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PERCEIVED IMPACT OF PRE-MARITAL COUNSELLING ON PHYSICAL ABUSE AND SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG IGEDE SPOUSE OF OJU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, BENUE STATE

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse and sexual abuse among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. Two research questions guided the study and two null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study was 1,100 married persons in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. A sample of 278 respondents was selected using the Research Advisor Table (2020). A multi-stage sampling technique involving purposive, proportionate stratified and simple random sampling procedures was employed. The researcher developed an instrument titled Pre-marital Counselling and Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse Questionnaire (PCPASAQ), which contained 30 items. The instrument was validated by experts, while its reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha method, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.66. Data collected were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations to answer the research questions, while Chi-square goodness-of-fit was used to test the null hypotheses. The findings revealed that respondents perceived pre-marital counselling as helpful in reducing physical abuse and sexual abuse among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. The findings further revealed significant differences in respondents' opinions regarding physical abuse ($\chi^2 = 124.70$, $p < .001$) and sexual abuse ($\chi^2 = 166.36$, $p < .001$). The study concluded that pre-marital counselling was perceived as an important means of encouraging peaceful conflict resolution, mutual respect, effective communication and sexual consent among married couples. Based on the findings, the study recommended, among others, that counsellors should educate intending couples on anger management and non-violent conflict resolution, while religious and traditional marriage institutions should include education on sexual consent and mutual respect in their marriage preparation programmes.

Keywords: Pre-marital counselling, physical abuse, sexual abuse,

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Introduction

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) remains a serious and widespread problem, affecting individuals across all regions and cultures. According to the World Health Organization (2021), about 1 in 3 people worldwide (approximately 30%) have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, mostly by an intimate partner. This shows that violence often happens within close relationships, especially marriage. Despite increasing recognition of premarital counselling as a way to prepare couples for healthy relationships, most global interventions still focus on responding to violence after it has already occurred rather than preventing it early. In Africa, the situation reflects similar concerns but is often intensified by economic hardship, cultural norms and gender inequality. Studies show that up to 36–46% of women in sub-Saharan Africa experience some form of intimate partner violence (Okoro, 2022). Factors such as financial stress, unemployment and strong beliefs in male dominance increase the risk of violence in relationships. In Nigeria, GBV continues to be a major social problem. Reports indicate that about 30% of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence, while many cases remain unreported due to stigma and cultural pressures. Government efforts have largely focused on legal reforms and public awareness campaigns. While these are important, they often do not address the root causes within relationships (Usman, 2022). In Benue State and among the Igede people in Oju Local Government Area, marriage is strongly related with cultural traditions that emphasize male authority and female submission. While these norms help maintain social order, they may also unintentionally support controlling behaviours and limit open communication between partners in such condition premarital counselling is either rare or not culturally emphasized, reducing opportunities for couples to discuss expectations, roles and conflict resolution before marriage.

Physical abuse refers to the intentional use of force against a partner, resulting in pain, injury, or bodily harm. It includes acts such as hitting, slapping, kicking, choking, or using objects to inflict harm. Victims often experience fear, insecurity and long-term emotional and physical health problems. Reports show that physical violence remains one of the most common forms of partner abuse, especially in rural areas where cultural norms reinforce male authority (Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey [NDHS], 2022). Research also indicates that expectations of male dominance contribute to violent control during conflict (Makama, 2021). Physical abuse destroys trust, affects children who witness violence and reduces victims' confidence over time. Many survivors remain silent due to cultural pressure and financial dependence. The high rate of physical abuse in marriages calls for quick and many-sided ways to stop it. Research shows about 20% of couples face some physical violence in the first few years of marriage (Leary. 2020). This number shows how weak relationships can be without preparation. According to Erim, Ugbe and Nwoye (2025), who reported an inverse relationship between counselling support and domestic violence. To Iyeke (2023), who reported higher levels of spouse abuse among married persons who had not participated in pre-marital counselling. These studies are consistent with the present finding because they connect counselling with a lower risk of abusive behaviour.

Sexual abuse is closely connected to physical abuse because both forms are rooted in power, control and dominance in intimate relationships. Sexual abuse may refer to forcing or pressuring a partner into sexual activities without free consent, including marital rape, coerced sex, and unwanted touching. Survivors often suffer emotional trauma, shame, fear, and reproductive health problems. Many women report sexual coercion within marriage but are unable to speak out due to strong cultural expectations of obedience (NDHS, 2022). Studies also

show that unequal gender power contributes significantly to sexual violence in intimate relationships (Amuda, 2020). Sexual abuse damages trust, weakens emotional intimacy, and contributes to long-term psychological distress. Pre-marital counselling is a structured support process that prepares couples for marriage by teaching basic relationship skills such as communication, conflict management, and shared expectations about family life (Hunter & Commerford, 2015). García and Fernández (2021), who reported that a counselling module on consent and sexual ethics reduced tolerance of sexual coercion. It also agrees with Omondi and Chebet (2019), who reported better communication about sexual needs and a lower incidence of sexually abusive practices among couples who received counselling.

