

Culture, Consent, and Silence: Addressing Marital Sexual Violence and Victim-blaming in South-South Nigeria

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Abstract

Sexual violence within matrimony remains one of the least recognised yet most pervasive form of gender-based violence (GBV), with profound physical, psychological, and social consequences that undermine women's wellbeing. In Nigeria, cultural expectations, patriarchal norms, and religious interpretations often normalise coerced sex in marriage and silence survivors. This study explores lived experiences of marital sexual violence in South-South Nigeria, focusing on Oron (Akwa Ibom State), Ugep (Cross River State), and Yenagoa (Bayelsa State). Guided by Culture of Silence theory, it examines how silence is sustained and how community-level strategies may foster change. The study employed a qualitative design with 29 participants-survivors, community and religious leaders, selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis of policy texts and NGO reports to contextualise survivor narratives and institutional responses. Thematic analysis identified recurrent patterns, while ethical safeguards including informed consent and confidentiality were strictly observed. Findings revealed the existence of normalisation of sexual violence as "marital duty," patriarchal and religious reinforcement of silence, victim-blaming, emergent voices of change, and institutional gaps. The study contributes empirically by centring survivor voices, theoretically by extending Freire's framework to marital contexts, and practically, by informing community-based intervention.

Keywords: marital sexual violence, culture of silence, patriarchy, South-South Nigeria

Introduction

Sexual violence is one of the gravest violations of human rights, with consequences that extend beyond individual trauma to broader social and cultural structures. The United Nations (2006, p. 6) defines sexual violence as “Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or acts directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, regardless of the relationship to the victim.” Forms of sexual violence include rape, sexual assault, harassment, coercion, and exploitation. Within Nigeria, these forms are widespread, but their most insidious expression is often found within matrimony, where silence, cultural norms, and patriarchal expectations normalise abuse and render it invisible. While this study focuses on marital sexual violence, it also recognises that other forms of sexual violence intersect with similar cultural and structural dynamics (Ojemeiri, Aondover, & Aruaye, 2022).

Despite progressive legislation such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2015, survivors continue to face barriers to justice and protection. Reports indicate that enforcement remains inconsistent, especially at state and community levels (Amnesty International, 2021). According to UN Women (2022), 13.2% of Nigerian women aged 15-49 reportedly experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the preceding year, with the South-South region reflecting particularly troubling trends. In many of these communities, sex, as one participant explained, is viewed as one of the core things women “bring to the table” in marriage, reinforcing male entitlement and making resistance appear illegitimate. This cultural framing, combined with patriarchal and religious pressures, silences survivors and sustains abuse.

Patriarchy, religious expectations, and cultural silence converge to shape how sexual violence is perceived and addressed in Nigerian communities. Research demonstrates that women’s roles are often constructed around chastity, obedience, and silence, while men’s authority is reinforced by cultural and religious traditions (Chimuanya & Uyah, 2025). Within Christian and patriarchal contexts in the South-South, teachings that emphasise marital submission are sometimes interpreted in ways that obscure issues of consent, thereby deepening the culture of silence around marital rape and abuse (Uroko, 2025). Survivors who attempt to speak out risk secondary victimisation-blame, rejection, and stigmatisation-further discouraging disclosure.

Local scholarship on marital sexual violence is growing but remains limited in scope and geography. For example, Kazeem and Sunday (2025) document coercive strategies used to obtain sex in intimate relationships and highlight the continuing under-recognition of marital rape in Nigeria-pointing to the need for deeper, context-sensitive inquiry. Meanwhile, civil society organisations have become crucial front-line actors: the Mirabel Centre (Nigeria’s first Sexual Assault Referral

Centre) reports that they supported more than 9,000 survivors with medical and psychosocial services, and WARDC continues to provide pro bono (free-of-charge legal) support for women facing gender-based violence. Although institutional responses such as the Akwa Ibom State Gender-Based Violence Management Committee (AKSGBVMC) exist, survivors' lived realities demonstrate that such structures have yet to achieve meaningful grassroots penetration. For instance, while Akwa Ibom has domesticated the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Law and established a state-level GBV committee, gaps remain in outreach and survivor-centred responsiveness (Invictus Africa, 2024). Recent policy announcements, such as the creation of a special offences court for sexual and domestic violence cases (Udonquak, 2025), further demonstrate state-level recognition of the problem but also highlight the distance between institutional frameworks and community realities.

