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Post-separation experience of male victims of intimate partner violence in Southern Nigeria

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Abstract

Studies of intimate partner violence (IPV) among heterosexual male victims have predominantly focused on pre-separation experiences, with post-separation experiences largely overlooked. In under-resourced settings such as Africa, where research on male victimization is limited, little is known about the post-separation experiences of male victims. This study used grounded theory methodology to examine the post-separation experiences and coping strategies of thirty-two heterosexual male victims in Nigeria. Using content analysis based on category development within the grounded theory methodology, three themes emerged: “Haunted self,” “Changed self,” and “Coping with the haunted and changed self.” “Haunted self” emphasizes the long-term negative impacts on male victims' physical and mental health, along with ongoing victimization by their ex-partners. “Changed self” reflects the negative effects of their experiences on perceptions and attitudes toward new intimate relationships. “Coping with the haunted and changed self” describes various adaptive and maladaptive strategies used to manage these issues. While adaptive strategies like help-seeking did not yield consistent positive outcomes, benevolent reappraisal was generally beneficial, but lessons learned proved detrimental for some victims who made premature decisions based on hasty conclusions. Maladaptive strategies such as self-loathing, regret, and self-blame caused further harm. Among other suggestions, the findings indicate a need for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to collaborate on implementing compulsory post-separation therapy sessions for both victims and perpetrators.

Keywords: changed self, haunted self, intimate partner violence, male victims, post-separation, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects individuals of all genders and is a complex, multifaceted problem (Corbally, 2014). While much research and public discourse have focused on the experiences of female victims in heterosexual relationships (Bates & Carthy, 2020; Corbally, 2014), recent studies have highlighted the often-overlooked experiences of male victims (Isangha, 2024b, 2024c; Taylor et al., 2022). However, much remains to be understood about male victimization. Current research primarily focuses on the pre-separation experiences, impacts, and help-seeking behaviors of male victims (Joseph-Edwards & Wallace, 2020; Tsang et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2020). An area that warrants attention is their post-separation experiences and coping strategies, given the limited existing knowledge (Bates, 2019a; Bates & Taylor, 2021).

The term “post-separation” in IPV refers to the period that occurs after the end of an abusive relationship during which the survivors may continue to experience various forms of abuse and its repercussions (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Hardesty & Chung, 2006; Hardesty et al., 2012). This phase is crucial since it often includes ongoing challenges pertaining to safety, legal matters, and emotional well-being (Dixon et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). The post-separation phase is not merely a time of physical separation but also involves navigating the complex aftermath of IPV, including psychological trauma, legal issues, and the restructuring of one’s life and identity (Logan & Walker, 2004). Providing appropriate support and intervention to IPV survivors requires an understanding of this period. Notably, only a handful of studies have focused on the post-separation experiences of male victims (Bates, 2019a; Bates & Taylor, 2021). In under-resourced settings like Nigeria, where male victimization is only recently gaining attention amid prevailing beliefs that men are stoic and emotionless (Isangha, 2024b, 2024c; Oyediran et al., 2023;

Tenkorang et al., 2023), it is essential to thoroughly examine the post-separation experiences of male victims and their coping strategies to inform policy, practice, and research.

1.1. Post-separation experiences and coping among male victims

Coping in the context of IPV refers to the strategies survivors use to manage the stress and trauma associated with their experiences (Folkman, 2013). These strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive, significantly influencing the survivor's psychological and physical well-being. Adaptive strategies may include seeking social support, utilizing counseling services, and engaging in problem-solving, all aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of IPV and facilitating recovery (Folkman, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Waldrop & Resick, 2004). In contrast, maladaptive strategies, such as substance abuse, denial, and self-blame, can worsen distress and hinder recovery (Clements & Sawhney, 2000; Folkman, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Leaving is a commonly discussed coping strategy in IPV. For male victims, the decision to leave abusive relationships often results from coping exhaustion and serves as a problem-focused approach to ending the abuse (Dixon et al., 2020; Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012; Park et al., 2020; Rizo et al., 2017). Ultimately, it is not a straightforward choice due to situational and emotional factors. For instance, victims often face issues such as a repeated cycle of abuse and apologies from their partners (Dixon et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020), threats from their partners to harm them, their children, or loved ones; fear of parental alienation; and a moral belief against leaving (Bates, 2019b; Chan & Tsang, 2017; Park et al., 2020; Sita & Dear, 2020). These factors often lead victims to remain in abusive relationships, prolonging their exposure to abuse and its consequences (Dixon et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). Although these factors exert significant pressure on victims to stay, the desire for survival and peace often prevails. This shift typically occurs when victims recognize that their partner will not change, that the abuse has become

intolerable, or that they can no longer justify their partner's behavior (Dixon et al., 2020; Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012; Park et al., 2020).

