

EMOTIONAL ABUSE AMONG WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN LAGOS STATE: IMPLICATION FOR COUNSELLING

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Abstract

This paper explores the incidence of emotional abuse among working-class women in Lagos State and its implications for counselling. The paper highlights the various forms of emotional abuse, including verbal abuse, isolation, and emotional blackmail, while also examining the root causes such as power imbalances, insecurity, cultural norms, and substance abuse. Emotional abuse in marriages is particularly prevalent, with long-term effects on the mental health, self-esteem, and well-being of victims. The paper further discusses the reasons women remain in abusive marriages, including fear, cultural pressures, economic dependence, and concerns about their children. It also emphasizes the role of counsellors in addressing emotional abuse by providing therapeutic support, promoting emotional healing, and empowering victims through techniques like Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), communication skills training, and conflict resolution strategies. The paper suggested that counsellors should engage in advocacy, continuous education, and collaborative efforts to raise awareness and improve support systems for victims.

Keywords: Emotional abuse, marriage, and Working-class women

Introduction

Emotional abuse, commonly known as psychological abuse, has emerged as a significant concern that impacts individuals' mental well-being, especially within intimate relationships and professional environments. Emotional abuse involves employing both verbal and non-verbal strategies to manipulate, intimidate, humiliate, or exert control over another individual, resulting in lasting psychological damage. In examining the experiences of working-class women, it is evident that the emotional abuse they endure can arise from multiple domains, such as their intimate relationships, professional environments, or societal expectations.

Lagos State, as Nigeria's commercial hub, showcases a fast-paced lifestyle that, alongside economic challenges, creates a distinctive array of stressors for working-class women. Many

women, while managing their professional and family obligations, experience an extra challenge of emotional abuse from partners, colleagues, or employers. This form of abuse can present itself through ongoing criticism, verbal humiliation, isolation, control over personal and financial choices, and threats, all of which undermine self-esteem, emotional well-being, and mental health (UNFPA, 2023).

The issue of emotional abuse among working-class women in Lagos State is notably alarming, given the interplay of gender expectations, economic limitations, and conventional family dynamics. The growing population and swift expansion of Lagos foster conditions in which women are anticipated to play a crucial role in family income generation, all while conforming to traditional patriarchal family structures. In these circumstances, women might encounter emotional abuse as a means of asserting control, particularly when their achievements in the professional realm confront conventional gender expectations (Soriyan, et al., 2024).

Recent studies have highlighted the prevalence of emotional abuse in various contexts, including intimate relationships, workplaces, and families. Research indicates that emotional abuse is a significant predictor of mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. In a study by Smith et al. (2023), it was found that emotional abuse in intimate relationships is strongly correlated with severe psychological distress and lower life satisfaction among victims. Fawole (2023) found that approximately 36% of women in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced some form of emotional abuse in their lifetime.

A longitudinal study by Patel et al. (2023) revealed that women who experience emotional abuse are more likely to develop chronic mental health conditions compared to those who experience physical abuse. The study emphasizes the need for early intervention to prevent long-term psychological damage. Emotional abuse not only affects the victim's mental health but also has significant social and economic implications. Women who experience emotional abuse are more likely to suffer from social withdrawal, diminished work performance, and financial instability (Doe et al., 2023). The economic burden of emotional abuse is considerable, with indirect costs such as lost productivity and increased healthcare utilization. The intergenerational impact is also notable, as children who witness emotional abuse are at greater risk of developing behavioural and emotional problems (Garcia & Hernandez, 2023).

Concept of Emotional Abuse in Marriages

Emotional abuse represents a particularly challenging form of abuse to recognise. It may be subtle and misleading or explicit and controlling. Ultimately, it undermines the individual's self-esteem and leads them to doubt their own perceptions and the reality of the facts. The primary aim of emotional violence is to dominate the victim by undermining, isolating, and silencing them, leaving the survivor feeling trapped. Individuals often find themselves too wounded to persist in the relationship, yet simultaneously gripped by a profound fear of

departure. Consequently, the cycle persists without end until a task reaches completion. Emotional abuse can be defined as any act or verbal attack on an individual's sense of worth or that causes psychological harm to another with the intent of exercising some form of control over the victim (Adikwu, et al., 2021).