This study therefore positions itself at the intersection of cultural anthropology, critical pedagogy, and gender justice, amplifying the voices of survivors of sexual violence in marital contexts while also engaging the perspectives of community and religious leaders. By foregrounding survivor narratives and examining the patriarchal and cultural discourses that sustain silence, the study contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to advocacy for systemic change.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following objectives to:

- i. Understand the lived experiences of survivors of sexual violence in navigating cultural expectations, religious values, and patriarchal norms.
- ii. Identify community-level strategies for addressing sexual violence by challenging harmful cultural narratives and reducing victim-blaming.

From these objectives, two research questions emerge:

- i. How do survivors of sexual violence in Oron (Akwa Ibom State), Ugep (Cross River State), and Yenagoa (Bayelsa State) experience and navigate cultural expectations, religious values, and patriarchal norms, particularly within matrimony?
- ii. What community-level strategies exist or can be developed in Oron, Ugep, and Yenagoa to address sexual violence, challenge harmful cultural narratives, and reduce victim-blaming?

By bridging survivor testimonies with community-level insights, this work contributes to the global discourse on sexual violence while situating the issue within the lived realities of the South-South Nigerian context. Ultimately, it aims to inform both scholarship and practice, promoting survivor-centred interventions and community transformation.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Sexual violence refers to any act of a sexual nature carried out without consent, through coercion, intimidation, or force, and includes rape, assault, harassment, and sexual exploitation (United Nations, 2006). Within matrimony, such violence assumes distinctive forms because cultural, religious, and patriarchal ideologies often disguise coercion as a legitimate marital right (Kazeem & Sunday, 2025). "Marital sexual violence" thus encompasses all sexual acts within marriage that occur without the freely given consent of one partner. In the South-South Nigerian context, this abuse is sustained by cultural narratives that define sexual submission as a wife's duty and silence as virtue (Uroko, 2025). Patriarchy functions as a system that privileges male authority in both private and public spaces, while religious interpretations reinforce obedience and endurance as expressions of faith and morality.

Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Marital Sexual Violence

The normalisation of sexual violence within marriage in Nigeria is closely linked to patriarchal and religious constructs. In many communities, sexual access to a wife is considered an inalienable marital right, supported by selective interpretations of scripture and traditional teachings. Chimuanya & Uyah (2025) observed that patriarchal and faith-based discourses on social media reinforce this ideology, presenting female submission as a moral expectation while silencing dissenting or reformist voices. Similarly, Uroko (2025) highlighted how cultural expectations of silence and endurance sustain a pattern of gendered oppression, particularly in Christian-dominated southern Nigeria, where resistance is often framed as sin or rebellion. These beliefs not only legitimise marital coercion but also shape communal attitudes that discourage survivors from speaking out.

Institutional and Policy Context

Despite legislative progress, such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015), enforcement remains inconsistent. Amnesty International (2021) and Invictus Africa (2024) document persistent gaps in implementation and public awareness, noting that survivors often encounter insensitive law enforcement and inadequate protection. The Akwa Ibom State Gender-Based Violence Management Committee (AKSGBVMC) and other state-level mechanisms represent important advances but remain limited in reach, especially in rural and semi-urban communities. These institutional weaknesses compound the effects of cultural silence, leaving survivors without meaningful redress or rehabilitation.

Empirical Insights and Emerging Gaps

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that cultural and religious expectations intersect to perpetuate silence and under-reporting. Kazeem and Sunday (2025) found that coercive sexual acts within intimate relationships remain under-recognised as violence due to entrenched norms around marital sex. NGOs such as the Mirabel Centre and Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARD) provide evidence of these challenges through case data and advocacy reports showing that survivors struggle to access justice and psychosocial support. While these studies and interventions illuminate structural and cultural barriers, few have examined marital sexual violence in specific regional contexts such as the South-South, where religion, culture, and patriarchal values uniquely converge. This gap underscores the need for deeper, context-sensitive inquiry – an area to which the present study contributes.