Evidence suggests that male victims of IPV face unique challenges and barriers post-separation, which can exacerbate their vulnerability and hinder recovery and safety. Many victims have reported increased continuous victimization, particularly in relationships involving children (Bates, 2019a, 2019b; Dziewa & Glowacz, 2022; Sita & Dear, 2020). Some victims have reported negative effects from their pre-separation experiences, while others experienced feelings of relief, peace, and freedom (Park et al., 2020). For some, these experiences are viewed as valuable lessons that may help prevent future revictimization (Park et al., 2020). Bates (2019a) found that male victims often endure continuous harassment, false allegations, and parental manipulation or alienation. These experiences lead to fear, with some victims hesitant to form new relationships and others diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bates, 2019a).

Furthermore, Bates and Taylor (2021) employed photo elicitation to examine how male victims cope post-separation after their victimization experiences. Bates and Taylor (2021) identified that victims faced power imbalances affecting children, finances, social status, personal agency, and parental alienation. They found that these imbalances significantly impacted male victims' coping strategies. Most refrained from seeking help due to fears of disclosure linked to masculinity, while those who did seek help reported primarily positive experiences with formal and informal resources. Some victims described systemic injustices stemming from gender stereotyping, including their perceptions of victimization, negative treatment by formal agencies, and how media representations shaped public attitudes toward male victims (Bates & Taylor, 2021). Despite being victims, they experienced feelings of failure, guilt, loneliness, and loss, often grappling with the question of 'why' (Bates & Taylor, 2021). Other strategies included self-care

practices such as exercise, spending time in nature, and medication, while maladaptive coping involved alcohol use (Bates & Taylor, 2021). In Dziewa and Glowacz (2022), some victims coped by surrounding themselves with professionals or family. This study contributes to the discourse on post-separation experiences of male victims by exploring the experiences of Nigerian male victims using a qualitative research design.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design and data analysis

This study employed a qualitative research design informed by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), rooted in symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes social interaction and human behavior as active processes created and shaped by the social environment (Coyne & Cowley, 2006). Data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using content analysis to explore male victims' post-separation experiences and coping strategies based on category development within the grounded theory framework (Chaiyawat & Jezewski, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

2.2. Participant recruitment and sample

Participants included 32 Nigerian male victims, aged 30 to 68, recruited from the Southern region of Nigeria for a larger study on IPV experiences, coping, and well-being (Isangha, 2024a). To date, two papers have been published from this data (Isangha, 2024b, 2024c). Participants (n=17) were primarily recruited through the Gnosis Help Initiative (GHI), a non-governmental organization; and social networking sampling (n=15). The sample included individuals in dating, married, separated, and divorced relationships; representing diverse educational backgrounds: tertiary, secondary, primary, and none; primarily consisting of business owners, civil servants, and the unemployed. At the time of the study, twenty-eight participants had at least one child. Although the southern region is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, most participants identified

as Christian. Twenty-nine participants reported physical and psychological abuse, including five who also reported sexual abuse, while three reported only psychological abuse (see Isangha, 2024a for detailed socio-demographic characteristics). The northern region was excluded due to significant security concerns, including banditry, armed conflicts, herder-farmer clashes, and kidnapping (Wada et al., 2022).

2.3. Interview protocol and data collection

A pilot study with two participants was conducted in January 2022 to refine the interview guide. Data were collected from January to June 2022 for a larger qualitative study on IPV experience, coping and well-being among male IPV victims in Nigeria, using semi-structured interviews (Isangha, 2024a). The current study examines the post-separation experiences of the victims in detail, highlighting the long-term impacts and challenges they experienced. Questions for this study specifically included: ‘Are you still in the relationship?’ ‘How would you describe your experiences after separation?’ and ‘How have you coped?’ Semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 130 minutes ($M=76.2$) were conducted in English, with participants permitted to use Pidgin English to better express their experiences. We employed member checking, allowing participants to review and provide feedback on their interview transcripts before proceeding to data analysis.

2.4. Data analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred in two phases. Initial open coding was performed on the first nine interviews by the first and fourth author, allowing the research team during peer debriefing to identify key concepts, properties, and dimensions. Axial coding merged related open codes, while selective coding identified larger concepts and emerging issues. These new insights informed the development of additional questions, which were integrated into the interview guide for the second phase of data collection.

The second phase involved 23 additional interviews to enable theoretical sampling and achieve data saturation. Theoretical coding techniques were used to explore connections between categories. Investigator triangulation was employed to enhance credibility, involving an independent analysis of five randomly selected transcripts by an expert in family violence to ensure alignment with the research team's findings. The Farmer et al. checklist was utilized to assess convergence (Farmer et al., 2006). Throughout the research process, the authors engaged in reflexivity to maintain credibility.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the City University of Hong Kong ethics committee (2021-22-CIR1-3), and the research adhered to the Belmont Report's principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Participants provided verbal and written informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

3. Results

The data analysis generated several themes, which were organized and discussed around three major themes. The “haunted self” encapsulates physical and mental well-being, and continuous victimization post-separation; the “changed self,” highlights their new cognitive and behavioral perspectives on intimate relationships; while “coping with the haunted and changed self” describes the strategies victims employed to address these challenges.

