

MIGRATION, CONJUGAL STABILITY, AND THE ENDURANCE ETHIC AMONG NIGERIAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE UK, US, AND CANADA

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Abstract

Migration is one of the most consequential transitions a family can undergo, since it does not merely relocate individuals geographically but fundamentally restructures the social, relational, and cultural architecture of conjugal life. This study examines how migration shapes marital stability among Nigerian immigrant families in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, using a mixed-methods design that combined survey data from one hundred and fifty Nigerian immigrant respondents with thematic analysis of ten in-depth interviews. Quantitatively, a statistically significant association between migration and marital stability was confirmed ($\chi^2 = 24.67$, $p = .0001$, Cramer's $V = .41$). Communication breakdown, financial stress, and emotional distance were the most commonly reported marital challenges; however, sixty per cent of respondents reported stable or very stable marriages, which points to the presence of meaningful protective resources within these families. Thematic analysis generated four themes, namely migration as simultaneous rupture and refuge, the endurance ethic as a gendered cultural framework, communication as marital currency, and adaptive resilience as a multi-source process. Drawing on ecological systems theory, the strengths-based perspective, and postcolonial feminism, the paper argues that the endurance ethic, understood as the asymmetric cultural norm that women must preserve marriages regardless of difficulty, is both a constraint and a stability resource that social work practitioners must engage with culturally and critically. Substantial implications for anti-oppressive social work practice with Nigerian immigrant families are discussed, including ecological assessment frameworks, culturally informed intervention during the transition period, and the development of social work education curricula that adequately reflect the complexity of Nigerian immigrant family life.

Keywords: conjugal stability; Nigerian immigrants; endurance ethic; ecological systems theory; anti-oppressive practice; social work; cultural humility; marital communication

1. Introduction

Nigerian immigrants constitute one of the largest and most educationally distinguished African diaspora populations in the English-speaking world (Anderson, 2017; Okunade and Awosusi, 2023). An estimated two hundred and forty-four million individuals worldwide reside in a country different from their birthplace (International Organization for Migration, 2017), and Nigerians are among the most professionally accomplished of these, particularly in the health, education, and technology sectors of the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. However, the experiences of Nigerian immigrant families, and particularly the conjugal dimensions of their lives, remain underexplored in social work literature, and where they are explored it is frequently through deficit-oriented frameworks that position Nigerian culture as a problem to be overcome rather than as a complex system of values and practices that both enables and constrains family wellbeing (Adeniyi, 2022; Igbineweka, 2022; Okeke-Ihejirika, 2015).

This is a significant gap, and one with urgent practical consequences. Social workers in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Nigeria increasingly encounter Nigerian immigrant families navigating the complex intersection of cultural displacement, relational strain, financial precarity, and normative renegotiation. Documentation delays that separate couples for years, the loss of communal support networks, the pressure of remittance obligations to family in Nigeria, and the collision between patriarchal cultural gender norms and egalitarian host country expectations are among the structural and cultural forces that shape the marital lives of Nigerian immigrants (Amzat et al., 2022; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). Despite this, social work practice frameworks for engaging with Nigerian immigrant couples remain limited, and training programmes both in Nigeria and in host countries have been slow to develop culturally informed and structurally aware approaches to this population (Dominelli, 2002; Lyons et al., 2006).

Research has established that migration places significant pressure on marital relationships by severing couples from the extended family networks, community support systems, and cultural frameworks that sustain marriages in origin societies (Bucher-Maluschke et al., 2017; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). Among Nigerian immigrant families, this pressure is compounded by gendered cultural norms that this study introduces for the first time as the endurance ethic, the culturally embedded expectation that marriage must be preserved regardless of difficulty, with the burden of this preservation asymmetrically placed on women. The endurance ethic has not been previously named or theorised in the social work literature, despite its significant relevance for practice with Nigerian immigrant families.