Theoretical Framework

Culture of Silence Theory

This study is anchored in Paulo Freire's Culture of Silence theory (Freire, 1970), which posits that oppression is maintained when marginalised groups internalise dominant ideologies and are denied opportunities for critical reflection. Freire conceptualises silence not merely as absence of speech but as a socially constructed condition in which individuals learn to accept injustice as inevitable.

Applied to the present study, the theory illuminates how South-South Nigerian women are socialised into obedience and endurance through patriarchal traditions and selective religious teachings. The expectation that a woman's sexual availability constitutes her marital duty exemplifies Freire's notion of structural oppression, where cultural norms suppress awareness and resistance.

Freire's emphasis on conscientisation – the awakening of critical consciousness through dialogue and education – guides the interpretation of emergent voices of change identified in this research. The framework thus provides a lens for connecting personal narratives of silence to broader systems of domination, while offering a pathway for transformation through community-based education, advocacy, and reinterpretation of cultural values.

Materials and Methods

This study was carried out in selected communities in the South-South region of Nigeria, specifically Oron in Akwa Ibom State, Ugep in Cross River State, and Yenagoa in Bayelsa State. These locations were chosen because of their cultural and

religious diversity, as well as the persistence of patriarchal traditions that often shape marital relationships and responses to sexual violence.

Oron, a coastal community in Akwa Ibom State, is predominantly inhabited by the Oron people, a subgroup of the Ibibio ethnic nationality. Traditional leadership is vested in village heads and council elders who mediate domestic and communal conflicts. Christianity—mainly Catholic and Pentecostal denominations—dominates religious life, promoting moral codes that emphasise marital obedience and female chastity. Although exposure to urban influences and education has introduced some shifts, traditional gender ideologies remain deeply ingrained, particularly in rural areas where sexual topics are considered private or taboo.

Ugep, located in Cross River State, is the cultural heart of the Yakurr ethnic group. The community is renowned for its Leboku New Yam Festival, which celebrates fertility, family honour, and continuity—values that reinforce traditional gender roles. The social order is hierarchical, with elders and male heads of households exercising authority in both public and private spheres. Women's identities are often defined through their domestic and reproductive roles, while religious life blends Protestant Christianity with traditional customs. Marital issues, including sexual relations, are generally viewed as private matters that should not be discussed outside the home.

Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State, represents a semi-urban mix of traditional Ijaw culture and modern socio-economic influences. As the administrative hub of the Niger Delta, it hosts a wide range of Christian denominations; Anglican, Pentecostal, and Charismatic churches among them. Despite its urban character, patriarchal structures remain dominant, with men occupying key roles in both religious and traditional institutions. In many Ijaw families, women are expected to maintain respect and endurance in marriage, and challenging male authority, especially in sexual matters, remains socially discouraged. Economic pressures and oil-related migration have also introduced new vulnerabilities for women, including exposure to domestic and sexual abuse.

Across all three sites, patriarchal traditions, religious interpretations, and cultural norms converge to sustain silence around sexual violence within matrimony. Discussions about sex or consent in marriage are considered inappropriate, and women who question their husbands' authority risk being labelled rebellious or unfaithful. This shared ethnographic context provides the socio-cultural foundation for understanding the persistence of marital sexual violence and the mechanisms through which silence and stigma are reproduced in South-South Nigeria.