Statement of the problem

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious problem across the world, affecting individuals, families and communities. It includes physical violence and sexual violence, and controlling behaviour, with women and girls being the most affected. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), nearly one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Such experiences may result in injuries, unwanted pregnancies, depression, anxiety, trauma and difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships. In Nigeria, many cases of GBV remain unreported because victims fear shame, retaliation, family rejection or financial hardship (Ojo, 2021). The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey also indicates that intimate partners are among the major perpetrators of sexual violence against married women. In Benue State, insecurity, displacement, poverty and harmful cultural practices may further expose women to different forms of violence and limit their access to protection and support services.

In Oju Local Government Area of Benue State, physical violence and sexual violence remains a concern among married couples, particularly where cultural beliefs, unequal power relations and family expectations discourage victims from reporting abuse. Some marital conflicts are settled through family meetings that may place greater importance on preserving marriage than protecting victims. Practices associated with bride price, male dominance and expectations of female submission may also contribute to violence within marriage (Ojeata, 2020). Although pre-marital counselling is intended to prepare intending couples for marriage through education on communication, conflict resolution, mutual respect and marital responsibilities, it is unclear how spouses perceive its contribution to reducing gender-based violence among the Igede people. Furthermore, limited local research has examined whether pre-marital counselling is perceived to influence physical violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse and other forms of violence within marriage. It is against this background that the researcher seeks to investigate the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical violence and sexual violence among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse and sexual abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State.
2. find out perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on sexual abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State?
2. What is the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on sexual abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State.
2. There is no significant perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on sexual abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State

Methodology

The study investigated pre-marital counselling and physical abuse and sexual abuse among married persons in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study was 1,100 married persons, from which a sample of 278 respondents was selected using the Research Advisor Table (2020). A multi-stage sampling technique involving purposive, proportionate stratified and simple random sampling procedures was employed. The instrument used for data collection was a researcher-developed questionnaire titled Pre-marital Counselling and Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse Questionnaire (PCPASAQ), which contained 30 items: physical and sexual. The instrument was validated by experts, while its reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, yielding an overall coefficient of 0.66. Data collected were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations to answer the research questions, while Chi-square goodness-of-fit was used to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question One: What is the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Perceived Impact of Pre-marital Counselling on Physical Abuse among Igede Spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State

Item No	Item Description	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	Pre-marital counselling helps couples learn non-violent ways of resolving conflicts.	120	100	30	20	3.19	0.47	Agree
2	Pre-marital counselling help partners identify their personal triggers.	160	84	20	6	3.47	0.73	Agree
3	Pre-marital counselling reduces the likelihood of beating in marriage.	110	91	40	29	3.04	0.73	Agree
4	Pre-marital counselling encourages mutual respect which discourages physical aggression	160	80	20	10	3.44	1.04	Agree
5	Pre-marital counselling improves communication, thereby reducing physical confrontation.	123	67	45	35	3.07	0.66	Agree
	Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation	**135**	**84**	**31**	**20**	**3.24**	**0.90**	Agree

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Table 1 reveals that the mean ($\bar{x}$) of the five items are 3.19, 3.47, 3.04, 3.44, and 3.03, with their corresponding standard deviations (SD) of 0.90, 0.73, 0.99, 0.79, and 1.07 respectively. These results indicate that the respondents strongly agreed that pre-marital counselling helps couples learn non-violent ways of resolving conflicts, helps partners identify their personal triggers, reduces the likelihood of beating in marriage, encourages mutual respect, and improves communication, thereby reducing physical confrontation. The cluster mean of 3.24 and standard deviation of 0.90 shows that the respondents strongly agreed that pre-marital counselling has perceived impact on physical abuse among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State.

Research Question Two: What is the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on sexual abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Perceived Impact of Pre-marital Counselling on Sexual Abuse among Igede Spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State

Item No	Item Description	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
6	Pre-marital counselling teaches that sex should be based on mutual consent between partners	150	100	10	10	3.44	0.74	Agree
7	Pre-marital counselling helps couples discuss sexual expectations respectfully before marriage.	112	78	50	20	3.08	0.96	Agree
8	Pre-marital counselling discourages forced sex in marriage.	190	50	20	10	3.56	0.79	Agree
9	Pre-marital counselling promotes understanding of each partner's sexual rights	155	50	35	30	3.31	0.97	Agree
10	pre-marital counselling helps couples handle sexual disagreements without pressure	160	70	25	15	3.39	0.87	Agree
	Cluster Mean and Standard Deviation	**153**	**70**	**28**	**19**	**3.36**	**0.86**	Agree