Emotional abuse is a form of domestic violence and refers to any pattern of behaviour that victimizes a partner in a marital relationship by any means in order to exert control over them. Of particular importance to this study is the concept of emotional abuse in marriages, which is abuse perpetrated by a spouse, the victimizer or abuser to cause emotional harm and to exert control over the other partner who is the victim (Center for Diseases and Control, 2017).

Emotional abuse is a pervasive form of mistreatment that often goes unnoticed and unaddressed, particularly within the context of intimate relationships, unlike physical abuse. Emotional abuse can be subtle, involving manipulation, control, isolation, and humiliating comments (Kamaldeen & Sorriyan, 2024). It can occur across various demographic groups but is particularly salient among married women, who may find themselves trapped in cycles of abuse due to societal, cultural, or economic pressures (Sullivan et al., 2023).

Studies show that emotional abuse is prevalent among married women, with many experiencing such abuse at some point in their relationships (Johnson & Leitenberg, 2021). The impact of emotional abuse is profound and can lead to long-term mental health challenges, difficulties in forming relationships, and issues related to self-perception.

Forms of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse manifests in various forms, each with distinct tactics used by abusers to control, manipulate, and harm their victims. Understanding these forms is crucial for recognizing and addressing emotional abuse in different contexts:

1. Verbal abuse is one of the most common forms of emotional abuse and includes any language used to demean, belittle, or intimidate the victim. This can range from name-calling and insults to more subtle forms of criticism and sarcasm intended to undermine the victim's confidence and self-esteem. A study by Dutton and Goodman (2023) highlights that verbal abuse often occurs in tandem with other abusive behaviours, contributing significantly to the psychological distress experienced by victims.
2. Isolation involves the abuser systematically cutting the victim off from friends, family, and other support networks. This can be done by controlling the victim's social interactions, restricting their access to communication, or creating conflicts that alienate the victim from others. According to Stark (2022), isolation is a key tactic in coercive control, as it increases the victim's dependence on the abuser and makes it harder for them to seek help.
3. Emotional blackmail involves the use of threats, guilt, and fear to control the victim's behaviour. The abuser may threaten to harm themselves, the victim, or someone else if

the victim does not comply with their demands. This form of abuse creates a climate of fear and obligation, where the victim feels trapped and powerless to resist (McLeod et al., 2023).

4. Abusers often use humiliation and degradation to strip the victim of their dignity and self-worth. This can include public shaming, mocking, and derogatory comments about the victim's appearance, abilities, or character. Bennett and O'Hara (2023) note that this form of abuse can lead to severe self-esteem issues and contribute to the victim's isolation, as they may withdraw from others to avoid further humiliation.
5. Threats and Intimidation: this often associated with physical abuse, threats and intimidation are also key components of emotional abuse. The abuser may use threats of physical harm, legal action, or other forms of retaliation to instil fear and compliance in the victim. O'Brien and Davis (2023) emphasize that these threats need not be carried out to be effective; the mere possibility of their occurrence is often enough to control the victim's behaviour.
6. Financial Abuse: though typically categorized separately, financial abuse often overlaps with emotional abuse, as it involves the abuser controlling the victim's access to financial resources. This form of abuse can include denying the victim access to money, sabotaging their employment, or controlling their spending. By restricting the victim's financial independence, the abuser increases their control and limits the victim's ability to leave the relationship (Khan & Rahman, 2023).

Causes of Emotional Abuse

The causes of emotional abuse are varied and complex, often involving a combination of personal insecurities, learned behaviours, cultural norms, and external pressures.

1. **Power and Control:** A primary cause of emotional abuse is the abuser's desire to exert power and control over their victim. This can manifest in behaviours aimed at dominating or manipulating the victim, such as isolation, intimidation, and constant criticism. Abusers often feel a need to assert control due to insecurities or a fear of losing power in the relationship. As Kamaldeen and Soriyan (2024) pointed out, emotional abuse is often a tool for maintaining dominance, particularly in relationships where there is an imbalance of power.
2. **Insecurity and Low Self-Esteem:** abusers may project their own insecurities and low self-esteem onto their victims. This can lead to emotionally abusive behaviours such as belittling, mocking, or undermining the victim to make themselves feel superior. Dutton and Goodman (2023) highlight that individuals who feel inadequate or fear abandonment may resort to emotional abuse to keep their partner dependent and ensure their own emotional security.
3. **Learned Behavior and Family Dynamics:** Emotional abuse can be a learned

behaviour, often stemming from the abuser's upbringing or family dynamics. Individuals who grew up in abusive households or who witnessed emotional abuse may internalize such behaviors as normal or acceptable. This cyclical nature of abuse is supported by research from Nguyen and Pham (2023), which shows that many emotional abusers were themselves exposed to abusive environments during childhood, perpetuating a cycle of abuse across generations.