3.1. Haunted self

Victims reported never feeling truly free post-separation due to ongoing issues, including impacts on their physical and mental well-being and continuous victimization from their partners.

3.1.1. Physical and mental well-being

Victims reported feelings of depression and sadness following separation. One participant, Effiong, noted that he became depressed after separation which lasted for over a year. “It was after

the separation that I became depressed. After the incident I also became depressed. I think it lasted for like between one year and 14 months [...]” (Effiong, married/separated). Another participant, Sylvanus, faced severe mental health challenges that led him to contemplate and attempt suicide.

[...] I did contemplate suicide, and I also tried to kill myself, you know. [...] let’s just end the show and that’s what I tried doing June of last year. I had a chair, my neck was on the [pause], oh God, let’s not even talk about that [*sobs gently at the recollection*] (Sylvanus, married/separated).

While some victims felt physically and mentally depleted post-separation, others reported feeling liberated and experienced improvements in their physical and mental well-being. Twenty-five victims reported feeling significantly better post-separation after experiencing feelings of being trapped and enduring poor physical and mental health pre-separation. In addition to feeling happier, Shadrach noted a marked improvement in his mental health.

So even as I am a single man now, I am happier compared to when I was married [...] As I am a single man now, the difference is so clear with my mental health. My mind, my everything. I feel happy [...] (Shadrach, married/divorced).

Patrick and Daniel reported finding peace and a better frame of mind, no longer experiencing physical issues such as loss of appetite and ulcers that they had faced during the relationship.

Remember I told you that I was an ulcer patient then, thank God o. I, after I left, God just miraculously healed me of it. But those are one of the advantages of being on the right frame of mind [...] (Patrick, married/divorced).

When I left, I felt inner peace within me and a kind of heavy load has been lifted off my shoulder [...] the moment I left her, I was able to eat. I was able to go out and enjoy myself

alone, find a good place and then come back home. The healing was slow and steady [...] (Daniel, married/divorced).

In a severe case of physical abuse, Akpabio, who experienced various ailments from boric acid poisoning, reported that these ailments gradually disappeared after separation.

[...] All the health challenges and symptoms I have been managing for four years had actually wear-out. As I speak to you, this is 2022, I have not taken any tablets to treat any particular condition either for kidney or for strained testicle, or for low energy levels or for anything whatsoever [...] (Akpabio, married/divorced).

3.1.2. Continuous victimization: Child alienation and repeated threats

While many victims reported feeling relieved after separation, those with children described various challenges they faced. Twelve victims reported maintaining a cordial relationship with their partner post-separation for the sake of their child(ren), ensuring they provided for and were physically present in their lives. Daniel explained.

I stay very close to them. So, whenever I close from work, I stop over, and we do their school homework. And after the homework I will go home. [...] I take care of the children she also takes care of the children [...] Sometimes, I will take them out, we will watch movie, and they will come, come back home and they too will be happy (Daniel, married/divorced).

Eleven victims reported that, despite maintaining a cordial relationship, their partners remained abusive. Sylvanus noted that, despite his efforts to maintain a cordial demeanor, his ex-wife continued to exhibit unkind and hostile behavior towards him.

So up until this past December I was still cordial especially because of the children [...] So, I still tried to maintain because I wasn't being violent anytime she does something. I

just say what I want to say and then let it go. [...] but she just kept on being extremely vile (Sylvanus, married/separated).

Additionally, ten victims reported that their partners alienated them from their children. Akpabio recounted being alienated and how his ex-wife tarnished his image by telling their daughter he had abandoned her, despite his efforts.

She is nine now, [...] She is always excited to gist and play, but the mother will ensure that I don't get to be with her. I don't get to talk to her. I can call a hundred times a day, she won't pick the call, she just keeps cutting off my calls. Then she will tell, she will tell my daughter, you see your father has abandoned you. I sent text messages, she won't reply [...] (Akpabio, married/divorced).

Similarly, Gabriel recounted how his partner prevented him from seeing his children and instilled anger and hatred in them.

She has severed it. She told my son that the day that she will see me with him, she is going to disown him. You can imagine, as if she is the commander of life. She is going to disown him [*laughs dejectedly*]. The other children, she has put fear into them, to the extent that they cannot even call me. [...] And I know she has poured so much anger and hatred on them, [...] (Gabriel, married/separated).

Furthermore, seven victims reported that their partners repeatedly threatened them after separation. Gabriel's partner threatened to disrupt his job as a church worker, while Adebayo faced threats from his partner and her friends when he served her divorce papers. "Even in this church where I am, is not up to three weeks I started here. And she threatens to come and scatter things here. Now I don't know what is really her problem [...]" (Gabriel, married/separated).

