Electrician	0	Dating/separated	8mnths	Christianity
Paul	Physical and Psychological	68	Ibadan	O level	Retired Police officer/Business	11	Married/Divorced	35yrs	Christianity
Daniel	Physical and Psychological	53	Benin	BSc.	Pastor/teaching	3	Married/Separated	12yrs	Christianity
Olugbenga	Physical and Psychological	38	Lagos	BSc.	Access manager in a Telecom firm	0	Married/Divorced	3yrs	Christianity
Franklin	Physical and Psychological	46	Benin	BA.	Clearing agent	2	Married/Divorced	8yrs	Christianity
Ayomide	Physical and Psychological	43	Ogun	BSc.	Church worker/Business	0	Married/Divorced	5yrs	Christianity
Joshua	Psychological	37	Akwa Ibom	BSc.	Business	1	Married/separated	1.8yrs	Christianity
Benjamin	Physical and Psychological	55	Ebonyi	BSc.	Retired Banker/Business	4	Married/Separated	15yrs	Christianity
Ezekiel	Physical and Psychological	53	Lagos	O level	Unemployed	4	Married/Separated	6yrs	Christianity
Akpabio	Physical and Psychological	37	Imo	BSc.	Banker	0	Married/Separated	5yrs	Christianity
Idorenyin	Physical and Psychological	36	Benin	O level,	Painting of houses	1	Dating/separated	5yrs	Christianity
Godswill	Psychological	40	Lagos	HND	Civil servant	0	Married/Separated	7yrs	Muslim
Giobari	Physical and Psychological	48	Delta	O level	Interior decorator	3	Married/separated	4yrs	Christianity
Collins	Physical and Psychological	33	Akwa Ibom	OND/Professional course	Electrical Engineer	Pregnant/0	Dating/Cohabiting	1.9yrs	Christianity

## Experiences with natal and in-law families

14

Idongesit	Physical and Psychological	40	Akwa Ibom	MSc.	Validation officer in a financial firm	2	Married/Separated	8yrs	Christianity
Kemudeme	Physical and Psychological	58	Lagos	O level	Book Editor/Administrator	4	Married/Separated	13yrs	Christianity
Johnson	Physical and Psychological	36	Anambra	HND	Business	0	Dating/separated	1.6yrs	Christianity
Raphael	Physical and Psychological	39	Abia	BSc.	Water engineer, Geologist/ Politician	0	Married/Divorced	3yrs	Christianity
Jerry	Physical and Psychological	49	Enugu	BSc.	Entrepreneur	3	Married/Separated	9yrs	Christianity
Ayo	Physical and Psychological	57	Lagos	BSc.	Unemployed	3	Married/Separated	8yrs	Christianity
Balobalo	Physical and Psychological	50	Lagos	MSc.	Sales manager	2	Married/Separated	18	Christianity
Jay	Physical and Psychological	41	Enugu	O Level	Trader	3	Married/separated	9years	Christianity
Jack	Physical and Psychological	59	Ibadan	NCE	Teacher	4	Married/separated	7yrs	Christianity
Agara	Physical and Psychological	48	Lagos	MSc.	Mining oil and gas Consultants	2	Married/separated	17yrs	Christianity
Shadrach	Physical and Psychological	37	Enugu	BSc.	Apprentice	1	Married/Divorced	3yrs	Christianity
Sampson	Physical and Psychological	56	Ogun	HND	Civil servant	2	Married/separated /divorced	18yrs	Christianity
Festus	Physical and Psychological	39	Imo	BSc.	IT Consultant	4	Married	8yrs	Christianity
Igwe	Physical and Psychological	30	Anambra	BSc.	Car Dealer	0	Dating/Separated	9mnths	Christianity
Adebayor	Psychological	51	Lagos	BSc.	Business	0	Dating/Separated	2yrs	Christianity
Michael	Psychological	45	Lagos	BSc.	Business	2	Married/divorced	8yrs	Christianity
Stephen	Physical and Psychological	50	Ibadan	MSc	Business	5	Married/Separated	21yrs	Christianity

Participants were free to use either English or Pidgin English in a way that suits their narrative. The first author and research assistant are fluent in both languages.

The lead researcher holds a PhD in social and behavioural sciences, specializing in IPV and men's health, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The second author, with a PhD in social work, focuses on health psychology, youth well-being, and qualitative research. The third author, an expert in human development, parenting, fathering, and family dynamics, also utilizes qualitative and quantitative approaches. The fifth author, holding a PhD in social work, specializes in gender-based violence, particularly IPV against both women and men, as well as trauma-informed care. Together, we reflect on how our expertise influences our interactions, research processes, and outcomes.

### **Data analysis**

Data collection and analysis were conducted in two phases. Given the limited time for data collection and challenges in recruiting participants, the study adopted a flexible approach following constant comparative analysis (Chaiyawat & Jezewski, 2006). In the first phase, data were purposively gathered based on the interview guide, with ten interviews conducted. After each interview, recordings were transcribed and sent to participants for member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Kornbluh, 2015; Thomas, 2017). While two participants requested the removal of all identifying information despite assurances of anonymity, the others approved their transcripts for analysis.

