

**Modern Marriage, Masculinity, and Intimate Partner Violence in Nigeria;** Daniel Jordan Smith, Department of Anthropology, Brown University

**Introduction**

Adaku's husband, Ifeanyi, was a notorious drunk.<sup>1</sup> When he drank he sometimes beat her, especially when she complained about his philandering and his frequent failure to provide money for food and for the children's school fees. Despite the beatings, Adaku did not relent in her criticism of her husband. On the contrary, she frequently carried her complaints to her family and to Ifeanyi's kin. She made no pretense of "loving" her husband. She simply wanted him to meet his obligations to provide for her and their children. In her mind, the chief obstacles to his doing so were his drinking and his infidelity. Ifeanyi's primary objection to his wife's conduct was that she had no appreciation for his efforts to provide for his family nor sympathy for how difficult that is in Nigeria.

Their respective kin had made many interventions to try to make peace between them. During these mediations Ifeanyi would promise to curtail his drinking and better support his family and Adaku would vow to try not to provoke her husband's temper. But the cycle of violence and reconciliation continued for many years. Sometimes, Adaku would move out of her husband's house to stay with her natal kin for weeks, and even months, at a time. But, eventually, she always went back. While separations are common, divorce is rare and stigmatized in the region of southeastern Nigeria where they live. In addition, their Igbo tribe is mostly patrilineal and children belong to a man and his lineage. A woman who divorces her husband will likely lose custody of her offspring; even a woman like Adaku saw the permanent dissolution of her marital union as untenable.

Having lived and worked periodically in southeastern Nigeria for over 25 years, my impression is that most men do not beat their wives. Indeed, excessive violence by men against

women or children is culturally unacceptable. But the idea that a man has the authority to hit his wife or children if they defy him is widely accepted, or at least tolerated, as long as he does not do so too frequently and he does not cause undue injury. In this context, instances of intimate partner violence within marriage often go unreported. Further, even if friends, neighbors, or kin are aware of violence, it can stay at the level of the unremarkable so long as the effects are not too brutal.

In long-term research in Ubakala, a semi-rural community in southeastern Nigeria, I have had the opportunity to witness the aftermath of many instances of intimate partner violence. These were all cases of men who beat their wives. I observed the ensuing interventions (and frequently the lack thereof) and resultant conversations among kin and community members. It is notable that I never heard a wife complain specifically of rape or sexual violence on the part of her husband, nor did I hear others in the community talk about their concerns regarding domestic violence in these terms. It is indeed unclear to me how frequent marital rape really was. This is partly because many people in southeastern Nigeria – especially men, but also women – do not recognize the category of marital rape. While the problem of rape in general is deeply shrouded in Nigerian society, marital rape in particular is commonly considered an oxymoron. Few married women couch their complaints about domestic violence in the idiom of rape, even when what occurs might be considered so, in the interpretation of outsiders and some Nigerians. Many women either share the cultural logic that marital rape is a contradiction in terms or they recognize that given prevailing social norms, such a complaint would be unrecognized, and even counterproductive. Men, by and large, reject the very concept of marital rape. They see women's sexual consent in marriage as taken for granted, and some men view beating, or at least slapping, their wives and children as a man's prerogative.

This paper explores the ways that ongoing social changes have affected the context of intimate partner violence in southeastern Nigeria. At the core of these changes are transformations and contestations around gender dynamics. Many aspects of the contemporary situation, such as increasing levels of education and employment for women and widely circulating global norms about gender equality, appear to push against gender-based violence. I argue that exploring masculinity and the perceived challenges to patriarchy must be at the core of understanding and addressing this problem. But rather than simply condemning male behavior, we must put it in context. This should not be interpreted to excuse men's violence, but is absolutely necessary to curb it.

In addition, "modern" relationship ideals, such as the increasingly popular belief that marriage should be grounded in romantic love, can also deprive women of traditional avenues for protection via kinship and community. This is generally not (or not solely) because a union that is negotiated outside the avenues of arranged marriage has no support from kin. Instead, women's lack of recourse to kin often comes because both parties are invested in the public appearance of modernity. As I will show below, to acknowledge philandering, violence, or unhappiness in a love union often threatens the very grounds of a woman's achievement of personhood through her choice of marriage. When combined with reassertions of patriarchy, including ideas promoted in popular Pentecostal churches, new challenges to understanding and preventing intimate partner violence arise.