One of those friends even met me in my house and said oh I shouldn't go ahead. I should stop the legal action of the divorce. And I told her that I've made up my mind [...] So, I believe, that statement didn't go well with her, and she left. Because later, they're now conniving with her [*partner*], saying that since they talk to me, and you know, I refuse, that they're going to deal with me in their own way [...] (Adebayo, married/separated).

Similarly, after the court dissolved Otunba's marriage, he reported that his ex-wife refused to leave. Due to his physical limitations, he could not force her out, and when he confronted her, she threatened to hit him with a bottle.

She hasn't hit me directly, but she threatens to hit me if I confront her. And you know I have no power; I have no hand [*disabled*]. She even promised hitting bottle on my head if I do rubbish [*misbehave*] because I decide to forcefully eject her [...] (Otunba, married/divorced).

3.2.Changed self

The victims discussed how their experiences influenced their cognition and behavior, including their perceptions and attitudes toward intimate relationships.

3.2.1. Attitudes in new relationship

The lessons learned (see section on coping) and the negative impacts of past experiences influenced victims' attitudes in new relationships. Ten victims reported struggles in establishing and maintaining these new relationships due to lingering effects from their previous relationships. Shadrach, whose ex was jealous, controlling, and possessive, initially hesitated to give love another chance. However, when he did, he found himself easily angered by his new partner, often rebuking her harshly for harmless inquiries like 'who was on the phone?'

Because it's been close to three years now, and most of the relationship I have had, one thing I discovered, it affected me in a way especially before I don't want to give it a chance

[...] Maybe later my phone rang, and she said ‘who is that?’ It now came to my head, and I said ‘don’t ever ask me that question again’ [*scolding her*] [...] ‘I pick anybody’s call, in front of another. Whoever I want to pick their call, I will pick, don’t question me who I pick the call’ [...] (Shadrach, married/divorced).

Five victims reported ending their relationships prematurely at the slightest sign of unacceptable behavior. For example, Daniel ended his new relationship because his ex was secretive about her past, despite his own openness.

I entered a new relationship few months back. As I said, my first one was a great lesson. So, when I found out that my new relationship is not going to work. Because of what, there was a lot of secrecy on the part of the woman. I let her know about my past, but she too, she was trying to hide her own side. I said no, that this is not good for a relationship, because that was what really affected my first one. [...] So, I cut off that relationship, [...] (Daniel, married/divorced).

3.2.2. *Negative perception about marriage*

Some victims reported losing trust in women due to their experiences. They believe marriage is no longer worth the hassle and are unwilling to consider it again. While they may engage in intimate relationships, they do not see these leading to marriage. Ebuka, Adebayo, and Enangha expressed disinterest in marriage. “[...] I have ladies that are around me now, that probably will say yes today, immediately. But really, I’m not keen on it. I’m just trying to get back myself financially, emotionally and mentally [...] (Ebuka, married/separated). “[...] I don’t even want to see another woman coming to me as I am now [...] based on the bad experience that I had” (Adebayo, married/separated). “I am no more interested because of what I have been through before. I don’t believe in it [*marriage*], I don’t want to give it a chance again” (Enangha,

married/divorced). Similarly, Sylvanus stated that marriage is no longer an option for him because he cannot marry a woman who might become an abuser. He believes the only thing a woman can offer him that he lacks is sex, and he does not see marriage as merely a means to fulfill that need.

For me, never, never, never again. For me, I am never ever going down that road again.

[...] No more marriage, no more wife. The only thing a woman can give me now that I do not have is sex. [...] But I cannot marry a woman now because I want to have sex.

Companionship for a woman that will become a beast (Sylvanus, married/separated).

Additionally, Akpabio hopes his desire for a relationship will change, as he currently views all women as untrustworthy and has no desire for intimacy.

Thinking about another woman, at this point? No! [...] I see every woman as man. You will not think as a man you want to have relationship with another woman. Let us be friends, let everybody be happy, because right now, for me, trust is an issue with opposite sex. That's not an option right now. I hope I get something that will change that. I just hope (Akpabio, married/divorced).

3.3.Coping with the haunted and changed self

To cope with their haunted and changed selves, victims adopted various strategies, some adaptive and others maladaptive.

3.3.1. *Binge-eating*

Only one victim reported engaging in maladaptive binge-eating. Sylvanus explained that he often binge-eats to cope with his depression, which significantly impacted his physical health, leading to chronic constipation and weight loss.

What I do now is, I eat too much. So, men when they are sad, they go and drink, me I eat too much [*Laughs boisterously but with a tinge of sadness*]. I use food as medication. I just

eat and eat till, when I get satisfied, and then I stop. I feel constipation, I used drugs. It's painful. I use food the way people use drugs, incredibly I am not getting fat, I am getting slimmer [...] (Sylvanus, married/separated).

3.3.2. *Self-blame, regrets and self-loathing*

Seventeen victims reported significant self-loathing and self-blame, another maladaptive strategy. Effiong continued to blame himself, believing that if he had asserted himself earlier, he could have ended the relationship long ago.