After completing member checking, the first and fourth authors initiated open coding, analyzing the data line by line, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph to identify concepts, properties, and dimensions. This was followed by axial coding, where related open codes were merged. Through peer debriefing, the authors questioned the data, examining words, phrases, and sentences to overcome analytic blocks and identify emerging categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Parker, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Walker &



Myrick, 2006). Selective coding revealed significant concepts and new issues, prompting the development of additional questions for the original interview guide. During the first phase of analysis, we identified gaps; while victims detailed their natal and in-law families' supportiveness, few discussed their emotional responses. Consequently, the second phase focused on exploring how these family interactions impacted on their emotional well-being.

The updated interview guide was utilized in the second phase of data collection and analysis, which involved twenty-five interviews aimed at achieving theoretical sampling and data saturation. Theoretical coding techniques were used to establish connections between categories as needed. No new concepts emerged after the 30th interview. To ensure credibility, investigator triangulation was employed (Farmer et al., 2006), where five randomly selected transcripts were sent to a UK lecturer with expertise in family violence for independent analysis. With over 70% agreement observed, the authors adopted this analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The authors maintained reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019; Teh & Lek, 2018) throughout data collection, analysis, and literature review to enhance credibility. This investigation aims to explore victims' experiences of support from their natal and in-law families, informing the development of tailored supportive systems for male victims. Ultimately, it seeks to highlight the critical role of familial dynamics in shaping victims' experiences and outcomes, guiding the creation of interventions that foster emotional and practical support.

Consistent with Corbin and Strauss' (2015) grounded theory framework, our study adopted a post-positivist perspective, emphasizing objectivity by grounding our analysis exclusively in participants' comments. However, we recognize that our biases inevitably influenced the coding, concept development, and category formation. To mitigate these biases and enhance the rigour of our analysis, we employed several strategies, including member checking, peer debriefing, investigator triangulation, and reflexivity. These methods were

instrumental in ensuring a more objective and nuanced representation of the participants' experiences, thereby strengthening the credibility of our findings.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical clearance for this study was secured from the City University of Hong Kong Ethics Committee (2021-22-CIR1-3) to ensure compliance with all ethical requirements. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles outlined in the Belmont Report, which underscore the importance of upholding critical ethical standards, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. All participants received a consent form and an information sheet after providing verbal consent to participate, ensuring they were fully informed of their rights and the study's purpose. To protect their confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, thereby safeguarding their identities throughout the research process.

### **Results**

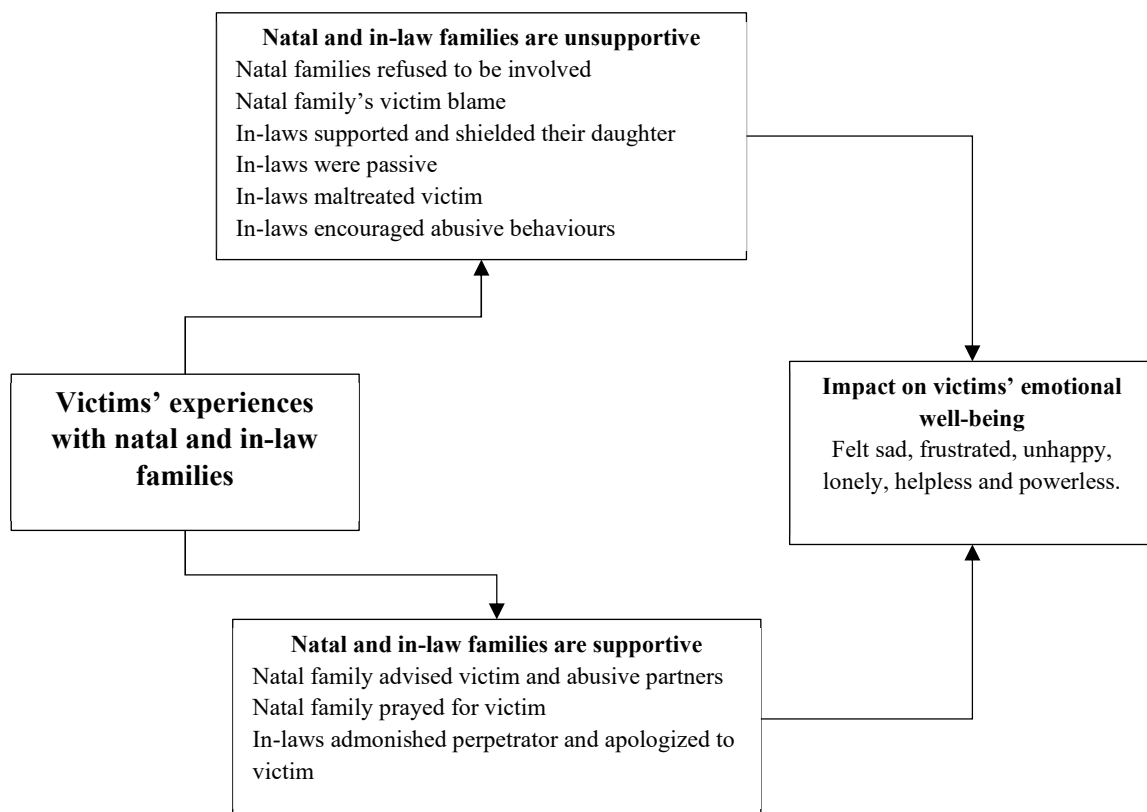
The results were presented to illuminate the distinctive experiences of heterosexual male victims in relation to their natal and in-law family's supportiveness. In the first theme, participants described the involvement of their natal and in-law families. The subsequent themes explored the complexities of these familial interactions, focusing on both supportive and unsupportive behaviours and their significant impact on the victims' emotional well-being. Sub-themes were developed to further elucidate these dynamics. The insights related to the second, third and fourth themes are visually represented in Figure 2, providing a clear illustration of the nuanced relationships between familial support and emotional health.