Table 2 reveals that the mean ($\bar{x}$) of the five items are 3.44, 3.08, 3.56, 3.31, and 3.39, with their corresponding standard deviations (SD) of 0.74, 0.96, 0.79, 0.97, and 0.87 respectively. These results indicate that the respondents strongly agreed that pre-marital counselling teaches couples that sex should be based on mutual consent, helps couples discuss sexual expectations respectfully before marriage, discourages forced sex in marriage, promotes understanding of each partner's sexual rights, and helps couples handle sexual disagreements without pressure. The cluster mean of 3.36 and standard deviation of 0.86 shows that the respondents strongly agreed that pre-marital counselling has perceived impact on sexual abuse among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State

Table 3: Chi-Square Test of the Perceived Impact of Pre-Marital Counselling on Physical Abuse among Igede Spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State

Opinion	Observed N	Expected N	Df	Level of Sign	Chi-Square Cal	P. Value	Decision
Strongly Agree	135	67.5	3	0.05	124.70	< .001	Rejected
Agree	84	67.5					
Disagree	31	67.5					
Strongly Disagree	20	67.5					

Table 3 reveals that the calculated chi-square value is $\chi^2 = 124.70$, at df = 3, with $p < .001$. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a significant difference in respondents' opinions on the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on physical abuse among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. Most respondents agreed that pre-marital counselling helps to reduce physical abuse.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on sexual abuse among Igede spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State

Table 4: Chi-Square Test of the Perceived Impact of Pre-Marital Counselling on Sexual Abuse among Igede Spouse of Oju Local Government Area of Benue State

Opinion	Observed N	Expected N	Df	Level of Sign	Chi-Square Cal	P. Value	Decision
Strongly Agree	153	67.5	3	0.05	166.36	< .001	Rejected
Agree	70	67.5					
Disagree	28	67.5					
Strongly Disagree	19	67.5					

Table 4 reveals that the calculated chi-square value is $\chi^2 = 166.36$, at df = 3, with $p < .001$. Since the p-value is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a significant difference in respondents' opinions on the perceived impact of pre-marital counselling on sexual abuse among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. Most respondents agreed that pre-marital counselling helps to reduce sexual abuse.

Discussion of findings

The discussion of major findings of the study was organized around the research questions and hypotheses of the study for ease of reading and comprehension

The finding for hypothesis one shows that respondents perceived pre-marital counselling as helpful in reducing physical abuse among Igede spouses in Oju Local Government Area of Benue State. This perception suggests that respondents value the opportunity for intending couples to discuss anger, disagreement and non-violent conflict resolution before marriage. The finding agrees with Erim, Ugbe and Nwoye (2025), who reported an inverse relationship between counselling support and domestic violence. It also agrees with Iyeke (2023), who reported higher levels of spouse abuse among married persons who had not participated in pre-marital counselling. These studies are consistent with the present finding because they connect counselling with a lower risk of abusive behaviour. However, the present study measured respondents' perceptions; it establishes that pre-marital counselling reduced physical abuse. The researcher therefore holds that pre-marital counselling help couples recognize and reject physical aggression.

The finding for hypothesis two showed that respondents perceived pre-marital counselling as helpful in reducing sexual abuse. This may be because counselling provides a setting in which intending couples can discuss consent, sexual expectations and respect for each partner's wishes before marriage. The finding agrees with García and Fernández (2021), who reported that a counselling module on consent and sexual ethics reduced tolerance of sexual coercion. It also agrees with Omondi and Chebet (2019), who reported better communication about sexual needs and a lower incidence of sexually abusive practices among couples who received counselling. The agreement lies in the emphasis on consent and communication as possible safeguards against sexual coercion. Nevertheless, those studies examined outcomes beyond perception, whereas the present study establishes only what respondents believe counselling can do. The researcher's position is that consent and respectful communication should be explicit parts of pre-marital counselling.

Conclusion

The study established that pre-marital counselling has significant perceived impact on physical and sexual abuse among Igede spouses. This means that when intending couples are properly exposed to pre-marital counselling before marriage, they learn important skills such as peaceful conflict resolution, mutual respect, emotional control and sexual consent. Therefore, pre-marital counselling is an important preventive counselling strategy for reducing physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, economic and educational abuse in marriage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Counsellors should counsel intending couples on how to manage anger and settle disagreements without violence. During pre-marital counselling, they should use familiar situations, such as disputes over money or family responsibilities, and allow couples to practice discussing them calmly. This may help couples avoid physical confrontation in marriage.
2. Religious and traditional marriage institutions should include sexual consent in their marriage preparation programmes. Counsellors should explain that both spouses must respect each other's wishes and should give couples an opportunity to discuss sexual expectations privately. This may help prevent coercion and sexual abuse.

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