I married a woman that is unmarriageable. I blame myself because I should have known that after that incident [...] She said she was going to change but obviously it did not happen [...] The marriage would have ended a long time ago if I had stood on my ground [...] (Effiong, married/separated).

Similarly, Shadrach stated that in the first six months post-separation, he hated himself for marrying his ex-wife despite recognizing the red flags during courtship.

It was a very horrible experience. For the first six months, I didn't miss her, I hated myself [...] Because I hated myself, because why on earth will I see a woman like this, that never hid her character while we were dating, and I went ahead and still marry her [...] (Shadrach, married/divorced).

Six victims reported that regret, self-blame, and self-loathing only intensified their feelings of negative emotion. Agu and Adebayo recalled...

I always say that the only thing I blame myself for is in the two years we spent you know, I feel bad though. I feel bad [...] basically when I think of those two years, at least if someone had gotten married by now 'e go don get one pikin' [*would have had at least a child*] (Agu, dated/separated).

I regret it, I regret it. Each time I think about it, I feel sad, and it kills me seriously. [...] maybe I would have gone beyond this level that I am, because this wrong marriage has drawn me back [...] (Adebayo, married/separated).

3.3.3. *Threats*

Some victims adopted a resistant approach that proved somewhat productive but ultimately ineffective. In response to repeated denial of access to his daughter, despite an agreement with social welfare, Akpabio threatened to call the police on his ex-wife. This threat prompted her to apologize out of fear.

The Friday, the Saturday and the Sunday she just created activities [...] I threatened I will just call 911 [*Although 911 is not an emergency line in Nigeria, many Nigerians commonly use it to refer to contacting the police*] and they will take you to Yaba [*prison*]. She said no, 'no, it's not like that'. She was pleading [...] (Akpabio, married/divorced).

However, Akpabio stated that his ex-wife continued to alienate him. He indicated that his next step was to report her to the social welfare department for reneging on the child custody agreements.

I am even supposed to drop a letter, a complaint at the social welfare [*department*] tomorrow about this issue of not allowing me access to the kid. Because social welfare from the beginning told us that I am entitled to weekly visits or the girl being with me for the weekend [...] (Akpabio, married/divorced).

3.3.4. *Prayers and begging*

One victim turned to prayer *and begging* to cope with alienation. Gabriel reported praying for divine intervention and occasionally begging his son to speak with him on his way to school. However, he found it difficult to reconnect, as his wife had poisoned their minds against him, asserting her role as the sole provider and demanding their obedience.

Ehhr, I have been praying. Even as I am here, I can't lie to you, I have been praying concerning this. Because I mean, I want to live with my children, you know. I want to live with my children. [...] I met with my son one day, after she has warned him. The guy was walking, he was going to school, and so because I know where he is passing, I know where to block him [*he knows his usual routes to meet with him*]. And I was like, eehm, please now. He was like in a hurry, and he wanted to leave, as if ehhr, there is something pursuing him. Can't you see that his mother, his mother will not meet him with cane? But she has shown to them, or she is telling them that, she is the sole provider of the house, they have to obey her, not even me. It's unfortunate (Gabriel, married/separated).

3.3.5. *Crying and focusing on work*

Only one victim reported using crying *and focusing on work* as a coping mechanism. Enangha described coping with post-separation depression through crying, although he sometimes attempted to focus solely on work. He found the sense of helplessness overwhelming but noted that crying provided some relief.

After the breakup, I cried! Because at that point the level of helplessness was just at the peak for me, I broke down a number of times. At some point I was beginning to tell myself 'you don't let', I had to let it out somehow. Somehow, because even all those times giving myself to work there was no work I couldn't do because of the level of energy. The helplessness was just too much. I cried! Nothing wrong in crying. I was relieved. There is nothing wrong in crying [...] (Enangha, married/divorced).

3.3.6. *Help seeking, and inadequate support*

Another adaptive approach employed by victims was help and support seeking. Three victims reported attending counseling to address their depression, sadness, self-loathing, and

hatred for women. Shadrach noted that while struggling with self-loathing, aversion to marriage, and psychological distress, he sought help from a counselor, which left him feeling freer and more at ease.

It was after we broke up that I went there. [...] I went there for my own psychological issue because I don't want to have the mind of not wanting to marry again. And I was having feeling of hatred, I hated myself. So, I went there to help myself not about the marriage [...] Every woman looked like a violent person. I don't want to see women as that. But after the counseling my psychology changed, and I saw women as good people (Shadrach, married/divorced).

Ten others got helped through on-air media counseling programs. Justin recalled that listening to a media counseling program helped him overcome feelings of guilt and self-blame, allowing him to move on and feel happy, transformed, and free.

[...] I just felt like maybe I have done something wrong because some people will tell you that you could have exercised patience more 'na'. But when I started listening to that program, I just said I don't care what anybody says. It was like an eye-opener. I was very happy. Every Saturday I must listen to the program. I don't joke with it. It has transformed my life so much and made me realize a lot of things and I really bless God for that (Justin, dated/separated).