Drawing on several case studies, the paper focuses on the ways that wider social changes reverberate in the most intimate arenas of life, particularly at the intersection of gender, morality, and violence. I analyze the occurrence, meanings, and social responses to cases of intimate partner violence in marriage in contemporary Nigeria in the context of transformations in the

region's political economy, kinship practices, gendered social organization, and religious landscape. I pay particular attention to men's lives and the ways that changing ideas and practices of masculinity intersect with and help explain the dynamics of intimate partner violence.

### **Domestic Violence and Marital Rape in Nigeria**

In the last decade or so, the topic of domestic violence in general (and marital rape in particular, albeit to a lesser extent) has begun to be addressed by both scholars and advocates in Nigeria. As feminist discourses have circulated globally in the same era that gender relations themselves are changing due to increasing levels of education, growing urbanization, rising female participation in the formal labor force, and a range of other interconnected factors, it is now common to find local civil society groups such as NGOs advocating for greater awareness of intimate partner violence and more measures to protect women (Onyejekwe 2008). NGOs promoting women's rights tend to be based in the national capital, Abuja, and the country's commercial capital, Lagos, and sometimes in state capitals. Many run projects and do advocacy work in smaller cities and rural areas, but rights-based language regarding domestic violence and rape has not yet reached places like Ubakala with significant effect.

Further, all efforts to specifically outlaw marital rape through federal legislation or statutes have failed. In fact, the Nigerian Criminal Code expressly legalizes marital rape by exempting any sexual relations between a husband and his wife from the category. Section 6 of the code clarifies the definition of rape as follows: "unlawful carnal knowledge means carnal connection which takes place otherwise than between husband and wife" (Chika 2011:42). While it is surely not the case that a law against marital rape would by itself be sufficient to address the problem of marital rape in Nigeria, law – as Sally Engle Merry (2006) has shown – can be a

significant force in social and cultural change. But as Saida Hodzic (2009) has observed in Ghana, getting national legislatures dominated by men to pass laws against marital rape can be highly politicized and difficult. The four rationales opposing marital rape laws identified by Kwaku Ansa-Ansare (2003) in Ghana are common in Nigeria as well: 1) such ideas are foreign-imposed; 2) such laws would threaten African family and culture; 3) domestic violence is best adjudicated privately, within families and communities rather than by the Federal Government; and 4) traditional authorities should mediate such disputes. As Hodzic notes for Ghana, in Nigeria it tends to be men who hold and promote these views, and who dominate that corridors of legal power, though I also sometimes heard women voice these ideas too.

Data on marital rape in Nigeria is scant, in no small part because of the difficulty of measuring a phenomenon widely believed to be a conceptual paradox. But one study conducted in two communities, one rural and one urban, in the same general region in southeastern Nigeria as Ubakala (my primary research site) suggests that domestic violence is extremely common and the incidence of rape in general is high (Okemgbo, Omideyi, and Odimegwu 2002). This study found that nearly 80 percent of women had been battered by their male partners (with battery defined as anything from a single slap to more violent beating). Most people in Ubakala would not consider a slap to be battery; the local norm that men should not be excessively violent with their wives that I mentioned earlier does not apply to all forms of physical abuse. While I find it hard to believe that 80% of men in Nigeria have ever slapped their wives, much less beaten them, the study does suggest a contradiction between scholarly and local definitions of what counts as violence.

The same paper further documents that approximately 21 percent of women reported having ever been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will. However, imprecision in

the way the data was collected (or reported) make it difficult to parse violence and rape that occurred before marriage versus within marriage, or whether women's understandings regarding what qualifies as rape were different inside and outside marriage. Indeed, one might imagine that because of the cultural belief that women must be sexually available to their husbands, they might frequently have sex with their husbands when they don't want to, but without any explicit issue of consent. It seems evident from this study and others in Nigeria that marital rape is difficult for Nigerian women to prevent or report, and perhaps also even to identify (Onyejekwe 2008; Aihie 2009; Eseré et al. 2009).

A report by a women's advocacy group headed by a Nigerian law professor enumerates not only why the Nigerian government has failed to criminalize marital rape, but also why it remains so difficult to address more generally:

First of all, the fact that marital rape is not known to be a serious social offence, because although such cases exist, most of them go unreported. Second, women that live with their husbands feel that reporting marital rape would have a negative impact on the marriage, family reputation and children. Third, the fact that it is extremely difficult to establish any case of rape in Nigeria and this means that marital rape, which occurs behind closed doors, is even more difficult to establish. Fourth, the culture dictates a situation in which married women are controlled in all respects by their husbands including in their sexual reproductive lives, therefore the idea of forced sex does not exist because the wife is expected to always submit to the husband's demands in all instances regardless of her own feelings (Okonkwo 2003:18).