### **Participants sociodemographic characteristics**

At the time of data collection, participants' ages ranged from 30 to 68 years. Among them, five participants were in dating relationships: one was currently dating and expecting a child, two had at least one child, and two were childless. A total of thirty participants had been married, with two still married, while the others were either separated or divorced; twenty-

eight had at least one child. Educationally, twenty-one participants held a bachelor's degree or Higher National Diploma (HND), four had a master's degree, six completed secondary school, and four had other educational backgrounds. Except for one Muslim participant, all identified as Christians. In terms of employment, thirty-one participants were business owners, two were civil servants, and two were unemployed. Notably, thirty participants reported experiencing both physical and psychological abuse, with five of these participants also disclosing instances of sexual abuse, while five others reported psychological abuse only.

Figure 2: A diagrammatic representation of victim's experiences with their natal and in-law families



### Help-seeking, observation and accusation

In response to the question, "Did you seek help from your extended family? If not, how did they become involved?", participants identified three primary ways their natal and in-law families became engaged in their experiences of abuse: help-seeking, observation, and accusations. Fourteen victims articulated that they reached out to their natal and/or in-law

families when they felt overwhelmed and unable to cope with their partners' behaviour independently. "I have been talking to the mum why will she be behaving like this ..." (Collins, dating/cohabiting). For the remaining twenty-one victims, the decision not to seek help stemmed from fears of emasculation and a belief that seeking help contradicted traditional masculine norms. In their narratives, these victims indicated that their natal and/or in-law families only became involved when they observed the evident strain in their relationships. At that point, family members initiated conversations, often inviting the victims for questioning. "So, when her sister came and started living with us, and she saw this [*abuse*], so she now reported to the family [*in-laws*]. So, the family sent for me" (Ayomide, married/divorced). Additionally, some victims reported that their partners leveled false accusations against them, prompting invitations from their natal and/or in-law families for questioning. "And she kept telling her family that I am doing this, I am beating her, I don't even send money, so they invited me to ask about it ..." (Daniel, married/separated). Victims detailed their specific experiences with their natal and in-law families, emphasizing the profound impact these interactions had on their emotional well-being. They articulated how familial involvement influenced their feelings of support or distress, highlighting the dual nature of these relationships.

### **Experiences with natal families**

Twenty-three victims indicated that they lacked an older natal family member to whom they could report the abuse, or they consciously chose to keep their experiences hidden from their families. In contrast, twelve victims shared their interactions with their natal families, offering valuable insights into the nature of these relationships and the varying degrees of support or understanding they received.

***Natal families were unsupportive:*** Some victims expressed that their natal families were unsupportive, revealing a significant barrier in their pursuit of help and healing. This lack

of support not only exacerbated their feelings of isolation but also hindered their ability to navigate the complexities of their abusive situations.

*Refused to be involved, and victim blame:* Two victims reported that their families exhibited a disinterest in their relationships and the challenges they faced, attributing this detachment to prior warnings about entering or remaining in those relationships. Ezekiel conveyed that, despite his family's awareness of his victimization, they refused to engage with his situation, advising him instead to accept any issues that arose. This response stemmed from their longstanding lack of support for his marriage, reflecting a profound emotional disconnect. "My family knows, ... what happened was that my own family they are not interested in our marriage, in our relationship? So, they said that whatever I see I should take it ..." (Ezekiel, married/divorced). Similarly, Igwe recounted that his sister placed the blame for his situation squarely on him, citing the warnings they had given him about the relationship from the outset. "One of my sisters blamed me ...". (Igwe, dating/separated).

*Natal families were supportive:* Most victims who had interactions with their natal families reported receiving support, illustrating the crucial role that family can play in the recovery process.

*Advised victim and abusive partners:* Three victims noted that their families offered guidance not only to them but also to their partners. Adebayor specifically recalled how his family members intervened, with his sister providing direct advice to his partner. Despite these attempts at intervention, however, his partner remained unchanged in her behaviour.

My family ... they have also tried to intervene in the matter, spoken to her several times, tried to advice. I linked her up with my immediate younger sister. They talked, so she can mentor her and get close to her. She did that several times. What she advises is not in her head ... So, she keeps doing the wrong thing all the time (Adebayor, dating/separated).

