



## Conceptualising and Policing Domestic Violence in Esanland: A Theoretical Analysis of Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Legitimacy

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This theoretical paper explores domestic violence (DV) within the sociocultural framework of Esanland (*Oto Esan*<sup>1</sup>), Edo State, Nigeria. It aims to critically examine how entrenched patriarchal ideologies, and cultural norms shape the perception and perpetuation of DV in this rural context.

**Methods:** Using patriarchal theory and the ecological Model, the study engages in a conceptual examination of DV as a culturally embedded phenomenon. It synthesizes existing literature, cultural narratives, and normative structures to interrogate how violence is legitimized and sustained within traditional gender hierarchies.

**Results:** The analysis reveals that DV in Esanland is normalized through patriarchal traditions that reinforce male dominance and female subjugation. These cultural constructs obscure the severity of abuse and hinder effective intervention. The study highlights the absence of institutional accountability, inadequate policing strategies, and limited community-based resistance, which perpetuate the cycle of violence.

**Conclusions:** DV in Esanland reflects broader ideological systems that require critical engagement and cultural reconfiguration. Addressing DV in this context demands a shift in gender norms, the development of culturally sensitive prevention frameworks, and the empowerment of marginalized voices.

**KEYWORDS:** domestic violence, Esanland, patriarchy, cultural norms, policing, gender

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

DV constitutes one of the most widespread forms of gender-based violence globally, cutting across social, cultural, and economic boundaries (Dahlberg and Krug, 2006; UNICEF, 2017; Weissman, 2007). DV is identified as a major contributor to women's morbidity and mortality worldwide, with profound physical, psychological, and social consequences (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000; Dahlberg and Krug, 2006; UNICEF, 2017; WHO<sup>2</sup>, 2012, WHO, 2013; Okenwa-Emegwa, Lawoko, and Jansson, 2016). While DV occurs in both developed and developing societies, its prevalence and social acceptance are significantly higher in contexts where patriarchal norms legitimise male dominance and female subordination (Heise, 1998; Williams, 2000; Jewkes, 2002; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Ehiakhamen, 2011; Heise and Kotsadam, 2015). An estimated 4.8 million women in the United States are subjected to physical and sexual violence by intimate partners each year, while approximately 2.9 million men endure comparable forms of abuse (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000; Basile, Smith, Kresnow, Khatiwada, and Leemis, 2022).

In sub-Saharan Africa, DV is often embedded within cultural practices and gender ideologies that frame violence as a legitimate tool of discipline and marital control (Heise, 1998; Jewkes, 2002; Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005; Antai, 2011; Heise and Kotsadam, 2015; Benebo, Schumann, and Vaezghasemi, 2018). Nigeria exemplifies this challenge (Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005; Fawole, 2008; Aihie, 2009). National survey data indicate that a substantial proportion of Nigerian women experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse by intimate partners, yet reporting rates remain exceptionally low due to stigma, fear of

<sup>1</sup> The word of Esanland.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organisation.

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retaliation, and distrust of formal justice institutions (Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh, 2000; Fletcher, and Weinstein, 2002; Fawole, 2008; Murray and Crowe, 2017; National Population Commission and ICF, 2019).

In Esanland, Edo State, DV is particularly underreported and socially tolerated. Traditional gender roles, kinship systems, and customary dispute-resolution mechanisms often prioritise family cohesion over individual rights, thereby silencing victims and shielding perpetrators from accountability. Despite the domestication of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) in Edo State in 2021, enforcement remains weak in rural areas, where policing is constrained by limited resources and cultural resistance.

This paper critically examines DV in Esanland, focusing on its forms, causes, and the challenges of policing abuse within a culturally conservative setting. By integrating Patriarchal Theory and the Ecological Model, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how cultural norms and institutional failures intersect to sustain DV. The paper further proposes context-sensitive strategies for strengthening prevention, protection, and policing mechanisms.

### 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION

DV remains a pervasive and deeply entrenched issue across global societies. Alarming, it ranks as the third leading cause of death among women of childbearing age in marital or cohabiting relationships (Hamber, 2000; Dahlberg, and Krug 2006; WHO, 2012, WHO, 2013). In many African contexts, the persistence of DV is largely sustained by deeply rooted patriarchal systems that reinforce male authority and suppress female agency (Okojie, 1994; Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022; Esanland.org, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, available data indicates that roughly two-thirds of women are subjected to violence perpetrated by individuals with whom they share close personal relationships (Amole, Bello, Odoh, Aliyu, and Iliyasu, 2016; Oyediran and Feyisetan, 2017). Among these, around 65% of literate women report experiencing such abuse, compared to about 55% of their less-educated or low-income counterparts (Fulu, Kerr-Wilson, Lang, Gibbs, Jacobson, and Jewkes, 2014; Abayomi, 2014; Awoniye, 2019; Juliet Ike, Ezekiel Jidong, and Ebi Ayobi, 2023; Sakifu, 2023). Despite the high prevalence, a staggering 97.2% of affected women reportedly do not report these incidents to authorities (Abayomi and Olabode, 2013; Abayomi, 2014; Amole, Bello, Odoh, Aliyu, and Iliyasu, 2016; Oyediran and Feyisetan, 2017; Omidoyin, 2018; Patience, 2024) reflecting not only institutional gaps but also the pervasive societal acceptance of DV.