While I would quibble with the extent to which men's control of women is understood by ordinary Nigerians to be so complete (a view my own observations of exertions of female agency in southeastern Nigeria also challenges), I would nonetheless be hard pressed to offer a better summary of the situation. My goal in the remainder of this paper is try to explain why this situation persists, and in particular to connect it to three factors that I think are central to the story: the rise of love as a relationship ideal for marriage; the performance of masculinity in contemporary Nigeria; and the role of increasingly popular Pentecostal churches in responding to challenges to patriarchy in marriage and gender relations in southeastern Nigeria.

### **Love, Marriage, and Violence**

It is common in southeastern Nigerian discourse for masculine authority in the domestic sphere to be justified on the grounds of a model of marital relations symbolized by men's payment of bridewealth. When a couple marries, it is almost universally expected that the husband and his family will provide agreed upon gifts in cash and in kind to the wife's family in exchange for their consent and participation in the socially shared project of a marriage. This occurs regardless of whether the union is deemed a love marriage or one that is explicitly arranged by the couple's families. Anthropologists have been insistent for decades that bridewealth payments are not tantamount to purchasing a wife (Comaroff 1980; Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Bridewealth systems are complex social arrangements in which extended families and communities create social ties rather than simply transferring a women's reproductive capacity from her natal family to her husband and his family (Ogbu 1978; Tambiah 1989). Bridewealth payments mark the beginning of relations rather than the conclusion of a single transaction. Most Nigerians I know can comfortably and fluently explain the socially embedded character of bridewealth and marriage in their society.

But is nevertheless common to hear people explain and justify masculine authority and a man's privileged sexual access to his wife in terms of a simplified notion that bridewealth (and therefore marriage) entitles a man to certain rights over his wife. Indeed, on the occasions when I asked men (and on much rarer occasions women<sup>2</sup>) about the possibility of marital rape in their society, I was commonly told that there could be no such thing because a man was entitled to sexual access to his wife whenever he wanted or needed it. While most men agreed that a man should not have sex with his wife in a given moment if she did not consent, this was usually overridden by the belief that a woman should always consent. Many women also agreed with the proposition that part of a woman's marital obligation was to be sexually available to her husband. All of this complicates the concept of marital rape. When consent is presumed, rape is difficult to conceptualize, much less prevent. With regard to the invocation of bridewealth as the justification for men's sexual access to their wives, I think it is best understood as symbolic in people's minds of a larger set of norms and practices rather than the actual reason for them.

In recent times the expectations, meanings, and practices of marriage in southeastern Nigeria have changed significantly, with consequences for the way gender, intimacy, and domestic violence are understood and negotiated. In Nigeria, as across Africa, evidence indicates that people are increasingly likely to select marriage partners based, at least in part, on whether they are "in love" (Obiechina 1973; Okonjo 1992; Smith 2001). The emergence of romantic love as a criterion in spousal selection and the increasing importance of a couple's personal, emotional relationship in marriage should not be interpreted to mean that romantic love itself has only recently emerged in Nigeria. Scholars have documented the existence of romantic love in Africa long before it became a widely accepted criterion for marriage (Bell 1995; Plotnicov 1995; Riesman 1972, 1973). As Obiechina notes: "The question is not whether love and sexual

attraction as normal human traits exist within Western and African societies, but how they are woven into the fabric of life” (1973:34).

Exactly when Nigerians in general and Igbos in particular began to conceptualize marriage choices in more individualistic terms, privileging romantic love as a criterion in the selection of a spouse, is hard to pinpoint. In some parts of Igboland and in many parts of Nigeria the social acceptance of individual choice in mate selection is still just beginning. Certainly these changes occurred first in urban areas among relatively educated and elite populations (Marris 1962; Little and Price 1973). Obiechina’s (1973) study of Onitsha pamphlet literature indicates that popular Nigerian literature about love, romance, and modern marriage began to emerge just after World War II. Historical accounts suggest that elements of modern marriage began even earlier in the twentieth century (Mann 1985). By the 1970s, a number of monographs about modern marriage in West Africa had been produced (e.g., Opong 1974; Harrell-Bond 1975). Most of these accounts focused on relatively elite, urban and educated populations.

In contemporary Igboland, the ideal that marriage should be based on romantic love has spread well beyond urban elites. Young people across a wide range of socio-economic statuses increasingly value choosing their own spouses, and individual choice is widely associated with the notion that marriage should be based on love. It is of course important to recognize that ideas about what constitutes love are culturally inflected and individually variable. But in southeastern Nigeria it is fair to say that when people talk about the importance of love for marriage they are generally signaling the value accorded to the personal and emotional quality of the conjugal relationship. People recognize that strong bonds can develop in more traditional marriages not premised on romantic love, but when people talk about marrying for love – as they frequently do – they mean a kind of love that is associated with being modern.