This paper addresses that gap. It presents findings from a mixed-methods study of one hundred and fifty survey respondents and ten interview participants, generating statistical evidence and qualitative accounts of how Nigerian immigrant couples experience, navigate, and survive the disruptions of migration. It introduces the endurance ethic as an original analytical concept, proposes a three-phase communication trajectory model, and develops a multi-source model of adaptive resilience, all grounded in the participants' own accounts and oriented toward social work

practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interlocking theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding and responding to the conjugal experiences of Nigerian immigrant families. The first is Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which understands the individual as embedded within nested, mutually influencing systems. The microsystem encompasses the couple's immediate relational world, including their communication patterns, conflict resolution strategies, and daily domestic arrangements. The mesosystem refers to the relations between immediate settings, including the family's connections with church communities, friendship networks, and settlement organisations. The exosystem encompasses the external structures that affect the family without their direct participation, most critically immigration documentation systems, credential recognition processes, and employment structures that shape the material conditions of immigrant family life. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses the broader cultural values and normative frameworks, including the endurance ethic, patriarchal gender norms, and the host country's egalitarian legal and social frameworks that shape expectations and behaviour at all other levels. This ecological framework is particularly apt for the present study because it directs attention simultaneously to the internal relational dynamics of the couple and to the structural conditions that operate on the marriage from outside, resisting the tendency to locate marital difficulty exclusively within the couple's own behaviour.

Figure 1 renders the ecological framework as a set of nested systems surrounding the couple. The microsystem of the couple is encircled by the mesosystem of community and faith networks, the exosystem of immigration and employment structures, and the macrosystem of cultural and normative frameworks within which the endurance ethic operates.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems applied to Nigerian immigrant conjugal life

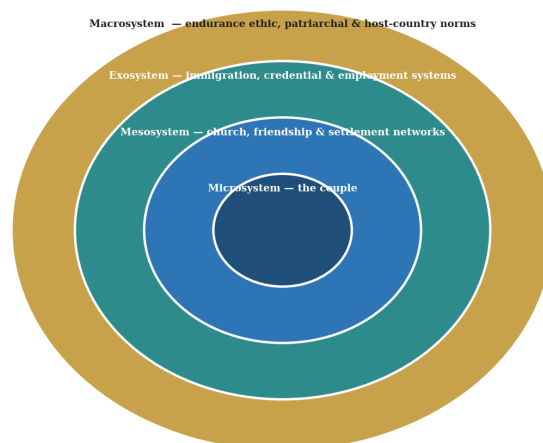


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems applied to Nigerian immigrant conjugal life, showing the nested systems within which the marriage is embedded.

Source: Authors' adaptation after Bronfenbrenner (1979).

The second framework is the strengths-based perspective (Saleebey, 2006), which resists deficit-oriented accounts of immigrant families and instead foregrounds the resilience,

resourcefulness, and adaptive capacity that Nigerian immigrant couples demonstrate. Saleebey (2006) argues that all people possess strengths that can be mobilised in the service of their own wellbeing, and that social work practice is most effective when it identifies and builds upon these strengths rather than cataloguing deficits. The quantitative finding in this study that sixty per cent of respondents maintain stable marriages despite sixty-eight per cent reporting migration-related challenges is itself a strengths-based finding that demands explanation in terms of what these families are doing right. Furthermore, the strengths-based perspective is consistent with African communal values of interdependence and mutual care, which means it is not merely a Western imposition but aligns meaningfully with the relational frameworks that Nigerian immigrant families bring from home.

The third framework is postcolonial feminism (Bahri, 2009; Guyo, 2017), which recognises that migration is not a neutral process but one shaped by historical power imbalances between Global South origins and Western destinations, and that Nigerian immigrant women occupy a specific and complex position within this power field. Postcolonial feminism insists on attending to the experiences of African immigrant women as neither simply oppressed by their cultures nor simply liberated by migration to the West, but as active agents navigating complex and often contradictory normative worlds. This framework is essential for understanding the endurance ethic without either pathologising it as simply oppressive or endorsing it uncritically as cultural tradition. Postcolonial feminist analysis holds the norm's ambivalence, its simultaneous constraint and enabling function, in productive tension, which is precisely the kind of nuanced engagement that social work practice requires.

This study introduces the endurance ethic as an original analytical concept emerging from the data analysis. While scholars have documented patriarchal gender norms in Nigerian society (Anugwom, 2009; Nwosu, 2012) and the persistence of marriages under difficult conditions (George and Ukpog, 2013; Igbineweka, 2022), the specific cultural mechanism through which women are asymmetrically burdened with the obligation to preserve marriages has not been named, theorised, or analysed in relation to social work practice. The endurance ethic is analytically distinct from related concepts such as marital perseverance, a gender-neutral term, cultural resilience, which implies positive adaptation rather than asymmetric burden, and gendered sacrifice in migration studies, which has tended to focus on economic dimensions. The endurance ethic specifically names the normative pressure on women to maintain marriages regardless of personal cost, and its ambivalent function, simultaneously constraining and stabilising, requires the kind of nuanced theoretical engagement that postcolonial feminism provides.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Migration and Marital Stability