These trends highlight how perceptions and responses to DV are shaped by cultural norms and vary across national contexts (Cavalin, 2010; Abayomi and Olabode, 2013; Abayomi, 2014; Amole, Bello, Odoh, Aliyu, and Iliyasu, 2016; Oyediran and Feyisetan, 2017; Omidoyin, 2018; Patience, 2024). In many Nigerian communities, DV is often viewed not as a criminal act, but as a legitimate method of discipline within the marital relationship (Okojie, 1994; Eromonsele, 2018; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022). Within certain cultural contexts, it is deemed acceptable for a husband to physically discipline or chastise his wife as a form of corrective action (de Munck, and Korotayev, 2007; Okenwa-Emegwa, Lawoko, and Jansson, 2016). This perception is less common in developed societies, where legal and social systems more actively discourage and penalise spousal abuse (Goldfarb, 2002; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Cavalin, 2010; Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh, 2000).

One of the more drastic consequences of DV is marital dissolution. While divorce is generally viewed as undesirable, given that most couples enter marriage with the intention of long-term partnership, it can also serve as a protective strategy for victims of ongoing abuse (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000; UNICEF, 2017; WHO, 2012; Eromonsele, 2018; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022). Divorce rates linked to DV are relatively high in several developed countries: approximately 50% in Canada, 65.4% in Russia, 61.2% in South Africa, and about 53% in the United Kingdom, with the United States reportedly having the highest divorce rate globally (Cavalin, 2010; Antai and Antai, 2008; Benebo, Schumann, and Vaezghasemi, 2018; Oyediran, 2021; Oluku and Abasiokong, 2024; Adegoke and Danbagai, 2024). By contrast, divorce rates in Nigeria appear to be significantly lower, although comprehensive official statistics are lacking (Cavalin, 2010).

Importantly, women subjected to DV are not merely passive victims. They often deploy various coping mechanisms, including seeking separation or divorce, as strategies for safeguarding their well-being and that of their children (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan, 2008; WHO, 2012; Fong, Hawes, and Allen, 2019). Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the perceptions and responses of married women in Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria, to DV. It also investigates the broader implications of these responses for the institution of marriage in this cultural context and highlights the importance of policing DV in Esanland.

DV is widely understood as a wilful, persistent pattern of abuse inflicted within intimate or familial relationships, resulting in physical harm, psychological distress, or social and economic injury. Rather than isolated acts of conflict, DV involves sustained behaviours aimed at exerting power and control over another individual. These behaviours may include physical assault, sexual coercion, emotional and psychological abuse, economic deprivation, intimidation, threats, and social isolation (Stark, 2007; Oladepo, Yusuf, and Arulogun, 2011; WHO, 2013; Basile, Smith, Kresnow, Khatiwada, and Leemis, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, scholars emphasise that DV manifests across diverse ethnic and cultural groups and disproportionately affects women, undermining their dignity and reinforcing their subordinate social status (Aihie, 2009; Ishola, 2016). It encompasses

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a broad range of abuses, including intimate partner violence, marital rape, sexual exploitation of children, and culturally sanctioned practices that cause harm to women and girls (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan, 2008; Ishola, 2016; Howell, Barnes, Miller, and Graham-Bermann, 2016; Fong, Hawes, and Allen, 2019). As such, DV constitutes a clear violation of fundamental human rights and bodily autonomy, with consequences that extend beyond individual victims to families and communities.

The contemporary academic and policy discourse on domestic violence gained momentum in the 1970s, largely through feminist activism that highlighted the structural roots of abuse in gender-based power inequalities. Feminist scholars argue that DV should be understood not as a private family matter but as a social problem embedded in patriarchal systems that legitimise male authority and female subordination (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Jewkes, 2002; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Murphy, 2009; Ogundeyi, 2025). From this perspective, violence functions as a mechanism for enforcing gender hierarchies and maintaining control within intimate relationships.

This structural understanding is particularly relevant in many African societies, where cultural norms often blur the boundary between discipline and abuse, normalising coercive practices within marriage and family life (Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005; Enato, 2021; Diala, 2024). Within the Esan socio-cultural context, domestic violence is frequently rationalised as corrective or disciplinary behaviour, reinforcing women's subordinate status and discouraging resistance (Okojie, 1994; Eromonsele, 2018; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022; Esanland.org, 2022). Such interpretations obscure the criminal nature of abuse, foster social silence, and contribute significantly to underreporting.

Although domestic violence primarily refers to abuse within adult intimate relationships, it frequently coexists with violence against children. Empirical evidence indicates that a substantial proportion of children experience sexual or physical abuse before adulthood, underscoring the intergenerational dimensions of domestic violence and its broader social implications (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan, 2008; Fulu, Kerr-Wilson, Lang, Gibbs, Jacobson, and Jewkes, 2014; Abayomi, 2014; Awoniyi, 2019; Fong, Hawes, and Allen, 2019; Juliet Ike, Ezekiel Jidong, and Ebi Ayobi, 2023; Sakifu, 2023). Taken together, these perspectives highlight domestic violence as a deeply entrenched social problem rooted in unequal power relations, requiring both legal and socio-cultural interventions to effectively address its persistence.