In a village sample of just over 200 married women of reproductive age that I collected in Ubakala during my dissertation research in 1996, over 60 percent reported that their marriages were choice marriages rather than arranged marriages, and, not surprisingly, the percentages were higher among younger women. The expectation to choose one's spouse is almost universal among young persons still in school. In a sample of 775 students drawn from 19 secondary schools in the Umuahia area during the same year, over 95 percent said they expected to choose their marriage partners themselves, and the expectation was universal among 420 students I surveyed at Abia State University. Although my more recent research did not entail sample surveys, every indication from participant observation and popular culture is that the ideal of love marriage has continued to grow.

The nature of social change driving these changes in marriage is too extensive to fully account for here, but intertwining factors include economic diversification and labor migration, urbanization, education, religious conversion, and globalization. Contemporary economic strategies hinge on rural-urban migration. As larger numbers of families move to the city in search of better education, employment, and other economic opportunities, family structure is changing, and this opens up spaces for individuals both to meet a wider variety of potential mates and to decide to select their own partners. Modifications in family organization induced by economic and demographic transition have been complemented by moral, ideological, and religious trends that also affect the institution of marriage.

The modern marriages of young couples in southeastern Nigeria are clearly different from their parents. Describing the differences between her marriage and her parents' marriage, a 30-year-old woman married for three years said: "My father had three wives and 14 children. Often it was every woman for herself. My husband and I have a partnership. We decide things.

There is love between us.” Perhaps the most concise way to contrast modern Igbo marriages with the past is to note that young couples see their marriages as a life project in which they as a couple are the primary actors, and where the idea of being in love is one of the principal foundations of the relationship, whereas their parents’ marriages were more obviously embedded in the structures of the extended family. The differences are most pronounced in narratives about courtship, descriptions of how husbands and wives resolve marital quarrels, and decision-making about contributions to their children’s education and well-being. In each of these arenas people in more modern marriages tend to emphasize the primacy of the individual couple and their personal relationship, often in conscious opposition to the constraints imposed by ties to kin and community. For example, a 43-year-old teacher reported:

For me and my wife our marriage is our business, whereas in my parents’ time everything was scrutinized by the extended family. If they had any little problem everyone might become involved. We try to keep things within the married house. If we have any problem we handle it ourselves and maybe pray over it, but we don’t go running to the elders broadcasting our problems here and there.

But it is important not to exaggerate these trends. Even in the most modern marriages, ties to kin and community remain strong, and the projects of marriage and child rearing continue to be a social effort, strongly embedded in the relationships and values of the extended family system. Scholars of West African society have long recognized the pronounced importance of marriage and fertility in the region (Fortes 1978; Bledsoe and Pison 1994; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999). The fact that modern marriage in southeastern Nigeria remains a resolutely social endeavor creates contradictions for younger couples, who must navigate not only their individual relationships, but also the outward representation of their marriages to kin and community. Most

couples seek to portray their marriages to themselves and to others as being modern, but also as morally upright. The tension between being modern and being moral is crucial to explaining the dynamics of intimacy in marriage, including how women respond to intimate partner violence. In many ways, the rise of love marriages can make it harder for woman to report and protect herself from an abusive husband.

Nneka described her decision to marry Emeka as based on love. She told my female research assistant that they met in Lagos through a friend, had seen each other for a year, eventually fell in love and decided to marry. Her kin were initially opposed to the marriage because they did not know Emeka and his family came from a community into which women in her community did not typically marry. But her family relented and the couple had a typical traditional wedding, with bridewealth provided in full. For several years things seemed good, but by the time Nneka gave birth to their third child she realized Emeka was having extramarital affairs. When she objected he dismissed her complaints and when she persisted he eventually beat her. From then on a cycle of disputes and beatings ensued. It took my research assistant many meetings before Nneka revealed the situation, though my assistant had suspected this was the case. When Nneka finally opened up she explained that she was reluctant to tell anyone about the beatings because of the disgrace it would bring. In response to my assistant's further questions, Nneka said that the fact that she had married for love, against her parents' initial advice, made her feel like revealing the problem would be seen as evidence that her judgment regarding Emeka's love had been wrong, or that it no longer existed. While I did not encounter many women willing to talk about abusive husbands during my research, I did encounter more women who were hesitant for the same reasons to publicly expose their husbands' infidelity (Smith 2009). In any marriage, women see intimate partner violence (like a man's infidelity) as a

big problem. But in love marriages in particular women seem to find confronting infidelity and violence all the more difficult. This is because in a love marriage such violations undermine the emotional basis for the marriage and the forms of leverage a woman has with her husband even more than in arranged marriages. While a woman might hope that love should be protection against abuse, when abuse does occur it seems – in southeastern Nigeria at least – that a love marriage makes a woman's position even more difficult.