Similarly, Idongesit shared that although his family harbored reservations about his partner, his sister expressed deep concern for the welfare of his child. She advised him to forgive his partner and remain in the relationship for the sake of the child. Despite his unhappiness with this suggestion, Idongesit felt compelled to comply, yet the abusive behaviour of his partner persisted unabated.

Some of my family members were angry. My sister was the one that said I should forgive her because of the baby. ... And at the end, I was still with her because of the baby. Even though I was not happy with what has happened, I was still with her, and the behaviour persisted ... (Idongesit, married/separated).

In addition, two victims recounted that their families actively listened to their struggles and promptly advised them to leave their abusive situations. Ezekiel noted that his older brother not only urged him to exit the relationship but also encouraged him to consider entering a new one. “My senior brother said I should forget her, that I should get another person ...” (Ezekiel, married). Similarly, Olugbenga's family members counselled him to request the return of his bride price.

Every little thing she will flare up and I couldn't cope with such again. I told my people. And my people said anyway, since we don't have peace in our home, all I have to do is to ask her to return the bride price ... (Olugbenga, married/divorced).

*Prayed for victim:* Three victims shared that their families engaged in prayer on their behalf, underscoring the emotional and spiritual support offered during difficult times. When Johnson informed his family of his decision to leave the relationship, they revealed that they had been praying for his release from it. “... even when I told my family members, I was no longer interested, none of them said no. They were saying, thank you God. We have been praying for God to remove you out of that situation” (Johnson, dating/separated).

### Experiences with in-laws

Twenty-six victims detailed their experiences with their in-laws, shedding light on the complex dynamics that often influence the victims' situations. These encounters reveal a spectrum of interactions, ranging from support to lack of support.

***In-laws were unsupportive:*** Some victims recounted a range of actions, inactions, and reactions from their in-laws that lacked support.

*Supported and shielded their daughter:* Eighteen victims articulated their disappointment with their in-laws, noting that their actions fell short of expectations. Franklin, for instance, highlighted that, as an only daughter, his partner was shielded by her parents rather than being cautioned about the realities of her abusive relationship.

They are like shielding her, I perceive that. They may not say it, but I am seeing it, especially the mum. So, I perceive it strongly. In fact, one of the reasons, she is the only daughter of her mother, so they will shield her (Franklin, married/separated). Similarly, Shadrach described how his in-laws consistently endorsed his partner's actions without offering any caution or guidance.

One thing I discovered about her was she has a mother, sister and brother who will not sit her down and talk sense into her head. But instead, she will do those things and go, and they will support her (Shadrach, married/divorced).

Daniel recounted that whenever he and his partner experienced conflict, she often turned to her family, making false accusations of maltreatment and physical abuse against him. Instead of engaging in a dialogue or seeking clarification, a response typically expected in many African families, his in-laws unconditionally believed her claims. This lack of inquiry not only reinforced Daniel's sense of injustice but also led him to conclude that his in-laws were complicit in supporting his partner's harmful behaviour.

The family supported her because if the family did not support her, the family, what

the African family will do is that they will call a meeting and they will say to us settle down. Listen to us, because already it has gone beyond. She does not want to listen to me. The funniest thing is that there will be a misunderstanding, she will call her family, all the members of her family and tell them another story. Tell them how I'm maltreating her, how I'm beating her and so on. And that is a lie. Now they took her counsel together, her family (Daniel, married/separated).

*Being passive:* Fourteen victims expressed frustration over their in-laws' passive behaviour or unwillingness to act. They noted that while their in-laws often made promises to intervene, these commitments frequently went unfulfilled. For instance, Christopher recounted that each time he voiced concerns to his mother-in-law about his partner's behaviour, she would assure him that she would address the issue, only for him to later discover that she was merely providing her daughter with superficial reassurances. Christopher observed that, in response to his complaints, his partner's abusive behaviour intensified.

Coming to you to tell you, gives you a leeway, for you to put some input into the matter. You will give me that response [*promise to caution his wife*] and more or less pad your daughter on the back. Because after such reports, she comes back even more two times difficult. There is no time the mother visits that I don't deal with those issues for months (Christopher, married/divorced).

*Victims' maltreatment based on false accusation:* Five victims reported experiencing animosity or mistreatment from their in-laws, driven by false accusations made by their partners. Christopher recounted how his partner fabricated stories about him, which led to a significant deterioration in his relationship with her family. These unfounded narratives fostered a deep-seated hatred among his in-laws, leaving Christopher feeling marginalized and unjustly vilified. "... Yet you are, you are carrying stories and telling your family and your siblings. All of them are hating me for what I do not, no just cause, I do not know" (Christopher,



married/divorced). Similarly, Kingsley recounted that despite his earnest pleas for understanding, his father-in-law steadfastly refused to consider his perspective following accusations from his partner that he had physically assaulted her.