For administrative purposes, *Oto Esan* represents Edo State Central Senatorial District (Enato, 2021; Esanland.org, 2022; Orukpe, 2022). This region comprises of the following five Local Government Areas (LGA), "Esan North-East, Esan Central, Esan West, Esan South-East, and Igueben" (Osimen and Aisedion, 2021; Esanland.org, 2022; Orukpe, 2022; Amaechi, Obeto, and Okoduwa, 2024). Orukpe (2022) highlighted that the Esan tribal groups have been consolidated into a defined administrative structure within the five LGAs (Okojie, 1994; Edo State Government, 2013; Osimen and Aisedion, 2021; Esanland.org, 2022). The region is predominantly rural and inhabited by the Esan people, whose traditional social structures are deeply patriarchal. Authority is primarily vested in male elders and hereditary monarchs known as *Onojie*<sup>3</sup> (Okojie, 1994; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Esanland.org, 2022). Esan society is organised around age-grade systems, extended family units, and monarchic institutions, all of which reinforce rigid gender hierarchies (Okojie, 1994; Eromonsele, 2018; Enato, 2018; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022; Esanland.org, 2022).

Women are predominantly confined to domestic and reproductive roles, and their economic and social mobility is often curtailed by entrenched cultural norms (Okojie, 1994; Weissman, 2007; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022; Esanland.org, 2022). Gender roles prescribe female subservience, nurturing, and obedience, while male dominance within households is culturally sanctioned. Consequently, acts of violence against women are frequently perceived as legitimate disciplinary measures rather than as criminal offences. As observed earlier, DV in Edo State is significantly under reported due to a combination of stigma, fear of reprisal, and cultural norms that discourage public disclosure of private or family matters. Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) and Bronfenbrenner (2013), opine that an important element that influences and conditions people's life and their stage of growth is their natural features. This is true of the Esan people. The Esan people's perception of their environment informs their worldview and shapes their independent political and socio-economic life (Weissman, 2007; Enato, 2018; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022; Amaechi, Obeto, and Okoduwa, 2024).

The Edo State Statistical Yearbook (Edo State Government, 2013) highlights that the total land space of Esanland is 2,814.347 square kilometres while that of Edo State is 19,794 square kilometres and the land mass of Nigeria is 923,763 square kilometres (Itua, 2019; Orukpe, 2022; Esanland.org, 2022). Esanland is geographically bordered by Etsako to the northeast, Owan to the northwest, Orhionwon and Ika to the southwest, and Aniocha and Oshimili to the south and southeast. Its eastern boundary is defined by the River Niger (Ola, 2018; Itua, 2019; Okojie, 1994; Osimen and Aisedion, 2021; Enato, 2021; Orukpe, 2022; Esanland.org, 2022).

The present-day Esanland consists of thirty-five tribal clans, namely: "Amalu, Egoro, Ewohimi, Emu, Ekpoma, Ewossa, Ebelle, Ewu, Ewatto, Igueben, Irrua, Ido, Ifeku, Illushi, Irukpen, Iyenlen, Ogwa, Okalo, Opoji, Orowa, Oria, Ohordua, Okhuesan, Onogholo, Udo, Ubiaja, Ugboha, Ujiogba, Ugbegun, Ugun, Uromi, Urohi, Ukhun, Uroh, and Uzea" (Okojie, 1994; Orukpe, 2022;

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<sup>3</sup> The term "Onojie" typically refers to a traditional ruler or king among the Esan people.

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Esanland.org 2022). These thirty-five (35) tribal clans are also known as the 35 established kingdoms in Esanland (Esanland.org, 2022; Orukpe, 2022).

Orukpe (2022) observes that Nigeria comprises more than 350 ethnic groups, both large and small. He argues that scholarly attention has disproportionately favoured the larger tribes, often overlooking the smaller ones whose histories are subsumed within broader narratives (Orukpe, 2022). As a result, the documentation of minor ethnic groups, such as the Esan, tends to be superficial or inaccurately portrayed. In regions where the Esan reside, the Benin tribe is recognized as dominant, and Orukpe (2022) emphasises that academic focus on Benin often leads to the marginalization and erasure of Esan identity consequently, Esan remains invisible. The Esan are an ethnic group located in southern Nigeria, with Esan as their native language. Traditionally, their livelihoods include farming, herbal medicine, warfare, and hunting (Okojie, 1994; Ola, 2018; Enato, 2018; Orukpe, 2022; Esanland.org, 2022). The contemporary Esan society is thought to have taken shape in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when nobles and royal figures migrated from the Benin Empire to the northeast, establishing settlements known as *eguares*<sup>4</sup> among the indigenous populations they encountered.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Patriarchal Theory and the Ecological Model. These frameworks are employed to critically analyse the underlying causes, manifestations, and responses to DV in Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria. They offer insights into both the cultural dimensions and the broader systemic factors that perpetuate women gender-based violence and hinder initiatives aimed at its regulation and prevention.

#### 3.1. Patriarchal Theory

Patriarchal Theory conceptualises DV as a product of systemic gender inequality rooted in male dominance (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Williams, 2000; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Murphy, 2009; Ola, 2018; Ogundeyi, 2025). In patriarchal societies, social, legal, and cultural institutions reinforce male authority and female dependence, creating conditions in which violence against women is tolerated or justified.