Furthermore, Akpabio discovered that his ex-wife was not only alienating him but also attempting to flee with their child.

Strangely I now discovered again that she had been trying to run away with my daughter to go and meet an ex-boyfriend. [...] Had it been the passport of the child didn't need the signature of the father, she would have gone (Akpabio, married/separated).

Consequently, Akpabio reported her to NAPTIP (The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons). With police assistance, NAPTIP ensured that the child could not leave the country without his approval.

I gave a report against her to NAPTIP that is national agency for trafficking in person. They started the investigation. [...] They now asked her to go and bring her travelling documents. [...] So, the police officer advised me to go and get my daughter passport and keep. [...] So, those ones took the passport and flagged it. Should anybody come to request for another passport that is not you, the person will be arrested. And if anybody travels with her right now across any of the exit points across West Africa border, that person will be arrested (Akpabio, married/divorced).

Similarly, due to the threats he faced, Adebayo left his home for safety and reported his wife and her friends to the court.

It got to a point that they started coming to sleep in my house. But that time, I have left the house for my own dear life and to avoid physical confrontation. [...] I had to report them in the court. It was part of the document that I submitted in the court. So especially one of them who made that statement that they're going to deal with me [...] (Adebayo, married/separated).

Interacting with NAPTIP, police and the court did not always yield the desired outcomes. Four victims reported experiencing negative emotions such as hopelessness, anxiety, and helplessness during this process. For example, while the police suggested that Akpabio flag his child's passport to prevent unauthorized travel, they also intended to arrest his ex-wife, pending his approval. Akpabio felt conflicted about this decision, as it could result in his daughter being placed in foster

care, which deeply concerned him. Consequently, he experienced heightened anxiety, powerlessness, and elevated blood pressure.

They [*NAPTIP*] are only waiting on [*for*] me to give them the go ahead. That if I give them the go ahead, they will arrest her. But the downside of it is that, if they arrest her, they will take my daughter, they will go and put her in a more like a foster care. And she might stay in their custody for so long with other things and that might affect her [...] It was a whole lot of mixed feeling dealing with NAPTIP. [...] I felt really powerless, there was so much anxiety around me which I had to preach to myself and tell myself to calm down because it was beginning to affect my BP [*blood pressure*]. So, there was a lot of helplessness (Akpabio, married/divorced).

Similarly, Adebayo expressed dissatisfaction with the court's delayed handling of his divorce case, stating that this has led to constant worry.

It is abnormal. I've gotten from that time till now, I've gotten about thirteen adjournment dates without progress. And each one, at times each one will be like two-month interval. The least will be one month and without a movement. [...] but this delay now, this delay practice now is the one that is causing another serious eh [...] thinking for me [...] (Adebayo, married/separated).

Additionally, due to the threats and his inability to compel his ex-wife to leave, Otunba contacted the police and the Ministry of Justice. He explained that the commissioner of police has refused to respond to his complaints.

I couldn't help myself. I couldn't enforce the judgement myself. I have no help to enforcement of judgement. When the person is a stubborn person and doesn't want to obey the government, at least somebody must be there to enforce it. I have written to

commissioner of police; I have written to minister of justice. I do post it; I registered it online till it gets to them. [...] I know that myself [*as an ex-police officer*], that it is part of police to enforce court order but then he has refused [...] (Otunba, married/divorced).

Some victims also relied on their informal support systems. Otunba explained that after the justice department refused to assist him, he turned to his in-laws and natal family. Despite their efforts to persuade her to leave peacefully, they were unsuccessful.

Even today, I have called the most senior man in their house the family head, the papa was begging me. [...] You know, my father and mother are gone [...] The most senior person is my mother's elder sister, she has spoken to her of course, [...] but she has refused to leave (Otunba, married/divorced).

Again, Akpabio noted that his natal family provided significant support during his encounters with his ex-wife and the justice system.

Well, as it is, my family have been the one giving me the most support so far. I have a sister who is a bit high ranking in civil service in Nigeria. She said that she will give them a long rope to pull and not jump into the whole matter yet. But everything I am doing and every step I am taking are right. I should go ahead. I should secure myself. I should secure my daughter [...] (Akpabio, married/divorced).

Not all victims received support from their informal networks post-separation. Four victims noted that some friends were unsupportive. For instance, Patrick explained that some of his Christian friends deserted him due to their opposition to his divorce.

I lost close friends. They were friends in the Christian faith who they believe that marriage is till you die. [...] So, I have some of my friends, they don't talk with me again, they don't

relate with me again [...] But, there were set of friends that there were really very helpful.

[...] So, I lost friends, and I still kept some of my friends [...] (Patrick, married/divorced).

Patrick recalled feeling deep sadness due to his friends' abandonment and their changed perception of him. “[...] The way they’ve looked at me like someone that is up there, they won’t look at me that way again, so I will feel bad of course, I felt bad” (Patrick, married/divorced).