Research consistently demonstrates that migration strains conjugal relationships, since the relocation process disrupts the social and emotional structures that sustain marriages, separating couples from the extended family networks and communal support systems that mediate conflict in Nigerian society (Bucher-Maluschke et al., 2017; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011). Among Nigerian immigrant

families, the challenges of documentation delays, financial pressure, and cultural disorientation generate sustained periods of relational strain (Adeniyi, 2022; Afolayan, 2018; Okeke, 2017). For instance, Adeniyi (2022) found that Nigerian immigrant couples in the United Kingdom and the United States frequently encounter role confusion and communication breakdown in the early years of settlement, a finding that resonates with the broader immigrant family literature on acculturation stress and its relational consequences (Adewunmi, 2015; Montazer and Wheaton, 2016).

However, migration does not uniformly damage marriages, and several studies have identified it as a transformative process that creates new possibilities for relational equity and personal growth, particularly for women (Ilo, 2010; Okeke-Ihejirika, 2015). The displacement from communal surveillance, the reduction of extended family interference, and exposure to host country norms of gender equality have been identified as conditions under which Nigerian immigrant women gain communicative agency, professional ambition, and greater decision-making authority (Akinwumi, 2023; Igbineweka, 2022). The question is therefore not simply whether migration is good or bad for marriages, but rather under what conditions, for whom, and at what cost migration affects conjugal outcomes. Communication has been identified in the literature as the single most important protective factor for conjugal stability among immigrant families (Ade-Oshifogun et al., 2019; Ngazimbi et al., 2017).

3.2 The Nigerian Cultural Context

Nigerian culture places a strong emphasis on marriage as a communal institution, extended family members participate actively in conflict mediation, and communal living norms mean that marital disputes are rarely purely dyadic affairs (George and Ukpog, 2013; Igbineweka, 2022). This communal architecture has ambivalent effects on conjugal stability. On one hand, it provides external support, accountability, and a framework of shared obligation that can sustain marriages through difficulty. On the other hand, it generates surveillance and interference that can constrain the capacity of couples to develop autonomous relational norms, and can expose private marital difficulties to communal scrutiny and judgment in ways that prevent effective resolution (Adaranijo et al., 2024; Amzat et al., 2022).

Nigerian gender norms are predominantly patriarchal in their institutional expression, men are positioned as breadwinners and primary decision-makers, while women are expected to occupy the domestic sphere as caregivers and homemakers (Anugwom, 2009; Nwosu, 2012). These are not merely descriptive norms but normatively enforced expectations with real consequences for women who deviate from them. A woman who speaks too directly, earns more than her husband, or questions household arrangements risks being labelled as deviant or a bad wife, a social cost that functions as a disciplinary mechanism constraining the communicative and relational agency of women. Social workers engaging with Nigerian immigrant families need to understand these cultural frameworks not as deficits to be corrected but as complex systems that clients navigate with varying degrees of agency and constraint (Dominelli, 2002; Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998).

3.3 Anti-Oppressive Practice and Immigrant Families

Anti-oppressive social work, as articulated by Dominelli (2002), requires practitioners to be attentive to the ways in which cultural, structural, and interpersonal power relations shape the lives of service users, and to practise in ways that challenge rather than reinforce oppressive systems. For Nigerian immigrant families, this means attending simultaneously to the patriarchal dimensions of Nigerian cultural norms, including the endurance ethic, and to the structural dimensions of immigration systems, credential non-recognition, and financial precarity that shape the conditions under which these families live. Dominelli (2002) further argues that cultural competence is insufficient without structural analysis, and that practitioners must be prepared to advocate for policy change as well as providing direct support to individuals and families. Cultural humility, as theorised by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), offers a complementary practice orientation, since unlike cultural competence, which implies the acquisition of a fixed body of cultural knowledge, cultural humility is a lifelong process of self-reflection, learning, and openness to correction.

4. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative in-depth interview data. This approach was selected because quantitative data alone cannot capture the meaning-making processes, cultural frameworks, and lived experiences that shape conjugal stability, while qualitative data alone cannot establish the prevalence and statistical significance of the patterns identified (Creswell, 2003). The integration of both strands allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced account of Nigerian immigrant family dynamics than either approach could provide in isolation.