In Esanland, patriarchal ideology is embedded in customary laws, marriage practices, and kinship structures that position men as household heads with disciplinary authority. Women's socialisation into submissive roles discourages resistance and reinforces acceptance of abuse. Patriarchal Theory thus provides a critical lens for understanding how cultural norms legitimise DV and undermine institutional intervention.

#### 3.2. Ecological Model

The Ecological Model, developed by the WHO, explains DV as the outcome of interacting factors at individual, relational, community, and societal levels (Heise, 1998; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, and Lozano, (Eds), 2002). Individual factors include exposure to violence and substance use; relational factors involve power imbalances within intimate relationships; community factors encompass social norms and informal justice mechanisms; and societal factors include legal frameworks and gender ideologies.

Applied to Esanland, the model highlights how patriarchal culture, economic insecurity, weak law enforcement, and social stigma converge to sustain DV. The model underscores the necessity of multi-level interventions rather than purely legal responses.

### 4. FORMS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF DV IN ESANLAND

DV in Esanland manifests in various forms and intensities, often perpetuated by deep-rooted cultural beliefs, gender norms, and socio-economic inequalities. While some acts of violence are overt and easily recognisable, such as physical assault, others are more insidious, manifesting in psychological, economic, and culturally sanctioned forms (Weissman, 2007; WHO, 2012, WHO, 2013; Okenwa-Emegwa, Lawoko, and Jansson, 2016). This chapter provides a comprehensive academic examination of the diverse forms of DV experienced in Esanland, with particular attention to how these abuses are normalised, legitimised, and sustained through tradition, patriarchy, and insufficient law enforcement.

#### 4.1. Physical Violence

Physical abuse includes slapping, beating, kicking, burning, and other forms of bodily harm. Such acts are often justified as disciplinary measures within marriage, particularly when women are perceived to have violated cultural expectations (Antai, 2011; Benebo, Schumann, and Vaezghasemi, 2018; Oyediran, 2021; Enato, 2021; Oluku and Abasiokong, 2024; Adegoke and Danbagai, 2024).

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<sup>4</sup> In Esanland, *eguares* refer to the various communities and kingdoms, each governed by an *Onojie*, the traditional ruler of that particular locality.

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### **4.2. Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence includes marital rape, coercive sex, incest, and child sexual abuse. Although criminalised under Nigerian law, marital rape remains culturally denied, as wives are expected to provide unconditional sexual access to husbands (de Munck, and Korotayev, 2007; Basile, Smith, Kresnow, Khatiwada, and Leemis, 2022; Para-Mallam, 2020; Diala, 2024).

### **4.3. Psychological and Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse involves humiliation, threats, intimidation, isolation, and verbal degradation. These forms of abuse erode victims' self-esteem and mental health, often resulting in depression and anxiety (Oladepo, Yusuf, and Arulogun, 2011).

### **4.4. Economic Abuse**

Economic abuse entails restricting women's access to financial resources, employment, or property. Economic dependency traps many women in abusive relationships and reinforces male control (Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Weissman, 2007; Fawole, 2008; Frost, Fawole, Okedare, Salawu, Kiene, Augusto, and Reed, 2023; Zamouri, 2023).

### **4.5. Culturally Sanctioned Abuse**

Practices such as widowhood rites, property dispossession, and forced remarriage constitute culturally legitimised forms of violence that disproportionately affect women (Okojie, 1994; Dibua, 2005; Chesler, 2009; Oladepo, Yusuf, and Arulogun, 2011; Osezua, 2013; Tsirigotis and Luczak, 2018; Enato, 2021).

### **4.6. Child Labour and Exploitation**

Another form of domestic abuse prevalent in Esanland is child labour, particularly among children from poor households or those fostered by extended family members. Children, especially girls, are often engaged in strenuous labour activities such as hawking, domestic servitude, or working as market porters. These forms of labour not only violate the rights of the child to education and leisure but also expose them to physical and sexual abuse (Nwazuoke and Igwe, 2016; Olusegun and Idowu, 2016; Charity, 2020; Okpara and Okoro, 2024). The economic hardship faced by many families often serves as the rationale for this exploitation, yet the long-term effects on the child's development are profoundly damaging.

In some cases, these children are not biological offspring but are brought in from rural areas under the guise of offering them better opportunities, only to be used as cheap labour. This situation parallels broader discussions on modern slavery and human trafficking within Edo State, where cultural practices such as *omonosemhen* (child fostering) are exploited for abusive purposes.

### **4.7. Neglect and Abandonment**

Neglect, particularly by male breadwinners, constitutes another subtle yet harmful form of domestic abuse. It encompasses the neglect of fundamental responsibilities such as providing food, clothing, housing, education, and medical care for family members. In Esanland, men who abandon their families or provide only sporadic support are seldom held accountable, often relying on extended family or the community to fill the gaps. Such neglect leads to severe physical and psychological consequences, especially for women and children, who are left vulnerable to exploitation and emotional trauma (Leeb, Lewis, and Zolotor, 2011; Goel and Kumar, 2024).