### **The Performance of Masculinity**

The fact that the preponderance of intimate partner violence – in marriage and otherwise – is perpetrated by men against women suggests that such violence is an overt manifestation and enforcement of patriarchy. But in southeastern Nigeria, as in many settings around the world, a combination of complex social changes such as political-economic and demographic transformations, but also the rise of feminism and the circulation of rights-based discourses, have made the maintenance of male privilege and power through violence increasingly untenable. Even as many Nigerian men justify intimate partner violence and deny the very possibility of marital rape based on ideas about masculine authority, the spread of formal education and the inclusion of women in a capitalist labor market intersect with more intimate transformations in gender dynamics, such as the rise of love as a relationship ideal for marriage described above, to challenge hegemonic masculinities. But despite these ongoing changes, it is clear that in southeastern Nigeria gender inequality remains strong, domestic violence is still a serious issue, and marital rape continues to be a mostly unacknowledged problem.

In this section, I argue that a better understanding of masculinity is a key element in explaining – and ultimately addressing – the problems of intimate partner violence and marital rape. I focus on two relevant aspects of masculinity in southeastern Nigeria: 1) how non-violent

performances of masculinity undergird widely shared ideas of manhood that create the context in which intimate partner violence and marital rape remain acceptable, if increasingly contested, behaviors, and 2) how the perceived threats to masculinity that men experience in Nigeria help to explain their behavior. Before proceeding, it is important to make two points. First, although my evidence and argument focus on masculinity in southeastern Nigeria, it should be obvious that domestic violence and marital rape are not unique to this region, country, or continent. While this should perhaps be unnecessary to note, delving into the social conditions and cultural context that situate masculinity and enable intimate violence can sometimes be misread as blaming culture – something unfortunately all too common in accounts of African social problems. It is important to distinguish between putting a problem in its context, an endeavor central to anthropological analysis, and simplistically blaming victims (and perpetrators), a position antithetical to good anthropology. The second and related point is that putting the performance of masculinity in context is meant to help explain why men commit acts of intimate partner violence and marital rape, not to excuse these behaviors. But I believe that curbing intimate violence and marital rape requires addressing the threats that men perceive to their manhood rather than simply expecting men to behave better based on some notion of individual transformation.

The relationship between the enforcement of masculine domination in marriage through beatings or rape and the nonviolent means by which male authority is asserted and maintained is complex. It works in contradictory ways. On the one hand, an extensive system of patriarchy and a widely shared social construction of masculinity create the circumstances in which men's perpetration of domestic violence and marital rape is possible and, at least to some extent, culturally protected. Men are not in positions of dominance over women in southeastern Nigeria

only because of violence or the threat of violence; instead, male violence against women is tolerated (though, of course, also contested) because masculine power achieves its relative hegemony through other means – political, economic, social, and symbolic – that do not require overt violence. On the other hand, actual incidents of domestic violence and marital rape seemed to be tied, and sometimes triggered, in nuanced ways to men’s perceptions that masculinity is threatened, not just by the women against whom violence is perpetrated, but also by larger forces that appear out of men’s control. I begin with a brief sketch of what the contours of dominant or hegemonic masculinities look like in southeastern Nigeria and conclude this section with examples of the ways men experience threats to masculinity, which contribute to the situations that produce intimate partner violence.

Ever since R. W. Connell (1995) developed his hierarchy of masculinities – hegemonic, complicitous, marginalized, and subordinated – scholars have both mapped men into these categories and debated the whether the concept of hegemonic masculinity (the “culturally exalted” form of masculinity in a given context) accurately captures patterns of male beliefs and behavior and men’s experiences (Beasley 2008; Groes-Green 2012). In southeastern Nigeria, and arguably in much of sub-Saharan Africa, certain features of a hegemonic masculinity are easily recognizable and widely shared. The fundamental elements of this masculine ideal involve being a husband, father, and head of household. Above all, these roles require men to be providers, responsible for the provision of food, shelter, and protection for their families, and – especially in the contemporary era – for their children’s education. The notion that the socially accepted primary foundation of African manhood is the demonstrated capacity to provide for one’s family has been documented in many African contexts (Morrell 2001, Lindsay and Miescher 2003; Hunter 2005, 2010). Certainly for Nigeria there is ample scholarship, both historical and

contemporary, that has shown that the male position as provider is central to masculine identities and practices (Berry 1985; Cornwall 2002, 2003; Lindsay 2003). Integral to the African and Nigerian ideal of man the provider, and indeed to Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, is that along with the obligation of being the provider comes the privilege and authority of patriarchy. In Connell's terms, hegemonic masculinities both mask and enable the problematic inequalities of patriarchal structures and social relations. To most Nigerian men they legitimate them.