The total sample consisted of 29 participants, distributed across the three locations: 10 from Oron, 9 from Ugep, and 10 from Yenagoa. Survivors of sexual violence were interviewed alongside community and religious leaders.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Survivors were selected purposively to ensure that the study captured lived experiences of sexual violence within matrimony, while snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants through referrals, given the sensitivity and stigma surrounding the subject. The sample included 15 survivors of marital sexual violence, 8 community leaders, and 6 religious leaders. The community leaders comprised village heads, women's group coordinators, and youth leaders who represent traditional and civic structures within their respective communities. The religious leaders were drawn from Christian denominations, predominantly Catholic, Pentecostal, and Mainline Protestant churches, which are the dominant faith groups across the study sites. These leaders were included because of their significant influence in shaping cultural expectations, sustaining silence, and framing responses to sexual violence within marriage.

Data collection relied on semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences and perspectives. Survivors recounted personal encounters of marital sexual violence, while leaders reflected on cultural, religious, and patriarchal narratives that sustain silence and discourage open discussions on consent within marriage. In addition to interviews, a limited document analysis was undertaken, focusing on two key sources: The United Nations' 2006 Study on Violence Against Women, which provides an authoritative definition and categorisation of sexual violence, including marital contexts; and the Amnesty International 2021 report on sexual violence in Nigeria, which highlights the systemic and structural challenges survivors face. These documents were analysed to provide international and national context for the findings, and to situate participants' narratives within broader policy and advocacy debates.

All interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were carefully coded and recurring patterns were grouped into themes that aligned with the research objectives and questions. An inductive approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge from participants' accounts, while insights from document analysis were used to triangulate and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the research. Informed consent was obtained from every participant, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymising their identities and securely storing data. Given the sensitivity of the topic, interviews were conducted in a manner that was ethically sensitive and methodologically neutral. It adhered to trauma-informed research principles

designed to ensure participants' emotional safety while maintaining objectivity. The researchers remained reflexive throughout the process; acknowledging potential biases and taking deliberate steps to minimise their influence on data collection and interpretation to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

Results

The study analysed data from 29 in-depth interviews conducted with survivors of sexual violence, community leaders, and religious leaders across Oron, Ugep, and Yenagoa. The analysis yielded several interconnected themes that highlight experiences of sexual violence within matrimony, situated within broader cultural and religious frameworks.

Theme 1: Normalisation of Sexual Violence within Marriage

Survivors frequently described forced sexual relations as an unavoidable "marital duty." Cultural expectations and religious teachings reinforced silence, leaving many women unable to resist.

"In our marriage, he said my body is his right...that, that is what I bring to the table. If I refuse, it means I am not a good wife" (Survivor, p. 4, Oron).

"My pastor told me a woman cannot deny her husband. I cried, but I kept quiet" (Survivor, p. 9, Ugep).

Theme 2: Patriarchal and Religious Discourses Reinforcing Silence

Community and religious leaders often acknowledged the existence of marital sexual violence but refrained from naming it as "rape." Instead, patriarchal traditions and selective religious interpretations emphasised obedience.

"In our tradition, a woman cannot deny her husband. That is how peace is maintained" (Community elder, p. 11, Ugep).

"The Bible says the wife must submit. So, sometimes, even if it is forceful, it is still part of marriage" (Religious leader, p. 16, Yenagoa).

Theme 3: Victim-Blaming and Secondary Stigmatisation

Survivors who attempted to disclose abuse often faced blame or dismissal. Instead of receiving protection, many were told to endure, pray, or preserve family honour.

"When I told my aunt, she said: 'It is shameful to say such things about your husband. Endure it.'" (Survivor, p. 7, Oron).

"One church elder told me that if I was truly prayerful, my husband would change. So, the fault was mine" (Survivor, p. 18, Yenagoa).

Theme 4: Emergent Voices of Change

Amid entrenched silence, some community and religious leaders particularly younger ones offered counter-narratives that challenged harmful norms. These perspectives pointed toward community-level strategies for addressing sexual violence.

“We cannot continue to tell women to keep quiet. If there is no consent, it is wrong – even in marriage. I now preach this openly” (Religious leader, p. 22, Yenagoa).

“As leaders, we must change the story. Education in schools and churches is the way to start breaking the silence” (Community youth leader, p. 13, Ugep).