Neglect can also extend to emotional unavailability, where men distance themselves from the family emotionally and socially, compounding the isolation experienced by women. This form of violence is particularly difficult to police, as it does not leave physical evidence and is often viewed as a private or moral failing rather than a legal offence.

### **4.8. Widowhood Abuse**

Widowhood practices in Esanland also reflect a unique and often overlooked form of DV. Following the death of a husband, widows are often compelled to undergo degrading cultural practices such as enforced seclusion, head shaving, the wearing of mourning garments, typically black, and public insinuations or direct accusations of being responsible for their spouse's demise. These rituals are especially harsh when the widow has only female children or is childless. In many cases, the widow is dispossessed of her husband's property and may even be forced into "levirate marriage", being married off to a male relative of the deceased husband (Osezua, 2013). Such practices not only violate the widow's human rights but also exacerbate her vulnerability to further abuse and poverty. These culturally sanctioned forms of violence reveal how deeply embedded gender inequalities are in traditional practices, and how the legal and justice systems fail to protect women in such circumstances.

DV in Esanland manifests in various interrelated forms, physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and culturally sanctioned abuses, all underpinned by a patriarchal social structure. These abuses are often normalized and internalized within community norms, making them resistant to both legal redress and social intervention. Effective policing of DV in Esanland, therefore, requires a multidimensional strategy that not only addresses legal enforcement but also confronts the socio-cultural attitudes that sustain abuse.

## **5. CAUSES AND DRIVERS OF DV IN ESANLAND**

The persistence of DV in Esanland, is sustained by a complex and interconnected mix of cultural norms, economic hardship, substance abuse, entrenched institutional and social factors (Weissman, 2007; Eromonsele, 2018; Sakifu, 2023; Echeozo, 2023).

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These influences do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in ways that collectively reinforce patriarchal dominance, suppress the voices of victims, and normalise patterns of abuse within domestic spaces. An in-depth understanding of these causes is essential for developing effective policy, policing, and community-based interventions to mitigate and ultimately prevent DV in the region. Cultural traditions that legitimise male dominance and female subordination often normalise violence in intimate relationships (Williams, 2000; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Mshweshwe, 2020; Higgins, 2020). Economic insecurity and unemployment can heighten domestic tensions, with women in financially dependent positions particularly vulnerable to abuse (Weissman, 2007; Aihie, 2009; Okenwa-Emegwa, Lawoko, and Jansson, 2016). The misuse of alcohol and other substances further exacerbates aggressive behaviour within households (Fawole, 2008; Echeozo, 2023). Moreover, weak law enforcement structures, corruption, and limited access to justice contribute to underreporting and inadequate responses to incidents of DV (Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh, 2000; Fletcher, and Weinstein, 2002; Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005). Social stigma and fear of ostracisation also discourage victims from seeking help, thereby perpetuating cycles of abuse (Overstreet and Quinn, 2016; Murray and Crowe, 2017; Camp, 2022).

### **5.1. Patriarchal Cultural Norms**

At the core of DV in Esanland lies a deeply entrenched patriarchal ideology that legitimises male authority and female subservience (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Giles, Cureen, and Adamson, 2005; Murphy, 2009; Bojegahre, 2024; Ogundeyi, 2025). Traditional Esan cultural values and social structures firmly position men as the undisputed heads of households, vested with the authority to discipline their wives and children (Dibua, 2005; Holt, Buckley, and Whelan, 2008; Howell, Barnes, Miller, and Graham-Bermann, 2016; Fong, Hawes, and Allen, 2019; Enato, 2021; Ogbeni, 2024). This patriarchal positioning is often internalised as normative and reinforced by customary laws, kinship systems, and societal expectations. Conversely, women are expected to exhibit obedience, submission, and stoic endurance in the face of hardship, including physical and psychological abuse (Okojie, 1994; Dibua, 2005; Chesler, 2009; Oladejo, Yusuf, and Arulogun, 2011; Osezua, 2013; Tsirigotis and Łuczak, 2018; Enato, 2021). These gender roles are not incidental but are systematically cultivated through early socialisation processes, where boys are groomed for leadership, control, and dominance, while girls are channelled into domesticity, deference, and service (Williams, 2000; Ehiakhamen, 2011; Enato, 2018; Para-Mallam, 2020; Enato, 2021; Ogundeyi, 2025).

This deeply gendered socialisation entrenches male dominance and contributes to the normalisation of aggressive behaviour as a legitimate form of asserting authority within the family unit. The distinction between discipline and violence becomes blurred, particularly in communities where patriarchal values are dominant (Murphy, 2009; Ehiakhamen, 2011; Bojegahre, 2024; Ogundeyi, 2025). Consequently, domestic abuse is frequently framed as a form of correction or moral instruction rather than as a violation of human rights (Eromonsele, 2018; Williams, 2000; Ogbeni, 2024). The cultural acceptance of male entitlement is further institutionalised through practices such as the payment of bride price, widowhood rites, and ritual expectations of female silence and endurance, all of which reinforce notions of male ownership and control (Dibua, 2005; Diala, 2024; Oluku and Abasiokong, 2024).