Of course patriarchy and the extent to which it is justified through the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti 1988) – the ways in which women become complicit in affording men the privileges and authority of masculinity in exchange for certain social obligations that men must perform – or the "conjugal bargain" (Whitehead 1981), is not unique to Africa. Indeed, feminist scholars developed these terms analyzing gender in non-African contexts. The social construction of gender is elemental to the configuration of power and the fabric of social relations in every society, a reality that is now well established not only in anthropology, but across a range of disciplines that have probed the meanings, practices, and, consequences of how societies "do gender" (Di Leonardo 1991; Fenstermaker and West 2002). For men in Nigeria, as in other African societies, it is the continuing importance of their role as providers – for their wives and children, but also for other networks of kin and supporters if they aspire to wider power and prestige – that creates pressures as they navigate the intersecting worlds of production and social reproduction (Cornwall 2002, 2003; see Hunter 2010 for South Africa). Andrea Cornwall (2003) showed that in contemporary southwestern Nigeria nothing produced more anxiety for men than the specter of becoming (usually in women's words) "useless men": men without jobs or money; men who are unable to satisfy their women in love (or sex); men who fail

at both production and social reproduction. The same is true where I work in southeastern Nigeria. While the meanings and practices of “provider love” (Hunter 2010) have evolved with societal transformation and with the rise of new ideals and practices of intimacy, the expectation that competent masculinity depends on its successful performance is as true as ever.

In contemporary Nigeria, men commonly feel their capacity to provide adequately is under threat. A combination of high unemployment, low incomes, rising costs, and increasing expectations – for greater consumption and more, and more expensive, schooling for children – has put many men at risk of being perceived as “useless.” In their interviews asking women about situations that correlated with their husbands’ resort to violence, Okemgbo, Omideyi and Odimegwu document many responses that allude to situations where it is a man’s perception that his wife is challenging his masculinity that leads to a slap, or worse (2002:112). In a study I conducted in southeastern Nigeria in 2004 examining the risk of HIV infection in marriage, much of the research focused on men’s extramarital sexual behavior and the performance of masculinity more generally (Smith 2007, 2009; Hirsch et al. 2009). One of the questions I asked the 22 married men I interviewed in depth over several meetings was whether there was ever a situation that would justify a man slapping or beating his wife. Although slightly more than half of the men responded it was never acceptable to beat one’s wife, slightly less than half said that some circumstances might warrant it. Men’s explanations of what those situations might entail frequently referenced challenges to their authority and specifically to disrespect for their role (and assumed power) as providers.

For example, Uchenwa, an auto mechanic in his early forties, said that if his wife failed to cook and blamed the lack of a meal on not having enough money from him, it might provoke him to slap her: “Sometimes if a women does not see with her husband’s struggles and

unnecessarily torments him about chop (food) money when she knows there is none, she can provoke a slap. It is a wife's duty to do her best with what a man can provide." Iheancho, who has a small provisions shop in a local market, said: "Every time it is time to pay the children's school fees it is a crisis. Often there is not enough cash on hand. If my wife disturbs me too much – especially if she exposes our problems to others – that is a reason to slap her." Other examples focused on disrespect of man's authority, such as leaving for an extended period without permission, spending money in what men perceived to be a wanton fashion, or even, in a couple of cases, for complaining too openly about a man's infidelity. In such cases women commonly expressed discontent about men wasting precious resources on a girlfriend instead of properly catering for his family, rather than focusing on infidelity as a personal insult or breach of trust. The logic of this justification derives from wives' knowledge that prevailing ideals of masculinity implicitly – and even explicitly – entitle men to relationships outside marriage, so long as they provide for their families (Smith 2007).