4. **Cultural and Societal Norms:** Cultural and societal influences play a significant role in the prevalence of emotional abuse. In some cultures, traditional gender roles and patriarchal values may legitimize controlling behaviour by men and subordinate women, making emotional abuse more common and less likely to be recognized as harmful. Ali and Ahmed (2022) discuss how societal norms that emphasize male dominance and female submission can contribute to the normalization of emotional abuse, making it difficult for victims to seek help or even recognize the abuse.
5. Mental health disorders can also contribute to emotionally abusive behaviour. Conditions such as narcissistic personality disorder or borderline personality disorder are often associated with traits like extreme jealousy, possessiveness, and a need for control, all of which can lead to emotional abuse. Bennett and O'Hara (2023) note that while not everyone with a mental health disorder will become abusive, these conditions can exacerbate tendencies toward controlling or manipulative behaviour.
6. Substance abuse is closely linked to emotional abuse, as it can impair judgment, reduce inhibitions, and increase aggression. Individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol may engage in emotionally abusive behaviours that they might not otherwise exhibit. Gonzalez and Torres (2023) found a strong correlation between substance abuse and the perpetration of emotional abuse, particularly in intimate relationships, where the abuser's altered state can lead to increased volatility and unpredictability.
7. High levels of stress from external factors like financial difficulties, job loss, or health problems can trigger emotionally abusive behaviours. When under stress, individuals may lash out at those closest to them, using emotional abuse as a coping mechanism to vent their frustrations or regain a sense of control. While stress does not excuse abusive behaviour, McLeod et al. (2023) suggest that it can be a significant contributing factor, particularly when combined with other risk factors like low self-esteem or substance abuse.
8. Gender inequality is a broader societal issue that can foster environments where emotional abuse is more likely to occur. In societies where men are often seen as dominant and women as subordinate, emotional abuse can be a method used by men to maintain traditional power structures within relationships. This systemic issue is often reinforced by cultural, legal, and economic inequalities that make it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships or seek justice (Khan & Rahman, 2023).

Risk Factors Contributing to Abusive Personalities

While abuse is not excusable for any reason, it is important to realize that some individuals may be vulnerable to being abused and some may have the propensity to be abusers. One dimension to examine when reviewing the causes and disposing factors to spousal abuse is the personality of the both the abuser and the victims. Factors responsible for increasing risk of having an abusive personality include having a history of abuse as a victim or an observer, untreated mental health issues, lacking social skills, struggles with self-control, having poor self-esteem, an inordinate desire for power, feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence.

In reviewing the aetiology of violence, it has been discovered that adults who had been exposed to violence as children either as victims or as witnesses were more likely to commit assault themselves. When children witness or experiences abuse themselves, they not only internalize these behaviours but are traumatized (Igbolekwu et al., 2021). This makes it more likely for them to lack healthy emotional regulation skills if the trauma is not addressed which can make them also react to stressors in future relationships in a very dysfunctional and destructive ways.

Nwabunike and Tenkorang, (2017) reported that women whose husbands were domineering were more likely to suffer from emotional abuse. Some studies identified abusers to exhibit narcissistic characteristics, anger and alcoholism when compared with non-abusers. Men who had difficult relationships with their fathers had the tendency to develop narcissistic tendencies and often have unrealistic expectations which are often not met in marriage leading to frustration and anger against their spouses. Some studies have identified spouse-abusers to be more often than not diagnosed with some form of personality disorder. In particular, individuals diagnosed with or exhibiting symptoms of Cluster B personality disorders were identified as high-risk individuals including an antisocial personality disorder with a lack of regards for the rights of others and difficulties in relational reciprocity (Wallace, et al., 2019).