Empirical research across Nigeria supports the correlation between strong patriarchal norms and increased tolerance for DV. Communities with heightened adherence to patriarchal codes exhibit significantly higher rates of domestic abuse and justification of such acts as disciplinary (Antai and Antai, 2008; Benebo, Schumann, and Vaezghasemi, 2018; Oyediran, 2021; Oluku and Abasiokong, 2024; Adegoke and Danbagai, 2024; Bojegahre, 2024). This dynamic not only perpetuates gender-based violence but also obscures accountability and prevents victims from seeking justice or support. In this context, patriarchal cultural norms serve as both a structural and ideological foundation that sustains DV, reinforcing women's marginalisation and vulnerability within Esan society.

### **5.2. Economic Insecurity and Dependency**

Persistent economic insecurity in Edo State, characterised by poverty, high unemployment, and widespread underemployment, contributes to the escalation of DV within households (Weissman, 2007; Adebayo and Joseph, 2024; Ikuteyijo, Zepro, Akinyemi, Probst-Hensch, and Merten, 2025). The inability of many men to fulfil culturally prescribed roles as primary providers undermines their sense of masculinity and self-worth, often resulting in frustration and aggressive behaviour directed toward family members (Weissman, 2007; Murphy, 2009; Mshweshwe, 2020; Adebayo and Joseph, 2024). Financial stress thus becomes a catalyst for household conflict, where economic hardship intensifies tensions and increases the likelihood of DV.

Concurrently, women's limited access to education, employment opportunities, and property rights fosters a deep economic dependency on male partners (Frost, Fawole, Okedare, Salawu, Kiene, Augusto, and Reed, 2023; Ikuteyijo, Zepro, Akinyemi, Probst-Hensch, and Merten, 2025). This dependency severely restricts women's capacity to challenge abuse or exit violent relationships, effectively trapping many within cycles of subjugation and control. The lack of financial autonomy not only sustains ongoing abuse but also reflects broader structural inequalities embedded in the socio-economic fabric of Edo State (Frost, Fawole, Okedare, Salawu, Kiene, Augusto, and Reed, 2023; Ikuteyijo, Zepro, Akinyemi, Probst-Hensch, and Merten, 2025). In this context,

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economic insecurity functions both as a driver and a sustaining factor of DV, illustrating the intersection between poverty, gender-based violence, and systemic inequality.

### 5.3. Alcohol and Substance Abuse

Alcohol and substance abuse are significant contributing factors to DV in Esan communities. The widespread consumption of locally brewed alcoholic beverages such as palm wine and *ogogoro* (distilled gin) has been strongly correlated with heightened aggression and violent behaviour within households. Alcohol serves not only as a disinhibitor but also as a trigger that escalates domestic tensions into physical and verbal abuse (Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 2013; Okenwa-Emegwa, Lawoko, and Jansson, 2016; Anyogu and Okpalaobi, 2017). Its accessibility and cultural acceptance in rural areas make it a common feature of everyday life, yet its impact on behavioural control is profound. Substance use impairs judgment, reduces self-restraint, and fosters impulsive reactions, thereby increasing the frequency and severity of DV incidents. In this way, alcohol and substance misuse exacerbate already volatile domestic environments and compound the risks faced by vulnerable household members.

### 5.4. Weak Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Despite the formal criminalisation of DV through the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) of 2015, the implementation of this legislation in rural parts of Edo State, including Esanland, remains markedly limited. While Edo State domesticated the VAPP Act in 2021, enforcement across LGAs continues to face significant challenges (Goldfarb, 2002; Shajobi-Ibikunle and Kassim, 2023; Zamouri, 2023; Ihunna, 2025). These include under-resourced police units, lack of gender-sensitive training, and a widespread preference for customary dispute resolution mechanisms that prioritise familial reconciliation over justice (Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh, 2000; Fletcher, and Weinstein, 2002; Naylor, 2010; Shajobi-Ibikunle and Kassim, 2023). Victims often encounter law enforcement personnel who are either indifferent to or unfamiliar with the provisions of the Act, leading to dismissive attitudes and inadequate responses. Moreover, traditional mediators and customary courts, which many rural residents rely upon, tend to reinforce patriarchal norms, thereby undermining statutory protections (Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh, 2000; Ehiakhamen, 2011; Anyogu and Okpalaobi, 2017). This legal and institutional weakness discourages survivors from reporting abuse and contributes to a prevailing culture of impunity, where perpetrators face minimal consequences for their actions.

### 5.5. Social Stigma and Silence

Social stigma remains a critical factor in the perpetuation of DV in Esanland. Victims in Esanland, particularly women, are often deterred from reporting abuse due to fear of ostracisation, community backlash, and concerns about bringing dishonour to their families (Murray and Crowe, 2017; Itua, 2019; Ihunna, 2025). Cultural taboos in Esanland surrounding divorce and the dissolution of marriage further reinforce expectations of endurance and silence, regardless of the severity of the violence experienced (Dibua, 2005; Eromonsele, 2018; Sakifu, 2023). Within this normative framework, social pressure to preserve marital unity takes precedence over personal safety and justice (Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh, 2000; Fletcher, and Weinstein, 2002; Miccio, 2005; Eromonsele, 2018; Enato, 2018; Enato, 2021; Sakifu, 2023). Consequently, many women endure abuse in secrecy, contributing to a pervasive culture of silence that enables perpetrators and obstructs effective law enforcement. This silence not only conceals the true scale of DV but also undermines institutional efforts to intervene and protect vulnerable individuals.