Theme 5: Document Analysis Insights

Document analysis reinforced the findings of this study. The United Nations (2006) report underscores that marital sexual violence is often invisible within cultural and religious frameworks, while Amnesty International (2021) notes systemic failures in protecting survivors in Nigeria. Together, these documents provide context for participants' experiences of silence, stigma, and limited avenues for justice.

Table 1*Summary of Results*

S/N	Theme	Sub-Theme	Illustrative Quotes	Linked Objective
1.	Normalisation of sexual violence within marriage	Marital duty as justification	"In our marriage, he said my body is his right... that, that is what I bring to the table. If I refuse, it means I am not a good wife" (Survivor, p. 4, Oron).	Objective 1
		Religious justification	"My pastor told me a woman cannot deny her husband. I cried, but I kept quiet" (Survivor, p. 9, Ugep).	Objective 1
2.	Patriarchal and religious discourses reinforcing silence	Tradition of obedience	"In our tradition, a woman cannot deny her husband. That is how peace is maintained". (Community elder, p. 11, Ugep)	Objective 1
		Scriptural interpretations	"The Bible says the wife must submit. So, sometimes, even if it is forceful, it is still part of marriage" (Religious leader, p. 16, Yenagoa).	Objective 1
		Family dismissal	"When I told my aunt, she said: 'It is shameful to say such things about your husband. Endure it.'" (Survivor, p. 7, Oron).	Objective 1
3.	Victim-blaming and secondary stigmatisation	Spiritualising abuse	"One church elder told me that if I was truly prayerful, my husband would change. So, the fault was mine" (Survivor, p. 18, Yenagoa).	Objective 1
		Recognition of consent in marriage	"We cannot continue to tell women to keep quiet. If there is no consent, it is wrong – even in marriage. I now preach this openly" (Religious leader, p. 22, Yenagoa).	Objective 2
4.	Emergent voices of change	Community education as strategy	"As leaders, we must change the story. Education in schools and churches is the way to start	Objective 2

			breaking the silence” (Community youth leader, p. 13, Ugep).
5.	Document analysis insights	Global and national evidence	UN (2006) notes marital sexual violence is culturally invisible; Amnesty International (2021) shows systemic failures in Nigeria. Objective 1 & 2

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex intersection of culture, patriarchy, and religion in shaping how sexual violence is experienced and understood within matrimony in South-South Nigeria. Survivors' narratives and leaders' reflections demonstrate that sexual violence in marriage is not only normalised but also sustained by powerful cultural and religious discourses that construct women's sexuality as a resource for male entitlement.

Marital Duty and the Commodification of Women's Sexuality

One of the most striking findings was the normalisation of coerced sex within marriage, framed as a wife's "duty" or "obligation." In the study area, participants repeatedly suggested that sex is one of the most significant contributions women "bring to the table" in marriage. This reflects a commodified view of women's bodies, where their value is tied to sexual availability rather than autonomy. Such narratives are consistent with Chimuanya and Uyah (2025), who observed that patriarchal traditions in Nigeria perpetuate gendered power imbalances by positioning women as subordinate and sexually obligated. Globally, the United Nations (2006) notes that marital rape remains one of the least recognised yet most widespread forms of sexual violence, precisely because of such cultural constructions of women's roles.

Religion, Patriarchy, and the Culture of Silence

Religious interpretations also played a central role in sustaining silence. Survivors' accounts revealed that Christian teachings on submission were often invoked to legitimize forced sex. This echoes Uroko (2025), who argued that Nigerian religious institutions sometimes reinforce patriarchy by framing women's endurance of abuse as virtuous. The reluctance of leaders to name marital rape as violence reflects what Amnesty International (2020) identified as a systemic failure in Nigeria: the invisibility of marital sexual violence in both law and community practice. Together, these cultural and religious discourses converge to produce a culture of silence, where disclosure is discouraged and survivors face secondary stigmatisation.