The quantitative sample comprised one hundred and fifty Nigerian immigrant respondents recruited through a multi-pronged sampling strategy targeting Nigerian immigrant communities in the United Kingdom, namely London and Manchester, the United States, namely New York City and Los Angeles, and Canada, namely Toronto and Montreal. Data collection occurred between January and September 2023. Recruitment was conducted through three complementary channels, namely partnership with Nigerian diaspora community organisations, snowball sampling whereby initial participants shared the survey with others in their networks, and outreach through social media platforms serving Nigerian immigrants. Eligibility criteria included self-identification as Nigerian, current residence in one of the three host countries, age of eighteen years or older, current or previous marital relationship, and English language proficiency sufficient to complete the survey. Post-hoc power analysis indicated that the obtained sample size provided eighty per cent power to detect medium effects at an alpha of .05 (Cohen, 1988).

The structured online survey comprised five sections covering demographic information, migration experience, marital status and history, communication and relationship dynamics measured in part through the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen and Sullaway, 1984), and gender role perceptions including a four-item endurance ethic scale developed for this study. Survey validity was established through expert review by

three Nigerian social work academics and cognitive interviewing with five Nigerian immigrants not included in the final sample. Data were analysed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were generated for all survey items, chi-square tests of independence examined associations between categorical variables with Cramer's V reported as a measure of effect size, and multiple regression analysis identified significant predictors of family dynamics outcomes.

The qualitative component comprised ten semi-structured in-depth interviews with six women, designated P1, P3, P5, P6, P8, and P9, and four men, designated P2, P4, P7, and P10, residing across Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Interviews were conducted by telephone, recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim, with each interview lasting between forty-five and ninety minutes. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework, with coding conducted by two members of the research team to enhance the dependability and credibility of the analysis. Member checking was employed to support the dependability of the qualitative findings (Boyd, 2017; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study received ethical approval from the Federal University Lokoja Research Ethics Committee, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for multi-item scales, with the Marital Stability Scale returning .87, the Communication Patterns Questionnaire .82, and the Endurance Ethic Scale .79, all meeting the conventional threshold for acceptable reliability.

5. Findings

5.1 Quantitative Findings

The majority of respondents were aged between twenty-eight and forty-seven years, female, and currently married, while around thirty-five per cent had experienced some form of marital disruption through separation or divorce. The sample was highly educated, with the overwhelming majority holding tertiary qualifications. Of the one hundred and fifty respondents, sixty-eight per cent reported experiencing challenges in their marriage since migrating, and around seventy-five per cent affirmed that migration had significantly affected their relationship with their spouse. Communication breakdown was the most frequently cited challenge, followed by financial stress and emotional distance, as displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2 ranks the marital challenges reported by respondents since migration. The prominence of communication breakdown, financial stress, and emotional distance identifies the relational and material domains in which the pressures of migration are most acutely felt.

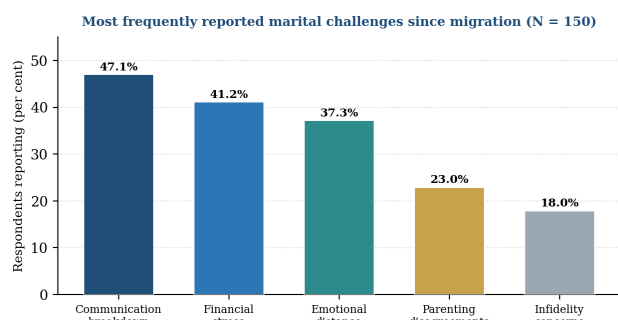


Figure 2: Most frequently reported marital challenges since migration among Nigerian immigrant respondents.

Source: Authors' field survey, 2023.

Despite these challenges, sixty per cent of respondents described their marriage as stable or very stable, while around twenty-three per cent described it as unstable or very unstable. A chi-square test of independence confirmed a statistically significant association between perceived migration impact and marital stability outcomes (chi-square = 24.67, df = 4, $p = .0001$, Cramer's $V = .41$), indicating a moderate to strong effect size. The juxtaposition of widespread challenge and prevailing stability, illustrated in Figure 3, constitutes the central empirical puzzle that the qualitative analysis seeks to explain.

Figure 3 sets the proportion of respondents reporting migration-related challenges against the proportion reporting stable marriages. The coexistence of these two figures defines the resilience paradox that animates the study, namely the maintenance of marital stability in the face of widespread and acknowledged difficulty.