## 6. POLICING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ESANLAND

Policing DV in Esanland, Edo State, presents a multidimensional and deeply rooted challenge shaped by sociocultural norms, institutional deficiencies, and systemic underreporting. Although DV is criminalised under Nigerian law, and more specifically addressed through the domestication of the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) in Edo State in 2021, implementation in rural and peri-urban areas such as Esanland remains inconsistent, reactive, and constrained by limited institutional capacity.

Law enforcement agencies in Esanland frequently operate within resource-strained environments. Police stations are often understaffed and poorly equipped, lacking the necessary infrastructure and trained personnel to adequately address DV. Officers typically do not receive sufficient gender-sensitive or trauma-informed training, leading to dismissive attitudes, procedural deficiencies, and an overreliance on informal mechanisms such as family reconciliation. As a result, domestic abuse is often deprioritised in favour of crimes perceived as more pressing, such as theft or public disorder (Turner, Finkelhor, Ormrod, Hamby, Leeb, Mercy, and Holt, 2012; Hamber, 2000; Higgins, 2020). Cultural norms exacerbate the issue, as Esan society is deeply rooted in patriarchal beliefs that emphasise male authority, female subordination, and the preservation of family privacy. Within this context, DV is frequently regarded as a personal or domestic affair rather than a public concern. Victims, primarily women, are discouraged from reporting abuse due to fear of social stigma, economic retaliation, or being labelled as disloyal or dishonourable (Weissman, 2007; Osezua, 2013; Murray and Crowe, 2017; Enato, 2018; Frost, Fawole, Okedare, Salawu, Kiene, Augusto, and Reed, 2023). Community elders, religious authorities, and extended family members frequently intervene to mediate disputes, with the goal of preserving marital harmony rather than pursuing justice. These interventions, while culturally sanctioned, often prioritise reconciliation over victim protection and perpetrator accountability, undermining the deterrent effect of formal legal structures (Lewis, Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh, 2000; Fletcher and Weinstein, 2002; Naylor, 2010; Overstreet and Quinn, 2016; Camp,

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2022). The consequences of such weak policing are not confined to adult victims alone. Empirical studies have consistently shown that the safety and well-being of children are closely tied to the safety of their mothers. A woman subjected to chronic physical or emotional abuse may be unable to provide a secure and nurturing environment for her children, who may themselves become direct victims of violence or suffer the traumatic effects of witnessing abuse (Turner, Finkelhor, Ormrod, Hamby, Leeb, Mercy, and Holt, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 2013; Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter 2013; Fong, Hawes, and Allen, 2019). Children exposed to DV are at heightened risk of emotional distress, behavioural problems, and cognitive impairments, including anxiety, depression, and aggression (Holt, Buckley, and Whelan, 2008; Howell, Barnes, Miller, and Graham-Bermann, 2016; Fong, Hawes, and Allen, 2019). The overlap between DV and child maltreatment underscores the need for integrated policing that not only addresses the rights of women but also prioritises child protection.

A critical reform in policing strategy involves shifting from a victim-centred burden of proof to a perpetrator-accountability model. Law enforcement officers must be trained to recognise the complex dynamics of domestic abuse, respond sensitively and consistently, and take proactive steps to protect victims and prosecute offenders. Instead of placing the responsibility on battered women to repeatedly demonstrate the danger they face, state institutions must uphold their safety as a legal right, not a conditional benefit (Goldfarb, 2002; Fletcher, and Weinstein, 2002; Miccio, 2005; Zamouri, 2023).

While the domestication of the VAPP Act marks a positive step, its impact remains limited without systemic reform and sustained political commitment. Nascent collaborations between civil society organisations and local law enforcement, such as training workshops and awareness campaigns, have begun to lay the groundwork for more responsive policing. However, without robust referral mechanisms linking police with healthcare providers, shelters, social welfare agencies, and legal aid, survivors continue to face a fragmented and often hostile system of protection.

Ultimately, improving the policing of DV in Esanland requires a comprehensive, intersectoral approach. This includes the establishment of dedicated family support units within police stations, the promotion of culturally sensitive community engagement initiatives, and the integration of policing with child protection services. By confronting both institutional inertia and cultural complicity, such reforms can help transform DV from a hidden tragedy into a public justice priority, ensuring the safety and dignity of women, children, and all individuals in Esanland.

### **7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND OUTLOOK**

DV in Esanland is deeply embedded within interlocking cultural, social, and institutional structures, necessitating comprehensive and context-sensitive interventions. No single sector can effectively address the problem in isolation. Rather, a coordinated, multisectoral strategy involving law enforcement agencies, faith-based institutions, government, civil society, and the media is essential for both preventing DV and mitigating its consequences. The following recommendations outline key intervention pathways.

#### **7.1. Strengthening Law Enforcement and Legal Responses**

Effective policing remains central to combating DV in Esanland. Law enforcement agencies should establish specialised DV units staffed with officers trained in gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and victim-centred approaches. Such training is critical to shifting police responses away from informal reconciliation and toward protection, investigation, and prosecution. Although the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) was enacted federally in 2015 and domesticated in Edo State in 2021, enforcement remains uneven, particularly in rural communities. Courts should prioritise DV cases to ensure timely adjudication, while institutional safeguards must be strengthened to prevent undue interference by influential individuals. Transparent and impartial prosecution of offenders, including traditional and political elites, is essential to restoring public confidence in the justice system and dismantling entrenched cultures of impunity.