Victim-Blaming and the Burden of Silence

The study also revealed persistent patterns of victim-blaming. Survivors who attempted disclosure were often told to "endure" or to pray, rather than seek justice. Such responses not only silence women but also reproduce trauma. According to UN Women (2022), this aligns with global trends, where underreporting of intimate partner violence is driven by stigma and social pressures. In the South-South, however, this burden is compounded by the expectation that a woman's worth in marriage is tied to her ability to satisfy her husband sexually-making resistance appear culturally illegitimate.

Emergent Voices and Community Strategies

Despite these challenges, some participants offered counter narratives that reflect Objective 2 of this study: identifying strategies for change. Younger leaders emphasised the importance of education in schools, churches, and communities to redefine marital consent and dismantle harmful narratives. Such emergent voices of change are promising, reflecting what scholars describe as "cultural reinterpretation" - where religious and traditional discourses are re-examined to promote gender justice. This aligns with international advocacy efforts, such as those by UN Women, which stress that ending sexual violence requires both policy reform and grassroots cultural transformation.

Institutional Gaps and the Need for Responsiveness

At the state level, structures such as the Akwa Ibom State Gender-Based Violence Management Committee (AKSGBVMC) demonstrate government recognition of the problem and commitment to addressing it. However, the experiences shared by participants in this study indicate that such structures are not yet sufficiently visible or accessible at the grassroots. Survivors in rural and semi-urban communities continue to face silence, stigma, and limited avenues for help. This gap underscores the need for institutions to move beyond policy presence to active outreach and survivor-centred responsiveness, ensuring that interventions reach those most affected.

Conclusion

By centring survivors' lived experiences, this study contributes to the global discourse on marital sexual violence, an area often underexplored in African scholarship. It demonstrates that in South-South Nigeria, sexual violence within matrimony is normalised through cultural and religious narratives that commodify women's sexuality. At the same time, it identifies community-based strategies - particularly education, reinterpretation of religious teachings, and institutional outreach - as entry points for change. These findings not only deepen understanding

of the cultural underpinnings of marital rape but also provide actionable insights for advocacy and intervention at the community level.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Community education and awareness:** The study found that cultural expectations and community-level silence perpetuate marital sexual violence. To counter this, grassroots education programs should be developed to redefine marital consent as a human right. These initiatives should integrate community dialogues, media sensitisation, and local advocacy led by traditional and women's groups to dismantle the notion of sex as a woman's "duty" or sole contribution to marriage.
- **Religious reinterpretation and engagement:** Findings revealed that religious narratives often reinforce silence and justify abuse under the guise of obedience. Religious leaders across denominations should be engaged to promote survivor-centred interpretations of scripture, emphasising mutual respect, consent, and dignity within marriage. Faith-based organisations can also serve as safe spaces for confidential counselling and public advocacy.
- **Strengthening legal enforcement:** The study identified weak enforcement of existing legal frameworks such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) and its state-level adaptations. Training programs for police officers, judicial staff, and healthcare providers are needed to build sensitivity, ensure accountability, and improve responsiveness in handling marital sexual violence cases.
- **Support services for survivors:** Survivors' testimonies indicated gaps in access to psychosocial and legal support. Establishing community-based safe spaces and expanding existing services such as counselling, legal aid, and emergency shelters will improve access to justice and healing. Partnerships between NGOs like the Mirabel Centre and state agencies should be strengthened to ensure continuity of care.
- **Institutional responsiveness and outreach:** The findings highlighted limited grassroots engagement by state-level institutions. The Akwa Ibom State Gender-Based Violence Management Committee (AKSGBVMC) and related bodies should enhance outreach to rural and semi-urban areas through regular community consultations and mobile response teams. Survivor feedback mechanisms should be integrated into program design to ensure contextually relevant interventions and greater accountability.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the cultural and religious dimensions of marital sexual violence in South-South Nigeria, it is limited by its qualitative scope and small sample size. The reliance on self-reported experiences may also have been influenced by social desirability bias and the sensitivity of the subject matter. Future research should employ mixed-method approaches and larger, comparative samples across regions to explore variations in marital sexual violence and the effectiveness of community-based interventions. Further ethnographic studies could also investigate how evolving gender discourses, particularly through social media and youth activism, reshape norms of silence and consent within marriage.

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