Of course, she has been telling them that I have been beating her up, because of the responses and reactions I was getting from them. ... So, I called her father to talk about it and he was just talking about his daughter that, his daughter said this and that. And then when he finished talking, he will just hang up. He did that three times. The first time I called him, and I was like ‘please listen to my own side of the story, let me just tell you this,’ and he said ‘okay’. Do you know 15 seconds into what I was saying, he cut me off ... (Kingsley, married/separated).

In a surprising turn of events, Daniel recounted how his partner leveled accusations against him for failing to provide for their family. This prompted his in-laws to confront him with harsh questioning and skepticism. However, the dynamic shifted dramatically when Daniel presented bank statements that documented the substantial financial support he had been sending to his partner. The revelation left his in-laws in disbelief, prompting them to reassess their stance and begin cautioning her about her unfounded claims.

‘Why is it that you are not sending money to your wife?’ *[they were very harsh when asking the questions]* I said, ‘who told you that I am not sending money to her?’ ‘Your wife said, told us that you are not sending money to her’. I opened my app *[mobile banking app]* and I brought out the history, you know, they saw it. Nearly ₦400,000 in less than 3months, that is, including the children’s school fees and other expenses. They said ‘ahh, she is wrong’. They tell her that ‘ahh we have seen it o, but you, you are telling us that he is sending you ₦3000 for one week, maybe, after three months’, before I send another. Telling that I am not sending any money. But after that, they talked to her (Daniel, married/separated).

*In-laws encouraged abusive behaviour:* Three victims reported that their in-laws were not only complicit in but also actively promoted their partners' harmful behaviours. Kingsley remarked. "... So, he is the promoter of the fight" (Kingsley, married/separated). Collins recalled that his partner frequently adhered to the directives provided by his sister-in-law, particularly during conflicts. He noted that whenever issues arose, his sister-in-law consistently offered her unwavering support to his partner, reinforcing her actions and decisions.

She [*partner*] is taking orders from her sister [*sister-in-law*] to live in my house ... Whenever she has this little misunderstanding or she did something wrong, she will combine it with her sister. The next thing, she will support her, that, that is the way it's supposed to be [...] (Collins, dating/cohabiting).

*In-laws were supportive:* A few victims reported supportive experiences with their in-laws, highlighting that not all family members within the same group were unsupportive. Notably, four victims articulated that while certain in-laws were dismissive or unhelpful, others offered significant emotional and practical support. Jerry and Collins explained. "Her senior siblings listen to me, ... They support me, they are with me. It's only her mother that doesn't want to see it from the angle others are seeing it" (Jerry, married/separated).

From my own end of side, what I observed is the sister she has. Because she doesn't have friends. The sister she has is a very bad influence on her with her own personal life. Because in some few times that she did something wrong and when she reports to the dad, the dad cautions her, she will try to withdraw herself from her dad ... but she is much closer to the sister who lives on all kinds of life (Collins, dating/cohabiting).

This contrast underscores the complexity of familial relationships, revealing that dynamics can vary widely among in-laws.

*In-laws admonished perpetrator and apologized to victim:* Seven victims reported that their in-laws openly disapproved of their partners' behaviour and even issued apologies on

their behalf. Idongesit shared that his in-laws expressed significant concern regarding his partner's actions, especially when she denied him intimacy and subjected him to humiliation during their intimate moments. Furthermore, she frequently voiced complaints about him, which prompted his in-laws to intervene. They ultimately warned her to cease her visits, reflecting their dissatisfaction with her treatment of Idongesit.

She deprived me of sex, she will push me away. The brothers and the sisters heard all this thing, and they were not happy, the family was not happy ... They even warned her from coming to their house to report (Idongesit, married/separated).

Similarly, Preye's mother-in-law expressed profound shock at the treatment he endured from his partner. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, she not only offered her sincerest apologies but also took the initiative to caution her daughter about her behaviour.

I called the mother [*mother-in-law*], in fact I went to the mother I told her that 'look o, this is what I have been experiencing' and the mother was shocked. ... The mother at that point was begging me, ... the mum corrected her (Preye, dating/separated).

Six victims reported that when their partners were admonished by their in-laws, it often led to an escalation of aggression directed at them. This heightened hostility sometimes extended to the in-laws themselves, as they found themselves caught in the crossfire of familial conflict. Collins recounted a particularly striking incident where his father-in-law reprimanded his partner, resulting in her immediate anger directed at him, her own father. "If I tell the dad and the dad scold her, she will start getting angry with the dad, saying the dad is supporting me" (Collins, dating/cohabiting).

### **Impact of experience with natal and in-law families on emotional well-being**

Seven victims reported experiencing negative emotions during and after their interactions with their natal families. Idongesit, who preferred to keep his family uninvolved, explained that their intervention contributed to his unhappiness. He articulated that the presence

of his family in these matters intensified his feelings of distress, primarily because he disapproved of third-party involvement in his personal affairs. Despite these challenges, Idongesit maintained a sense of hope that circumstances might improve in the future because of their involvement.

I wasn't happy because it's not something to be happy about. But I had feelings that things would move *[get]* better when they started talking to her and myself. But I wasn't happy because she was allowing so many *[much]* information go outside (Idongesit, married/separated).