In these interviews I did not ask men specifically about marital rape. I did ask about mutual sexual pleasure, and most of the men said plainly that marital sexual intercourse should be mutually pleasurable to a man and a woman. Indeed, many men asserted that part of being a proper man entails the ability to satisfy one's wife sexually. But the fact that men believe they should give sexual pleasure to their wives does not preclude marital rape. Over the years I have lived and worked in Nigeria I have sometimes heard men talk about marital rape, mostly in the context of responding to some kind of news coverage about it – usually a story about a women's rights conference, an NGO advocating for a change in Nigerian law, or something like that. The tenor of the conversations was typically incredulous. The context was always male-dominated social settings where men were performing masculinity for their peers. In these circumstances,

men decried the very possibility of marital rape, suggesting that a wife should always be available to her husband. The assumption of a man's unfettered sexual access to his wife tilted between the sense of male authority and entitlement tied to a shared understanding of bridewealth, marriage, and domestic gender hierarchy on the one hand, and a kind of bravado about male sexual performance on the other hand. That a woman might have a right to deny consent to sex with her husband threatens an overall system of patriarchy; that a woman would not want to have sex with her husband challenges his capacity to perform as a man.

The verb "perform" is a telling one in Nigerian pidgin English. It captures a wide spectrum of expectations and behaviors associated with masculinity in contemporary Nigeria. Men (and women) use it to describe everything from success (or failure) in politics and the workplace to providing for one's family and satisfying one's sexual partner. The ubiquitous use of the verb is indicative of the extent to which men's performance as men is under constant scrutiny in Nigeria. In an era in which expectations have skyrocketed about what men are supposed to provide to their political clients and communities of origin in the public arena, and to their kin, wives, and children in the private domain, most men find the performance of competent masculinity extremely challenging. Intimate partner violence is fueled – though, again, not excusable – by the way in which an array of challenges to the performance of modern masculinity converge in men's roles as providers for their wives and children.

### **Pentecostal Christianity and the Patriarchal Bargain**

In November 2011, Obiageri Nweze joined a small Pentecostal Church in her semi-rural village. For months, a friend of hers who had joined the church a year or so earlier had been urging her to come to their Sunday services. The friend had even brought the pastor to visit Obiageri's house on a couple of occasions to pray with her and encourage her to join his flock.

Obiageri was married to a terribly abusive man. I observed her bruised face more than once in the years since I'd known her. Her friend from the Pentecostal church told her that joining the church would help resolve her problems with her husband. The pastor specifically prayed that her husband would follow her in finding Christ as his personal savior and that he would then refrain from his abuse.

In the months after Obiageri became born again until I left Nigeria in April of 2012 her husband did not follow her to join the church. But she insisted that her newly found faith (she had always been a Christian, but not "born again"), the pastor, and the congregation gave her strength. She maintained hope that her husband would also become born again and that it would repair their marriage and reform his violent behavior. While Obiageri's husband did not do as she hoped, I heard many stories of women joining Pentecostal churches to seek refuge from abusive, unfaithful, or otherwise disappointing husbands. While in southeastern Nigeria it is customary for a woman to join her husband's church, I am also aware of cases where men followed their wives in becoming born again. Scholarship on Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, and in Africa more generally, has noted the disproportionate population of women in Pentecostal churches. Some scholars have noted that women frequently try to use their churches to modify their husbands' behavior, whether the problem is intimate partner violence, alcohol abuse, infidelity, economic irresponsibility, or some combination of the above (Martin 2001; Mate 2002; Newell 2005; Marshall 2009). Whether Pentecostal Christianity has a constructive effect in curtailing domestic violence or other problematic aspects of the performance of masculinity in southeastern Nigeria is hard to know, but I have some preliminary evidence and ideas.

In 2012, I spent several months in Nigeria conducting a study focused on the role of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria's AIDS epidemic. But I also focused more broadly on the

social effects of this now very popular brand of Christianity. Women outnumbered men in the several churches I visited regularly, but not dramatically so. It was more common to find women in congregations without their husbands than vice versa, but also very common to observe spouses in the same Pentecostal church. In all the churches I attended I frequently heard sermons, Bible readings, and other orations focused on the importance of marriage and family. Pastors encouraged men to recruit their wives and women to recruit their husbands into the church if they had not already done so. Quite strikingly, men's behavior as husbands and fathers was a fairly common topic, with pastors urging men to forego philandering, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence in favor of fidelity, abstemiousness, and peaceful communication. It was clear why these churches would appeal to women with abusive or otherwise problematic husbands, though I never heard anyone address the issue of marital rape – perhaps further evidence of the degree to which it is culturally unrecognized, or at least deeply shrouded.

But it was also evident that these Pentecostal churches promoted a model of masculinity that subscribed to and advanced the ideal of the man as the primary provider. Further, they conveyed a strong message that in exchange for a man fulfilling his masculine obligations for providing for his family, a woman should recognize and submit to the authority of her husband. Rhetoric about the importance of good Christian families always included reference to the idea that the man, as a father and husband, was in charge. He should not drink, engage in extramarital sex, abuse his wife and children, or fail to provide for them to the best of his ability, but if he fulfills his duties his family must acknowledge that his is the final word in household decisions. It is perhaps not surprising that many women with abusive, drunken, or unfaithful husbands found the prospects of such an exchange appealing. In many ways, Pentecostal churches offered

the reestablishment of the patriarchal bargain, where women acquiesce to men's authority in return for certain kinds of support.