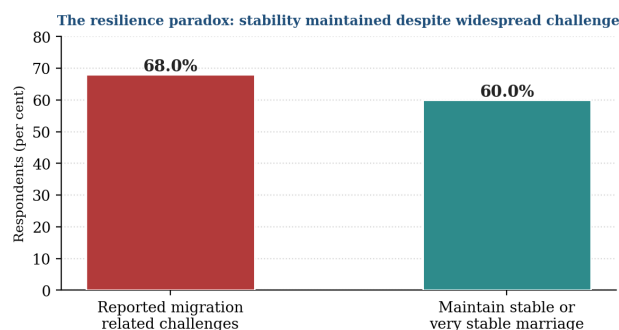


Figure 3: The resilience paradox, contrasting the proportion of respondents reporting migration-related challenges with the proportion maintaining stable marriages.

Source: Authors' field survey, 2023.

The multiple regression analysis revealed that cultural background, educational level, occupational status, and length of stay in the host country together explained around forty-seven per cent of the variance in family dynamics outcomes ($R^2 = .472$, $F = 32.67$, $p < .001$). Cultural background emerged as the strongest individual predictor, as displayed in Figure 4, which reinforces the centrality of cultural frameworks in shaping how Nigerian immigrant couples navigate the challenges of diaspora life.

Figure 4 presents the standardised regression coefficients for the four significant predictors of family dynamics outcomes. The predominance of cultural background over educational level, occupational status, and length of stay underscores that the cultural frameworks couples bring from Nigeria, rather than the structural

conditions of settlement alone, are the primary determinants of their marital dynamics.

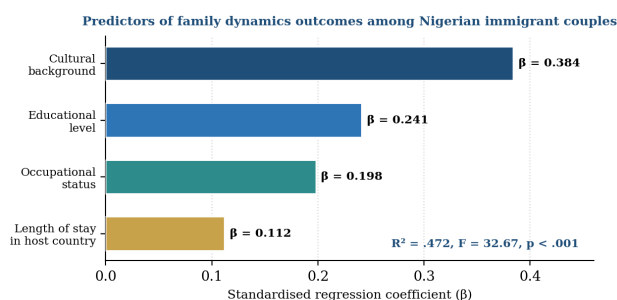


Figure 4: Standardised predictors of family dynamics outcomes among Nigerian immigrant couples.

Source: Authors' field survey, 2023.

5.2 Theme One: Migration as Rupture and Refuge

All ten participants experienced migration as simultaneously disruptive and liberating, and this dual character was the most consistent finding across the interview data. P1, a Nigerian woman who had joined her husband in Canada, gave the most vivid account of migration's disruptive force, describing profound social isolation and depression in the early post-migration period that placed the conjugal relationship under severe and unexpected pressure.

"It's more lonely... you just have that one person in your house. At some point it was depressing, especially for someone that just likes to make friends." (P1)

The loss of a social world rich with community ties, friendship networks, and extended family relationships was experienced by P1 as a form of social bereavement, and the forced dyadic confinement of early immigrant life meant that her husband became simultaneously her sole social contact and the primary target of her distress. However, migration also functioned as a refuge from communal structures that had constrained the marriage in Nigeria. P1 described with evident relief the removal of extended family interference, noting that migration gave the couple their own space to understand each other without external interference. P3 added a further dimension, describing the functional infrastructure of Canada as a marital stabiliser.

"Back home in Nigeria, a lot of challenges... When you come here, a working system, it makes it more stable, so it brings more peace to marriages when all the things you are praying for is already answered." (P3)

This framing repositions the familiar migration-and-stress narrative in an important direction, since for P3 it was not merely the removal of communal surveillance but the resolution of chronic material insecurity that made the host country a marital resource. Several participants also articulated what may be termed foreigner solidarity, naming the shared condition of displacement as a bonding resource. Within the dyad formed by displacement, a new form of marital solidarity was constructed that did not exist, and perhaps could not have existed, within the communal scaffolding of Nigerian social life.

5.3 Theme Two: The Endurance Ethic

P3 articulated, with striking directness, the cultural norm this study introduces as the endurance ethic.

“Most Nigerian families are oriented to endure marriages and also work things out. Because divorce is usually not an option, especially for the woman. In the woman aspect, women have to be patient and endure.” (P3)

The phrase concerning the woman is analytically critical, since the endurance ethic is not a gender-neutral cultural expectation but one applied asymmetrically, placing the primary obligation of marital preservation on women while implicitly releasing men from equivalent obligations of patience and forbearance. This asymmetry has material consequences, since it shapes how women name their experiences of marital difficulty, whom they feel they can approach for support, what they understand as legitimate responses to marital harm, and how they manage the social risk of being identified as wives who have failed to endure. Furthermore, the ethic operates not through explicit prohibition but through the internalisation of social expectations, which means that women often police their own endurance without external enforcement being necessary. This self-policing is precisely the mechanism that postcolonial feminism identifies as patriarchal power at its most effective and most difficult to name (Bahri, 2009; Guyo, 2017).