3.3.7. Benevolent reappraisal: Lesson learned

Most victims reported that their experiences have provided a deeper understanding of intimate relationships and will help them avoid similar mistakes in the future. For instance, Patrick acknowledged that he knew little about marriage before he got married. He has since learned from his experience and feels he will be wiser in future relationships. While he anticipates falling in love again, he will not fully commit, stating he would ask more questions and end the relationship at the first sign of unacceptable behavior.

Remember you learn from your mistakes, you learn one or two things, because I felt that I was not... One of my errors was that I was not well informed about what marriage is all about. So, I believe if I’m going to go into any relationship, [...] I think I will not give my heart [...] Of course, I will have to love anyway, love again. I’m not praising my job in loving any woman, but I think I’m going to be much wiser. Ask more questions and then discuss, communicate more. And if I feel anything like later impediment, eh obstructing behavior from the other side, I’m calling it off immediately, no second chance, no story, no explanation, [...] (Patrick, married/divorced).

Six victims acknowledged that the abuse was not entirely their partner's fault, recognizing areas where they could improve. They viewed this as a lesson for future relationships. Shadrach, for

example, noted that he had expected too much from his ex-wife and hopes to manage his expectations better and overlook some behaviors in future partnerships.

Love is when you can overlook. There are certain things that if I marry again now, I can overlook even. Maybe I expected too much from my ex-wife. Maybe I should expect less of human. So, when I get more, it will be okay. But if I expect more and she is doing less I will feel bad [...] (Shadrach, married/divorced).

Similarly, Obed aims to be more tolerant, recognizing that every relationship has its challenges.

[...] so at least in the future if I happen to experience somebody like this one, but all those antics, I will be able to manage issues like that, because as long as I want to have my own family, issues like this will come up [...] (Obed, dated/separated).

With a religious and spiritual undertone, fourteen victims viewed their experiences as part of God's plan to help them understand marriage for better future relationships. Seven of these victims explained that this perspective instilled hope, alleviating their depression and fostering happiness. Kingsley believes the abuse had an evil foundation but sees it as a lesson permitted by God, leading him to feel hopeful rather than sad or depressed.

[...] I know God will permit them to teach me some lessons. And also, I learnt a lot of lessons. Well, I do have believe that these things are from evil foundation. But nevertheless, I also know that God will permit somethings to help his people for certain reasons and I have that hope. Currently, I am not feeling sad or depressed anymore because of the hope I have [...] (Kingsley, married/separated).

Similarly, Adeola expresses gratitude for his experiences, believing they were allowed by God to help him understand how to manage issues with himself and his partner.

God allowed it to happen for me to learn of different things that actually happened in relationships and marriages and the way we can actually manage issues like that either from her own part or that her partner. That's the only thought I had [...] I feel happy to be honest [...] (Adeola, married/divorced).

4. Discussion

This study is, to our knowledge, the first to examine the post-separation experiences and coping of African male victims of IPV. The article underscores that separation and divorce do not equate to liberation from victimization, as significant and persistent challenges continue to affect victims (Dziewa & Glowacz, 2022; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017). In line with the findings of previous research, the “haunted self” in this study metaphorically represents the challenges faced by victims’ post-separation, including ongoing impacts on their physical and mental well-being (Bates, 2019a; Dixon et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020), and continuous victimization (Bates, 2019a; Dziewa & Glowacz, 2022; Hay et al., 2023; Sita & Dear, 2020). Consistent with this study, several studies have demonstrated that post-separation male victims just like female victims are more likely to develop mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and high blood pressure (Bates, 2019a, 2019b; Dixon et al., 2020; Machado et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020; Sita & Dear, 2020). Furthermore, evidence from this study which supports previous research shows that male victims also experienced continuous victimization like repeated threats and child alienation (Bates, 2019a; Bates & Talor, 2021; Hay et al., 2023; Li, 2023; Tutty et al., 2024). Continuous victimization in this study harmed the mental well-being of victims, mirroring past research that links such trauma to adverse health outcomes, including elevated rates of PTSD and depression among female and male victims (Bates, 2019a; Dziewa & Glowacz, 2022; Hay et al., 2023; Spearman et al., 2023; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017). Consistent with previous studies, male victims experience a “changed self,” struggling to rebuild their lives and regain safety and autonomy due

to trauma and emotional scars (Bates, 2019a, 2019b; Brooks et al., 2017; Dim, 2020; Park et al., 2020). Research indicates that victims often develop distrust and diminished affection for women, complicating their ability to form new relationships (Dim, 2020; Park et al., 2020). When they do attempt to connect, they frequently feel nervous, jumpy, and overly alert (Bates, 2019a, 2019b; Brooks et al., 2017; Dim, 2020; Park et al., 2020).