Many men also found Pentecostal Christianity's reassertion of the patriarchal bargain appealing, though they tended to implicate women for its failures more than themselves. At a lunch I had with men from one of the Pentecostal churches I attended one Sunday afternoon, the conversation touched on many of these issues of masculinity and the patriarchal bargain. With regard to family, the men asserted that a man's position as the head of his household is God's will and evident in the Bible. These Pentecostal men criticized the failures of many Nigerians to behave in ways that they said were required in men's roles as husband, father, and head of the family. Specifically, they condemned drinking alcohol, sexual infidelity, and the failure to raise children "in a good Christian way" as the main faults plaguing modern families. They said it was Christian men's responsibility to correct these problems. Several men also noted that weak manhood led to problems in women's behavior, including promiscuity, fiscal irresponsibility, and disobedience. They further asserted that it was frequently the failure of women to respect men's authority that undermined a man's ability to fulfill his familial and community obligations. This conversation and many others like it, as well as countless sermons I observed in Pentecostal churches, convinced me that part of Pentecostal Christianity's appeal to men was its potential to reestablish a patriarchal bargain in an era when men's authority as men appears threatened on many fronts. But while Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity's preferred version of gender dynamics in marriage appears to offer some protection against domestic violence and other egregious consequences of gender inequality, arguably it fundamentally preserves patriarchy. Thus, it leaves in place – and even strengthens – some of the gender dynamics that make intimate partner violence possible in the first place.

## **Conclusion**

When I was doing fieldwork in the mid-1990s, during and after the Fourth World Congress on Women in Beijing, many men in Nigeria jokingly referred to efforts of their wives or other women to challenge or change the nature of male authority as “Beijing.” The men vowed: “Africa [or Nigeria] is not Beijing.” The assertion that masculine authority – and by implication male privilege – is culturally rooted remains common in Nigeria. Of course, this view that male authority and privilege are quintessentially “African” has been observed elsewhere (e.g., see Spronk 2012 for Kenya), and the naturalized ideas about masculine privilege and power are common throughout the world. But the very fact that my male interlocutors in Nigeria were cognizant of the conference in Beijing and aware of (if resistant to) its implications in their setting is, I think, firm evidence that things are indeed changing.

Sally Engle Merry (2006) has written convincingly about the processes by which women’s rights in general and the right to protection from gender-based intimate partner violence in particular become acknowledged and eventually adopted in new settings around the globe. While my purpose in this paper has been to document the social and cultural forces at work that continue to enable intimate partner violence in southeastern Nigeria and make marital rape an almost culturally unrecognizable category, I want to conclude by pointing out that many of the processes that Merry describes are underway, if not complete, in Nigeria. Admittedly, some signs remain worrisome. For example, although law can at sometimes lead to positive social change, in Nigeria, with regard to marital rape, it is clearly not leading the way, as Nigerian law still protects marital rape. Other signs are mixed. While one might imagine that the rise of love marriage could be good for women’s rights, some of my ethnographic evidence suggests that it might make confronting abusive (and unfaithful) husbands even harder. Further,

ever-more popular Pentecostal Christian churches seem to be a place where women can seek help with abusive husbands and these churches push men to behave better. But they also reestablish the patriarchal bargain in ways that leave men's power intact – or even augment it. Nevertheless, despite these elements of social life that protect male privilege and facilitate, or at least tolerate, intimate partner violence and marital rape, major changes are afoot.

As I briefly alluded to above, a plethora of civil society groups such as NGOs and community-based organizations have taken up the cause of women's rights and gender-based violence, though few specifically focus on marital rape. Further, one can increasingly find stories in Nigerian newspapers, magazines and on TV and radio that address a variety of women's rights issues. These messages meet a world where more and more Nigerian women are well educated, they are more likely to work outside the home, and their participation in politics is gradually growing. All of these things bode well. But based on my research and experience in Nigeria, I think much greater attention to men and masculinity is needed. Policies, programs, messages, and interventions aimed at curbing domestic violence could better address the realities of men's lives. Instead of condemning – or apologizing for – men's bad behavior, it would be better to recognize that even abusive men are caught up in the performance of masculinity. There is no way to stop men from trying to be men, but it might be possible to slowly shift what that means.

### **Notes**

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. I had female research assistants interview women about sensitive topics rather than attempting to do so myself.

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