The endurance ethic does not operate uniformly across all Nigerian immigrant women, and the data suggest that its burden and its function vary significantly across class, religious, and ethnic lines, an intersectional dimension that deserves explicit attention (Crenshaw, 1991). Participants with tertiary education appeared to experience the endurance ethic with greater ambivalence, since their education provided them with alternative discourses and frameworks for understanding marital relationships. However, higher education alone was not sufficient to fully liberate women from the constraints of the ethic. Christian faith, particularly Pentecostal and Evangelical traditions, was invoked by seven of the ten participants as both reinforcing the endurance ethic and providing meaning-making resources that made endurance bearable. P3 also suggested that in Canada the working system ameliorates the material conditions that made endurance arduous in Nigeria, so that the ethic functions less as a burden and more as a resource, an important finding because it suggests that structural interventions supporting material stability may indirectly reduce the oppressive weight of the endurance ethic on women without requiring direct cultural confrontation.

5.4 Theme Three: Communication as Marital Currency

Communication emerged across all ten accounts as simultaneously the primary resource and the primary site of strain in immigrant marital life, and a traceable trajectory runs through the data from culturally constrained communication in Nigeria, through acute communicative disruption in the migration transition period, to the gradual emergence of more direct and emotionally honest exchange in the host country. P1 articulated the mechanisms of communicative constraint in Nigeria with particular precision.

“If people are older than you, you don't look at their face. Respect your husband. Sometimes when you want to express yourself, you consider: these are your people. You don't want to come out as that bad wife or something like that.” (P1)

The concept of the bad wife here functions as a disciplinary mechanism that constrains the communicative agency of women

through anticipated social judgment rather than direct prohibition, since women internalise the policing of their own speech in order to avoid violating the norms of femininity and conjugal deference. Migration to a context where women are recognised and there is less judgment dissolves this constraint at the normative level, even if the internal habits of self-censorship take longer to unlearn. However, the transition period paradoxically intensifies communicative difficulty before it begins to ease it, since forced proximity to the spouse produced emotional withdrawal rather than openness. Over time, however, all ten participants described communication improving in ways that reflected their particular relational circumstances. P1 located the turning point in her husband's growing comprehension of her adaptation process, while P2 described a post-migration shift to what he termed agreeing to disagree, and articulated an explicit discipline of reaching out to family before the end of each day. The three-phase trajectory of cultural silencing, communicative crisis, and transformed communication is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 presents the three-phase communication trajectory that emerged from the interview data. The model traces the movement from culturally constrained silence in Nigeria, through the acute communicative crisis of the transition period, toward the more direct and equitable exchange that develops in the host country, and it foregrounds the gendered asymmetry whereby women experience the silencing most acutely and the restoration most transformatively.

Three-phase communication trajectory among Nigerian immigrant couples



Gendered asymmetry: women experience silencing more acutely and restoration more transformatively

Figure 5: Three-phase communication trajectory among Nigerian immigrant couples, from cultural silencing in Nigeria through communicative crisis in the transition period to transformed communication in the host country.

Source: Authors' analysis of interview data.

5.5 Theme Four: Adaptive Resilience

All ten participants demonstrated what the data support calling adaptive resilience, a capacity not merely to endure the stresses of migration but to use them as catalysts for relational and personal transformation. This resilience was multi-sourced, drawing on Christian faith, spousal support, the enabling structures of the host country, community learning, and individual growth, and it is in the combination and mutual reinforcement of these sources, rather than in any single resource, that its power resides. The strengths-based perspective (Saleebey, 2006) is vindicated by this finding, since these are families that have survived extraordinary relational pressure not through luck but through the deliberate mobilisation of multiple forms of capital.

Christian faith was explicitly invoked by several participants as a stabilising resource across the adaptation process, operating at multiple ecological levels simultaneously, as a microsystem resource within the couple's shared meaning-making and as a

mesosystem resource through the social connections that church provided. Spousal support emerged as the primary relational mechanism across all ten accounts, though its character differed significantly between participants. P2 introduced the most explicitly social dimension of resilience, one that extends the model beyond the dyad, namely mentorship from longer-married couples, joint goal-setting across a five to ten-year horizon, and community building among fellow immigrants as structural supports for marital stability. This model of resilience extending beyond the couple into what might be called a community ecology of support resonates deeply with the communal values of Nigerian relational life, reconstituted in the diaspora context in new but recognisably Nigerian forms.