For Adebayo, a significant source of distress and unhappiness stemmed from the fact that, despite his sister's efforts to advise his partner, there was no noticeable change in her behaviour. This lack of responsiveness not only undermined his sister's attempts to mediate but also deepened Adebayo's sense of frustration and helplessness.

Why I felt bad was that she was taking many forms of correction, and she was not showing any sign that she really wants to improve. So, that was why I didn't feel happy. Being corrected you know you are being advised and then you are not making any effort to want to correct it (Adebayo, dating/separated).

Moreover, Ezekiel felt a profound sense of abandonment, disappointment, and distress due to his family's refusal to become involved in his situation. Their disengagement left him feeling isolated and unsupported during a challenging time, significantly intensifying his emotional turmoil. "Well, I felt disappointed ... My people abandoned me, my wife as well abandoned me too, so I felt so bad and disappointed" (Ezekiel, married/divorced).

Twenty-four victims articulated their emotional experiences during encounters with their in-laws. Kingsley shared that his interaction with his father-in-law left him feeling profoundly isolated and distressed. With the loss of his natal parents, he found himself without a support system, intensifying his sense of loneliness. This encounter not only compounded his

feelings of vulnerability but also led him to perceive himself as a victim of the situation, as his in-laws seemed to operate with impunity, exerting their authority without regard for his feelings.

There was a time it made me feel alone because my own parents were both deceased and I am very alone, and I have no one to turn to even ... there was no one I could talk to. So, at that point it made me feel like I was their victim, because they could just do anything they wanted (Kingsley, married/separated).

Furthermore, Christopher recounted that his partner had made false accusations against him, which resulted in mistreatment from his in-laws. This unjust treatment left him feeling profoundly helpless and powerless, as he grappled with the emotional fallout of their actions. The weight of the accusations and subsequent hostility made him feel as if he were moving through life like a zombie, disconnected and emotionally numb.

Her daughter [*his wife*] has been telling her [*mother in-law*] that she is the one paying the house rent and the one feeding and clothing me. And that I am spending my money on another woman outside [*laughs dejectedly*]. So, that was why all of them were treating me like 'shit'. I was very helpless at some point; it was very serious at some point. I was, let me use this language, I felt like a zombie. A whole lot of times you know I felt like I wasn't in the marriage. Right from the second year, I felt like I wasn't in the marriage that somebody else was just in the marriage and I was just tagging along (Christopher, married/divorced).

Eight victims described how their frustration led to angry reactions towards their in-laws. Paul recounted a significant incident in which he evicted his mother-in-law from his home. This drastic decision stemmed from his deep dissatisfaction with her failure to address her daughter's troubling behaviours, despite having witnessed them firsthand and heard his numerous complaints.

When the mother came, I thought the mother would be able to talk to her and she would

receive sense. That is why for some while, I didn't complain at that time. So, when I complained, the mother would see the complaint like this [*hear the complaint*] and see what the child [*wife*] has done but she wouldn't correct her. That's why I confronted the mother. And that is why I say she [*mother in-law*] must have to leave ... (Paul, married/divorced).

Similarly, Shadrach recounted that he refused to respond to his mother-in-law's summons at one point due to his dissatisfaction with her previous handling of related issues. His decision to disengage was rooted in a deep sense of frustration, as he felt that her past treatment of the matter had been dismissive and inadequate. "Just the mother now called me, and I said, I am not going to go to her, and she thought it was a joke, because when she was doing all those things, I was adding them together ..." (Shadrach, married/divorced).

## Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that comprehensively examines the experiences of heterosexual male victims in relation to their natal and in-law families through a qualitative lens. Consistent with previous research indicating that male victims often refrain from seeking help, our findings reveal that only a small number of participants actively sought help (Huntley et al., 2019; Tenkorang et al., 2021). The majority of cases in our study were characterized by a lack of help-seeking behaviour, with involvement from natal and in-law families primarily occurring either through direct observation of the victims' struggles or in response to false accusations made by their partners (Joseph-Edwards & Wallace, 2020). This pattern underscores a significant barrier to support, as many victims remained isolated and voiceless, often suffering in silence. The involvement of family members was typically reactive rather than proactive, highlighting a troubling dynamic where intervention only occurred in reaction to misunderstandings or conflicts. This finding emphasizes the critical need for increased awareness and education for victims and families to foster a more proactive help-

seeking, and supportive environment that enables open communication and engagement with victims before situations escalate.

Based on the findings of this study, natal families predominantly demonstrated their support by offering advice to both the victims and their partners, as well as through prayer for the victims' well-being. However, in the few instances where support was lacking, initial concerns about the relationships often impeded their ability to provide the necessary emotional and practical intervention that victims urgently required. In these cases, some family members chose to disengage, placing blame on the victims instead of extending the support needed. This reluctance to become involved not only exacerbated the victims' feelings of isolation but also highlighted a critical gap in familial support systems. These dynamics underscore the importance of fostering a more empathetic and proactive approach within families, ensuring that concerns do not overshadow the essential emotional support that victims deserve during challenging times which is the basic emphasis of the social support theory (Hupcey, 1998).