Community-based policing models should also be expanded. By fostering collaboration between police, traditional leaders, religious organisations, non-governmental organisations, and social welfare agencies, community policing can improve trust, encourage reporting, and provide survivors with coordinated support pathways.

#### **7.2. Engaging Faith-Based Institutions as Agents of Social Change**

Faith-based institutions wield significant moral authority in Esanland and occupy a strategic position in shaping family values and community norms. Their involvement is therefore indispensable to any sustainable intervention against DV. Religious organisations should institutionalise compulsory premarital counselling programmes that address healthy relationship dynamics, conflict resolution, gender equality, and the unequivocal rejection of abuse. Delivered jointly by trained counsellors and clergy, such programmes can integrate psychological insight with spiritual guidance.

Beyond premarital counselling, religious institutions should promote sustained ethical formation through sermons, scripture-based teachings, mentoring, and values-based education that emphasise non-violence, empathy, mutual respect, and shared responsibility within marriage. Regular seminars, workshops, and sermons should openly address DV, disseminate information on victims' legal rights, and publicise available support services, including shelters, healthcare, and legal aid.

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Pastoral visitation and early intervention strategies can also play a preventive role, particularly in conservative settings where formal reporting is uncommon. Trained pastoral teams and lay leaders should offer confidential support to families at risk, while religious organisations must demonstrate zero tolerance for abuse by enforcing internal accountability measures. Disciplinary actions, such as mandatory counselling or suspension from leadership roles, should be applied to perpetrators rather than shielding them, thereby reinforcing communal norms of responsibility and justice.

### **7.3. Media Advocacy and Public Sensitisation**

The media plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions and influencing social change. Media organisations should move beyond episodic reporting of violent incidents to sustained, socially responsible programming that interrogates and challenges the cultural myths and norms that legitimise DV. Educational content, such as documentaries, radio dramas, public service announcements, and community-focused discussions, can foster public awareness and promote gender-equitable attitudes.

Media platforms should also prioritise victim empowerment by amplifying survivors' voices in ways that reduce stigma, foster solidarity, and encourage help-seeking. Campaigns should clearly publicise available support services and reporting mechanisms. The involvement of respected public figures and community influencers in anti-DV advocacy can further reinforce a culture of zero tolerance.

### **7.4. Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment and Community Education**

Economic dependency remains a critical barrier preventing many women from escaping abusive relationships. Targeted policies and programmes aimed at expanding women's access to education, vocational training, employment opportunities, and financial resources are therefore essential. Economic empowerment not only enhances women's autonomy but also strengthens their capacity to resist abuse and seek justice.

Complementary community education initiatives should be implemented to raise awareness of DV as a legal and human rights issue rather than a private family matter. Sustained public education campaigns, delivered through schools, community forums, religious institutions, and local organisations, can gradually transform social attitudes and disrupt the culture of silence surrounding abuse.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Domestic violence in Esanland, Edo State, is not merely a private or culturally bounded phenomenon but a profound violation of fundamental human rights. It is sustained by an interlocking nexus of patriarchal cultural norms, economic dependency, substance abuse, weak institutional responses, and pervasive social stigma. Together, these forces normalise abuse, silence victims, and perpetuate impunity, producing a socio-legal environment in which domestic violence is both concealed and socially tolerated.

This study demonstrates that DV as experienced by women in Esan society constitutes a clear infringement of their human dignity and bodily autonomy. However, victims' perceptions of, and responses to, abuse are strongly shaped by cultural expectations of endurance, the sanctity of marriage, religious teachings, and communal pressures that discourage separation or divorce. Although marital dissolution is legally permissible, it remains culturally constrained by stigma and customary norms, revealing the limitations of universalist approaches to gender-based violence that fail to account for local socio-cultural realities.

Addressing domestic violence in Esanland therefore requires a coordinated, culturally informed, and multisectoral strategy that integrates legal enforcement with broader social transformation. Faith-based institutions, given their moral authority, must play a central role through premarital counselling, pastoral intervention, and ethical accountability to challenge norms that legitimise abuse. At the same time, state institutions must strengthen the implementation of existing legal frameworks, particularly the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act. This includes gender-sensitive training for law enforcement and the judiciary, improved institutional capacity in rural areas, and the impartial prosecution of offenders regardless of social status.

Media engagement is equally critical for reshaping public perceptions by challenging patriarchal ideologies, amplifying survivors' voices, and fostering public awareness of rights and support services. In parallel, women's economic empowerment through education, employment, and access to financial resources is essential to reducing dependency and enabling exit from abusive relationships.

Ultimately, this research underscores that domestic violence transcends the realm of private family life and must be recognised as a public justice and human rights issue requiring sustained structural and institutional reform. Effective responses must respect the cultural specificity of Esan society while advancing universal principles of gender equality and human rights. Only through such harmonised and context-sensitive interventions can the cycle of domestic violence be disrupted, paving the way for safer, more just, and more equitable communities.

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