6. Discussion

The integrated findings from this study advance social work knowledge of Nigerian immigrant conjugal life in several substantive and theoretically significant ways. The data confirm the dual nature of migration as both disruptive and liberating, a finding consistent with postcolonial feminist theory's recognition that migration simultaneously disrupts the communal structures of the origin country and offers refuge from patriarchal constraints (Bahri, 2009; Walton-Roberts, 2004). The chi-square finding quantifies what the qualitative accounts render in lived texture, however, as the ecological systems framework clarifies, the directionality of migration's effect on marriage is not predetermined but shaped by the couple's prior relational resources, the spouse's pre-migration gender orientation, the availability of community support, and the structural conditions of the host country. Social workers should therefore adopt multi-systemic assessments rather than pathologising Nigerian immigrant couples as inherently vulnerable.

The endurance ethic represents a significant theoretical contribution to the existing social work and sociological literature on Nigerian immigrant marital life. The existing literature has tended either to celebrate the liberatory potential of migration for women or to document the persistence of patriarchal constraints (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Pessar and Mahler, 2003), however, the endurance ethic challenges both tendencies by naming a specific cultural norm that is simultaneously a constraint on women and a mechanism of marital stability. The insistence of postcolonial feminism on attending to the ambivalence of cultural norms is particularly apt here, since the ethic burdens women with the obligation to endure but also creates the conditions under which couples negotiate rather than dissolve, a process from which both partners may ultimately benefit. Anti-oppressive social work practice (Dominelli, 2002) requires that practitioners recognise this ambivalence rather than resolving it in a single direction.

The three-phase communication trajectory proposed in this paper extends existing models of immigrant marital communication by foregrounding the gendered dimension of communicative constraint and transformation. The trajectory is not gender-neutral, since women experience the silencing more acutely and the restoration more transformatively, because the cultural norms that constrain women's speech in Nigeria are asymmetric. This has direct implications for social work assessment, since practitioners working with Nigerian immigrant couples should be attentive to the communicative histories that women bring to their

marriages, recognising that apparent reluctance to communicate may be the residue of structural silencing rather than personality or, as is sometimes assumed in Western clinical settings, passive-aggressive behaviour. The multiple regression finding indicates that cultural background, educational level, occupational status, and length of stay together explain approximately half of the variance in family dynamics outcomes, and that immigration policy supporting credential recognition, expedited family reunification, and comprehensive settlement services is, in this sense, also marital policy.

7. Implications for Social Work Practice

7.1 Ecological Assessment of Nigerian Immigrant Couples

The ecological systems framework directs social work practitioners to assess Nigerian immigrant marriages at multiple levels simultaneously rather than focusing exclusively on the interpersonal dynamics of the couple. At the microsystem level, assessment should attend to the communication trajectory of the couple, asking not only what communication difficulties exist, but what phase of the trajectory the couple appears to be in. Couples in the communicative crisis phase require interventions focused on normalising the adaptation experience, reducing isolation, and building spousal attunement, rather than the more complex relational work appropriate to the transformed communication phase. At the mesosystem level, social workers should assess the connections of the couple to community networks, faith communities, and fellow immigrants, recognising these connections, or their absence, as significant determinants of resilience. At the exosystem level, assessment should attend to structural factors such as documentation status, credential recognition, financial obligations, and employment stability that shape the material conditions of the marriage.

7.2 Engaging the Endurance Ethic with Cultural Humility

The cultural humility framework of Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) is particularly relevant for practice with Nigerian immigrant families engaging with the endurance ethic, because the ethic is easily misread from Western clinical perspectives, either as admirable cultural resilience or as evidence of harmful enmeshment and internalised patriarchal oppression. Social workers need training that helps them hold the ambivalence of the ethic, recognising the stability function it serves, the relational investment it represents, and the conditions under which it becomes harmful, without either pathologising clients who adhere to it or endorsing uncritically a norm that places asymmetric burden on women. In practice, this means that social workers should avoid framing divorce or separation as the natural or progressive response to marital difficulty in Nigerian immigrant contexts, particularly in the early settlement period, while ensuring that women who are experiencing harm are not discouraged from accessing support by a deference to the endurance ethic that effectively reinforces the patriarchal burden the ethic places on women.