In contrast, in-laws were predominantly perceived as unsupportive and, in many cases, as risk factors in the victims' experiences. Victims reported feeling that their in-laws actively supported and shielded their abusive partners, exhibiting passivity that seemed to condone abusive behaviours. Such dynamics illustrate the detrimental impact of blind loyalty within family structures, emphasizing the need for critical engagement and balanced perspectives to address conflicts constructively and fairly. Several victims noted that when they sought help from their in-laws, it often resulted in increased aggression from their partners. Additionally, some in-laws further intimidated or mistreated the victims based on unfounded accusations, exacerbating the victims' distress. This pattern aligns with findings from previous studies on female victims, which similarly identified in-laws as significant risk factors in abusive dynamics (Ali et al., 2021; Cañete-Lairla & Gil-Lacruz, 2018; Chan et al., 2008; Choi, 2022). It highlights the urgent need for open communication and fact-checking within family

dynamics to prevent the escalation of misunderstandings and to promote healthier interactions. The pervasive perception of in-laws as unsupportive highlights the urgent need for interventions that address these detrimental family dynamics, fostering a more protective and empowering environment for victims.

Support from in-laws was notably infrequent, occurring only in a few instances where they offered advice, issued apologies, or admonished the abuser. Moreover, even these supportive in-laws were not immune to repercussions; their efforts to intervene often provoked aggression from the abuser. This reaction underscores the complex dynamics at play, where the act of supporting the victim can lead to adverse consequences not only for the victim but also for those attempting to help. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the risks faced by supportive family members and the importance of creating safe channels for intervention that can effectively protect both victims and their advocates within the family structure.

Support from informal networks, such as natal and in-law families, has been consistently linked to improved mental health outcomes for victims; in contrast, the absence of such support is associated with detrimental effects on mental well-being (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Choi et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2024; Giles-Sims, 1983; Mhaka-Mutepfa et al., 2015). The findings of this study indicate that support from natal and in-law families does not consistently lead to positive outcomes for male victims. In fact, whether familial support is present or absent, it often adversely affects the victims' emotional well-being. In the few instances where victims described their natal and in-law families as supportive, they expressed feelings of both hope and sadness, as they grappled with the discomfort of having third-party involvement in their personal affairs. This dynamic reflects the influence of prevailing gender norms, which fosters the belief that such interventions compromise their masculinity (Corbally, 2014; Taylor et al., 2022). Consequently, this belief can hinder their capacity to experience positive emotions, such



as hope, thereby perpetuating a cycle of emotional distress. This highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how gender norms shape the experiences of male victims and the complexities surrounding familial support. Furthermore, the inability of natal and in-law families to effectuate lasting positive change, such as altering their partners' abusive behaviours, often elicited negative emotions in the victims. This lack of effective intervention contributed to a profound sense of helplessness and frustration among victims, who sought support but found it insufficient to address their circumstances. In contrast, previous research on female victims has demonstrated that the involvement of natal and in-law families can effectively prevent the escalation of abuse and provide a degree of protection (Deuba et al., 2016; Capaldi et al., 2012; Frías & Carolina Agoff, 2015). This divergence in outcomes underscores the complexities of familial support dynamics and highlights the need for targeted interventions that empower families to play a more constructive role in addressing and mitigating abusive behaviours, particularly in the context of heterosexual male victims. In many cases, victims who reported a lack of support from their natal or in-law families also expressed feelings of sadness, abandonment, unhappiness, loneliness, and frustration. These negative emotional outcomes mirror findings in previous studies on female victims (Gupta et al., 2018; Jewkes et al., 2019), reinforcing the notion that inadequate support exacerbates emotional distress. This trend is not surprising, as research indicates that lower levels of informal support for individuals experiencing trauma are linked to poorer mental health outcomes (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Dong et al., 2024). Additionally, the findings from this study suggest that victims may respond with anger when confronted with their in-laws' inadequate or dismissive reactions. This highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the emotional turmoil faced by victims and the critical role that family support or lack thereof plays in shaping their mental health and overall well-being.

**Recommendations and implications for practice and research**

Giles-Sims (1983) has long emphasized that family reactions significantly shape the overall outcomes of the abuse experience for victims. It is instinctive for in-laws to protect their own, and for natal families to feel aggrieved when their advice goes unheeded. However, it is crucial for them to recognize that the focus should not be on loyalty to their children or their grievances, but rather on resolving the underlying issues between the victims and their partners to foster healthier relationships. It is evident that a lack of support adversely affects victims' emotional well-being (Jewkes et al., 2019). Consequently, the absence of supportive responses from natal and in-law families can be effectively addressed through comprehensive information, training, and resources provided by professionals such as family therapists, counsellors, social workers, and psychologists. By equipping these professionals with the necessary tools to educate families about the dynamics of abuse and the importance of supportive interventions, we can foster environments that promote healing and resilience among victims. This approach not only empowers families to respond more constructively but also underscores the critical role of professional guidance in mitigating the negative impacts of familial non-support.