Reasons Women Stay in Abusive Marriages

Women tend to remain in violent domestic relationships despite the damage to their physical and psychological wellbeing. The common question often asked is why do these women stay in the abusive relationships? Some models such as the individual psychological character and the socially oriented perspectives have offered many reasons including dependent personality disorder, tolerance for violence, learned helplessness, low self-esteem, depression (Amos & Chikhungu, 2021). Cultural, religious, and economic factors play a significant role in explaining why some women tolerate spousal abuse. Research also reveals some women fear being separated from their children, as well as lack the means to provide for both them and their children if they decide to leave the abusive setting (Little & Kaufman, 2002). Some studies have also revealed that a good percentage of women themselves believe that spousal abuse is normal and justifiable, believing that there's no marriage that doesn't have its own challenges hence their reason for staying with it (Agene, 2017)

Nwabunike and Tenkorang, (2017) identified three categories of women who do not

disclose intimate partner abuse: those who are willing to disclose but are afraid; those who will not admit openly but present abuse signs and symptoms and those who do not show any signs of abuse but live with it. Reasons attributed for non disclosure are similar to those explaining why women do not leave abusive relationships which include protecting children from abuse, scarcity of financial resources, women's psychological readiness to confront the abuser, lack of social or communal support as well as religious and social norms (Agene, 2017). Others include fear of retaliation, distrust of the country's justice system and ignorance of personal rights (Delahunty & Crehan, 2016)

Counselling implication

Counselling psychologists play a critical role in addressing the psychological consequences of emotional abuse. Their training equips them to provide a safe space for survivors to explore their experiences, validate their feelings, and develop coping strategies.

Through various therapeutic approaches, including Emotional Focus therapy (EFT), trauma-informed care, and supportive counselling, psychologists can help women reclaim their sense of self and agency (Smith et al., 2022). In addition to providing direct support, counselling psychologists engage in advocacy and education, raising awareness about emotional abuse and its ramifications. They assist survivors in navigating the complexities of their marital relationships, offering tools for empowerment and decision-making (Anderson & Miller, 2023).

Here are detailed ways counselors can use the aforementioned therapeutic techniques to reduce emotional abuse among couples:

1. Emotional Focused Therapy (EFT)

- a. Identifying Attachment Needs: Counsellors can facilitate exercises that help couples explore and discuss their emotional needs and fears, focusing on how these have shaped their behaviours towards each other.
- b. Creating Safe Emotional Expression: Role-play can be used to practice expressing emotions without blame. Counsellors can guide them in using "I" statements, such as "I feel hurt when..." to express vulnerability without defensiveness.
- c. Enhancing Emotional Bond: Counsellors may utilize structured activities that promote bonding (like sharing positive memories about their relationship), fostering intimacy and safety in the relationship.

2. Communication Skills Training

- a. Active Listening Exercises: Partners can practice active listening by taking turns speaking while the other listens attentively. Counsellors can introduce techniques such as summarizing and paraphrasing to ensure understanding.
- b. Role-Playing: Counselors can create scenarios where partners practice healthy communication techniques, such as addressing mundane issues constructively,

which helps them build skills they can apply in real-life conflicts

- c. Feedback Sessions: After communication exercises, counsellors can provide feedback and guide couples to reflect on their interactions, emphasizing what worked well and what could be improved.

3. Conflict Resolution Skills

- a. Identifying Triggers: Counsellors can help couples identify specific triggers that lead to conflict through guided discussions. This awareness helps in anticipating and managing conflict scenarios.
- b. Negotiation Skills: Through role-playing exercises, counselors can teach negotiation skills, emphasizing compromise and understanding each other's viewpoints. Couples can practice resolving hypothetical disputes collaboratively.
- c. Conflict Management Plans: Counsellors can assist couples in creating a conflict resolution plan that outlines steps they can follow during disagreements, fostering a shared approach to conflict resolution.

Conclusion

Emotional abuse among working-class women in Lagos metropolis is a pressing issue with significant implications for mental health and professional functioning. Counsellors play a crucial role in addressing this issue by providing assessment, validation, therapeutic techniques, and education. Their work not only helps individuals navigate the complexities of abuse but also fosters an environment conducive to healthy relationship dynamics. Through counselling, couples can rebuild trust, improve communication, and ultimately create a more supportive and fulfilling partnership.

Suggestions

1. Counsellors should pursue ongoing training and education in recognizing and addressing emotional abuse to remain current with best practices and therapeutic techniques.
2. Counsellors are encouraged to collaborate with other mental health professionals, social workers, and legal entities to ensure a holistic support system for individuals experiencing emotional abuse.
3. Counsellors should advocate for increased public awareness regarding emotional abuse, promoting understanding and available resources to help victims.

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