Victims employed both maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies to confront their "haunted and changed self" post-separation. Maladaptive strategies, including binge eating, self-loathing, regrets, and self-blame, worsened their physical and mental health. Previous studies on male victims postseparation experiences have rarely explored the link between binge, eating, self-blame, self-loathing, and mental well-being (Bates, 2019a; Bates & Talor, 2021). For instance, binge eating which caused significant weight loss in our study has also been observed among female victims in the USA (Holmes et al., 2024; Lacey et al., 2015). More so, our findings align with research on female victims, indicating that self-blame contributes to psychological distress, including sadness and depression (Clements & Sawhney, 2000; Erb, 2016; Folkman, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Consistent with previous findings, some victims reported significant improvements in well-being after seeking formal help, such as counseling, others had mixed experience with the justice system (Bates & Taylor, 2021). For instance, some victims expressed satisfaction with how their cases were handled but still felt trapped, leading to hopelessness, helplessness, and high blood pressure (Bates & Taylor, 2021; Hines & Douglas, 2015). A notable example involved a victim who encountered significant challenges in securing child custody from his partner. He faced the daunting decision of whether to arrest her after she attempted to leave the country with their child without his consent, leading to considerable physical and psychological distress. Female victims

reported similar mixed experiences; while they found the family court frustrating and faced minimization of their allegations, they acknowledged the police's responsiveness (Hay et al., 2023; Zeoli et al., 2013). Other factors rarely described in the past studies on post-separation among male victims, such as delayed court judgments and inadequate support, also contributed to feelings of sadness and depression among male victims. Additionally, victims reported receiving mixed reactions from their informal social support networks, including family and friends. This finding aligns with previous research on both male and female victims (Dziwka & Glowacz, 2022), highlighting the varied responses victims encounter from their closest relationships post-separation. Furthermore, research on male victims' post-separation experiences has seldom examined influential factors such as benevolent reappraisal and lessons learned, which this study found to promote positive outcomes and transform victims' perspectives on intimate relationships. Notably, when overly emphasized, lessons learned can adversely affect victims' views on relationships and marriage. Additionally, coping strategies like crying and binge eating, identified in this study, are rarely documented in this population's post-separation experiences..

4.1.Implications for policy, practice, and research

A multifaceted approach is vital to address the post-separation experiences of male IPV victims. Like female victims, male victims often experience long-term physical and mental health challenges and ongoing victimization. Policymakers in Nigeria should mandate therapy for both victims and perpetrators during the separation or divorce process to facilitate smoother transitions. Our findings, consistent with previous studies, indicate that counseling is crucial for victims' healing. Healing is essential to break the cycle of abuse, as victims can become aggressive and hyper-vigilant in new relationships, leading to premature breakdowns. This approach not only supports victims but also addresses triggers for perpetrators, helping to prevent future violence.

Collaboration among policymakers, practitioners like family therapists, social workers, and counseling psychologists, and researchers is necessary to design effective therapy sessions. Without mandatory therapy, victims may resort to maladaptive coping strategies. Through the therapy sessions, victims can be helped to view intimate relationships as positive rather than burdensome. Therapists or counselors should encourage victims to connect with their spirituality and reappraise their experiences positively, as research shows this can be beneficial (Blake et al., 2018; Isangha, 2024c). However, caution must be exercised as excessive reframing can be counterproductive.

The Nigerian criminal justice system, including courts and police, requires ongoing training to effectively handle post-separation issues. They must understand that their actions can either support or exacerbate victims' emotions. Policymakers should strengthen IPV and child custody laws and empower law enforcement to ensure critical decisions, such as arrests, do not depend solely on victims, who may be conflicted. Courts and police need to act swiftly in response to victims' pleas for help. To achieve this, collaboration among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners is essential for establishing best practices in training. Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative studies are necessary to confirm the connections between the "haunted and changed self" and coping strategies, enhancing the reliability of findings.

4.2.Limitations

This study not only contributes to the limited literature on the post-separation experiences of male IPV victims but also represents an under-researched context. Despite its strengths, there are notable limitations. All information was self-reported, which introduces potential biases and knowledge gaps. Additionally, the 2018 Nigerian Demographic Health Survey indicated higher

rates of male victimization in the northern regions, while our study focused exclusively on victims from the south. This exclusion was intentional due to high insecurity in the north (StatiSense, 2022; Wada et al., 2022). Furthermore, only one Muslim participant was included, which may not fully represent the post-separation experiences of male victims in Nigeria.

5. Conclusions

Understanding male victims' post-separation experiences is crucial for providing timely and appropriate interventions. Similar to female victims, this study reveals that male victims faced ongoing victimization from ex-partners, along with long-term physical and mental health impacts. Male victims' experiences can significantly affect their perceptions and attitudes toward new intimate relationships. Victims employed both maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies, with maladaptive strategies proving more harmful. However, adaptive strategies were not consistently effective. Benevolent reappraisal of experiences can be an asset for male victims' post-separation. Offering comprehensive therapy sessions for male victims and female perpetrators may facilitate smoother transitions post-separation.

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