Additionally, if they are unable to assist the victims and their partners in addressing these issues, referring them to professionals should be seen as the appropriate course of action. Hence, it is critical for natal and in-law families to acknowledge their limitations in expertise and the importance of promptly referring victims to qualified professionals. The study's findings reveal that the advice provided by natal families often reflects a lack of understanding. For example, while suggesting that a victim stay in a relationship for the sake of their child may seem reasonable, it is not conducive to the victim's long-term health, as evidence indicates that prolonged exposure to abusive environments can have detrimental effects on well-being (Dixon et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). It raises the pertinent question: "What benefit does a chronically traumatized father provide to a child?" Furthermore, the natal families' lack of

expertise was evident in their recommendations for victims to leave their relationship without first addressing the root causes of the issues at hand. Professional intervention is essential, as trained counsellors understand that victims should only be encouraged to leave when all alternatives for restoring peace and balance have been thoroughly explored. This approach not only prioritizes the victims' well-being but also fosters healthier family dynamics. Professionals such as social workers, psychologists, and counsellors specializing in family violence must work collaboratively with family units in the justice system, including law enforcement. By conducting workshops, sensitization programmes, and public awareness campaigns, they can educate the community about the complexities surrounding male victimization. This will enable natal and in-law families to approach the issue with greater awareness and sensitivity, ultimately leading to more effective support for male victims (Hine et al., 2020; Huntley et al., 2019; Tenkorang et al., 2021).

In the interim, it is imperative that natal and in-law families serve as the primary responders for male victims (Tenkorang et al., 2021). Therefore, practitioners must collaborate with researchers to identify appropriate responses for these families, including when and how to implement them. It is essential to establish guidelines on what questions natal and in-law families should pose to victims and their abusive partners, whether these conversations should occur separately or together, and how to approach these discussions without bias or emotional overreach. Additionally, developing a systematic method for documenting the situation is crucial, particularly in cases where a referral to professional services becomes necessary. Key considerations include determining the most appropriate timing for referrals and the criteria that should guide these decisions.

Establishing effective strategies for natal and in-law families is vital in the short term. In the long term, however, government and policymakers must create services and structures tailored specifically to the needs of male victims. One potential first step could involve

rebranding existing support systems in Nigeria to enhance visibility or establishing new initiatives altogether (Isangha, 2024c). By doing so, natal and in-law families will be more inclined to make referrals, while victims will feel more comfortable seeking formal services designed to address their unique needs. This dual approach not only fosters a supportive environment but also contributes to a more comprehensive response to male victimization.

During sensitization and enlightenment programs, it is essential for both victims and the public to grasp the importance of gathering evidence in cases of abuse (Isangha, 2024c). In this study, the evidence presented by one victim notably influenced his in-laws' attitudes towards him. This experience highlights the critical importance of transparency and accountability in family relationships, demonstrating how access to factual information can challenge preconceived notions and foster a more balanced understanding of complex situations. It also underscores the potential for in-laws to play a pivotal role in addressing conflicts constructively, provided they are willing to listen and reassess their judgments.

The fact that many victims expressed unhappiness at the involvement of their natal and in-law families, preferring instead to avoid such interference due to prevailing gender norms, highlights the urgent need to deconstruct traditional concepts of masculinity. This deconstruction can help victims recognize that seeking help is not only acceptable but essential for their well-being (Burgess, 2024; Connell, 2005; Gough & Novikova, 2020). Additionally, the establishment of more peer support groups, facilitated by social workers, counsellors, family therapists, and counselling psychologists, could significantly enhance the resources available to victims. These groups would serve as vital supplements to the support provided by natal and in-law families, offering a safe space for victims to share their experiences, gain insights, and receive encouragement from those who understand their struggles (Isangha, 2024c). By integrating these peer support networks into the broader framework of assistance,

we can create a more robust support system that empowers heterosexual male victims and promotes their healing and recovery.

### ***Study Limitations***

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Notably, the perspectives of relevant members from the natal and in-law families, as well as victims from Northern Nigeria, were not included in our analysis. Future research should aim to incorporate these voices to enrich the understanding of the dynamics involved. Additionally, the sample consisted predominantly of Christian participants, with only one identifying as Muslim, necessitating caution in interpreting the findings through the lenses of religion and regional context. Moreover, we did not employ scientific measures to assess how victims' experiences with their natal and in-law families impacted their emotional well-being, which may limit the depth of our conclusions. Furthermore, while we applied constant comparative analysis, this method was utilized flexibly due to challenges in participant recruitment and restricted time for data collection. Additionally, the participants in this study identified themselves as victims of intimate terrorism (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). While their victimization was based on self-reporting, we acknowledge that there was no objective means to verify these claims. To enhance the credibility of their victim status, we encouraged participants to provide a comprehensive narration of their experiences before delving into specific questions from the interview guide. This narrative approach allowed for a richer understanding of their circumstances and reinforced the authenticity of their accounts. Despite these limitations, this study represents a timely and significant contribution to the discourse on male victimization and their interactions with natal and in-law families.

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