7.3 The Practice Paradox

The endurance ethic presents social work with what may be termed the practice paradox, since to challenge its oppressive dimensions is to risk undermining a cultural stability resource that many

couples rely on, while to accept it uncritically is to risk colluding with patriarchal burden and to fail in the professional duty of safeguarding women who may be experiencing harm. This paradox cannot be resolved through a prescriptive rule but must be managed through principled practice reasoning. Four principles are proposed for navigating this tension. First, social workers must distinguish between the endurance ethic as a resource and as a mechanism of harm, recognising it as a resource when couples are experiencing normative adaptation stress rather than abuse and both partners are actively working on the relationship, and as harmful when a woman is experiencing abuse, the burden of endurance is wholly asymmetrical with no prospect of change, or she expresses a desire to leave but feels unable to do so. Second, social workers must centre the woman's own assessment of the marriage and her safety. Third, social workers should address the structural conditions that make the endurance ethic burdensome, since the most effective way to reduce its harm is not direct cultural confrontation but the creation of structural conditions that give women genuine alternatives. Fourth, cultural humility is necessary but not sufficient, and must be complemented by critical cultural engagement that holds cultural frameworks in productive tension with safeguarding obligations.

7.4 Implications for Social Work Education

For social work education programmes in Nigerian universities and the wider African diaspora context, the findings of this study offer several concrete contributions to curriculum development. First, the endurance ethic and communication trajectory model provide frameworks for teaching students about the cultural architecture of Nigerian conjugal life in ways that are empirically grounded rather than stereotyped. Second, the ecological systems framework, applied to Nigerian immigrant family dynamics, provides students with a multi-level assessment tool that integrates cultural, relational, and structural analysis rather than treating these as separate domains. Third, the adaptive resilience model, with its emphasis on faith, spousal solidarity, community mentorship, and individual growth as interlocking resources, provides a strengths-based alternative to deficit-oriented approaches that position Nigerian immigrant families primarily as vulnerable populations in need of remediation.

8. Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample includes predominantly currently married individuals, which means that those who have divorced may have qualitatively different experiences that are underrepresented in the findings, and the role of the endurance ethic in marital preservation may be more apparent precisely because the marriages that survived were those where the ethic was most effectively enacted. The high educational attainment of the sample means the findings may not generalise to less-educated Nigerian immigrants, and the geographic concentration in major metropolitan areas means that findings may not reflect the experiences of Nigerian immigrants in smaller cities or rural areas. Marital stability was measured through self-report, which may not fully reflect objective marital quality, and social desirability effects are particularly relevant in the Nigerian cultural context. The cross-sectional design means that causal claims about migration's

effects on marriage cannot be established, and the qualitative sample of ten interviews, while sufficient for thematic saturation, limits the diversity of experiences captured. Finally, the requirement that participants speak English may have excluded non-English-speaking Nigerian immigrants.

9. Conclusion

This study has examined conjugal stability among Nigerian immigrant families in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, integrating quantitative evidence of migration's significant effects on marital outcomes with qualitative accounts of the cultural, relational, and structural processes through which those effects are navigated. Three conceptual contributions emerge from the analysis that have direct relevance for social work practice and education. The endurance ethic is introduced as a culturally specific marital framework that explains the persistence of Nigerian immigrant marriages even under significant stress, while attending carefully to its asymmetric gendered costs and the conditions under which it becomes harmful rather than stabilising. A three-phase communication trajectory is proposed, mapping the movement from culturally constrained silence in Nigeria, through post-migration communicative crisis, toward transformed and more equitable exchange in the host country. A multi-source model of adaptive resilience is developed that identifies faith, spousal solidarity, structural resources, community mentorship, and individual growth as the interlocking resources from which marital stability is constructed.

The dominant finding is not of marital breakdown but of remarkable resilience, since despite sixty-eight per cent of respondents reporting migration-related marital challenges, sixty per cent maintain stable marriages. Nigerian immigrant couples in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada are not passive victims of the disruptions of migration but active and resourceful architects of conjugal life across difficult terrain. Social work practice that recognises this resilience, engages with cultural frameworks through cultural humility rather than cultural competence alone, attends to the structural conditions that shape marital outcomes, and advocates for immigration and settlement policies that support family stability will be better positioned to serve Nigerian immigrant families. Future research should extend the geographic and demographic range of this study, pursue longitudinal designs capable of tracking the three-phase communication trajectory over time, and recruit participants who have experienced marital dissolution to address the potential survivorship bias in this and similar studies.

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