

THE ROLE OF PREMARITAL COUNSELLING IN STRENGTHENING MARITAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA: THE NEED FOR POLICY INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Marriage remains the cornerstone of social organization in Nigeria, yet rising rates of marital dissolution, domestic conflict, and emotional distress among couples signal a growing instability that threatens family structures and national development. Recent data indicates that Nigeria now ranks 11th among countries with the highest divorce rates globally, with a crude marital dissolution rate of 11 per 1,000 population and a divorce rate of 2.9% in 2023. This conceptual paper examines the role of premarital counselling in strengthening marital stability and assesses the imperative for integrating such counselling into national policy. Drawing on Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the paper argues that structured premarital preparation equips couples with the psychological, emotional, relational, and practical competencies required for sustainable married life. The paper synthesizes contemporary literature to demonstrate that premarital counselling enhances communication, conflict resolution, financial management, and marital commitment. It further contends that the absence of a national policy framework for premarital counselling in Nigeria leaves the majority of couples without adequate preparation, perpetuating a cycle of preventable marital distress. Recent state-level initiatives, such as Lagos State's compulsory pre-marital preparatory counselling (2022) and Kano State's premarital health screening law (2024), represent promising but fragmented steps toward policy integration. The paper recommends that the National Assembly amend the Marriage Act to mandate premarital counselling, and that state governments fund community-based counselling programmes to ensure universal accessibility.

Keywords: premarital counselling, marital stability, policy integration, marriage preparation, family systems theory

Introduction

Marriage in Nigeria is not merely a union between two individuals; it is a social institution that binds families, communities, and entire lineages together. Across the country's diverse ethnic and religious landscape, marriage is celebrated as a rite of passage, a marker of adulthood, and a foundation for procreation and economic cooperation. Yet beneath the colourful ceremonies and cultural fanfare lies a troubling reality: Nigerian marriages are increasingly fragile. Empirical reports from the National Population Commission, civil society organizations, and family courts indicate a steady rise in divorce, separation, and domestic conflict across all geopolitical zones (Adegoke, 2010; Noimo & Akokawebé, 2014). What was once considered a lifelong covenant is now, for many couples, a provisional arrangement vulnerable to the slightest stress.

Recent data has brought this crisis into sharper focus. According to a 2024 report by Divorce.com, Nigeria ranks 11th out of 26 countries with the highest divorce rates globally. The crude marital dissolution rate stands at 11 per 1,000 population, and among those ever married, the rate is 29.5 per 1,000. Nigeria's divorce rate reached 2.9% in 2023, translating to 1.8 divorces per 1,000 people. Strikingly, 62% of divorce cases are initiated by wives, with financial issues identified as the leading cause (1,035 cases by wives, 498 by husbands), followed by infidelity and incompatibility. The highest concentration of divorces occurs between ages 30 to 39, peaking at 35 to 40 years (Afolayan, 2025; Africa Check, 2025). Regional disparities are significant: the South-South zone records the highest marital dissolution rate (7.2%), followed by the South-West (6.5%), while the North-West reports the lowest official rate (1.3%), though qualitative evidence suggests Kano State may have one of the highest actual divorce rates, with approximately 32% of marriages ending within three to six months (Arigbede, 2025).

The causes of marital instability are multifaceted. Economic hardship, infidelity, interference from extended family members, unrealistic expectations, poor communication, and inadequate conflict resolution skills have all been implicated in the growing crisis (Adegoke, 2010; Maciver & Dinkpa, 2012). However, one factor that has received insufficient attention in both policy and practice is the absence of structured preparation for marriage. Most couples enter matrimony with little more than romantic idealism and cultural scripts that offer no practical guidance for navigating the complexities of shared life. They are expected to learn marriage by doing it, often at great emotional and financial cost.

Premarital counselling offers a proactive alternative. Defined as a structured educational and therapeutic process designed to prepare couples for marriage, premarital counselling addresses the psychological, emotional, relational, and practical dimensions of married life. It typically covers communication skills, conflict resolution, financial management, sexual compatibility, family planning, role expectations, and spiritual alignment. Research from developed and developing contexts consistently shows that couples who undergo premarital counselling report higher marital satisfaction, lower conflict rates, and reduced likelihood of divorce compared with those who do not (Hawkins et al., 2008; Fawcett et al., 2010).

In Nigeria, premarital counselling is currently offered in an ad hoc manner, primarily through religious institutions such as churches and mosques, and a handful of non-governmental organizations. While these efforts are commendable, they lack standardization, government oversight, and universal accessibility. A couple married in a Pentecostal church in Lagos may receive rigorous counselling, while another married in a rural mosque in Niger State may receive none at all. This patchwork approach means that the benefits of premarital counselling reach

only a fraction of the population, leaving the majority of Nigerian couples to navigate marriage without adequate preparation.

The theoretical rationale for premarital counselling is well established. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory posits that individuals bring their family of origin patterns into marriage, and that understanding these patterns is essential for establishing healthy, differentiated relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Premarital counselling, from this perspective, helps couples recognize how their upbringing shapes their expectations, communication styles, and conflict tendencies, thereby reducing the anxiety and reactivity that often destabilize marriages. Despite the evident benefits of premarital counselling and the theoretical frameworks that support it, Nigeria has no national policy mandating or regulating premarital counselling. The Marriage Act, which governs civil marriages, makes no reference to counselling requirements. Customary and Islamic marriages, which account for the majority of unions, are governed by traditional and religious authorities with no obligation to provide structured preparation. This policy vacuum represents a missed opportunity for preventive mental health care and family strengthening. It also contradicts global best practices, where countries such as Singapore and the United States have integrated premarital education into their legal and social welfare frameworks with measurable success (Ismail, 2021; Markman et al., 2010).

However, recent developments at the state level signal growing recognition of this gap. In August 2022, the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency, in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government and Community Affairs, introduced compulsory effective premarital preparatory counselling for intending couples. The initiative was prompted by statistics showing that at least 80% of clients reporting matrimonial abuses had pre-existing knowledge of their partner's anomalous behaviour but proceeded with the union ignoring red flags (Lagos State Ministry of Justice, 2022). Similarly, in May 2024, the Kano State Governor signed into law a premarital health screening bill mandating medical screenings for HIV, hepatitis, and sickle cell anaemia before marriage, with violators risking five-year imprisonment (The Guardian Nigeria, 2024). While these state-level initiatives represent important steps, they remain fragmented and do not constitute a comprehensive national framework for premarital counselling.

Lapai Local Government Area in Niger State provides a microcosm of the national challenge. As a predominantly rural and semi-urban community with a mixed Muslim and Christian population, Lapai reflects the religious diversity, economic pressures, and cultural traditions that shape marital dynamics across North Central Nigeria. The absence of structured premarital preparation in this context underscores the urgency of examining how policy integration might strengthen marital stability at both local and national levels.

Despite Bowen's Family Systems Theory establishing that marital stability depends fundamentally on differentiation of self and the resolution of multigenerational emotional patterns, existing premarital counselling programmes in Nigeria remain largely atheoretical or rely on imported Western intervention models that neglect family-of-origin dynamics. This theoretical misalignment creates a critical inconsistency: programmes routinely address surface-level communication deficits while failing to target the underlying systemic reactivity and chronic anxiety rooted in undifferentiated family ego masses, which explains why structured counselling sometimes produces limited effectiveness in key adjustment areas. Consequently, Nigerian policy and practice lack a theoretically grounded framework for premarital preparation, leaving legislators and practitioners without the conceptual architecture needed to design interventions that actually alter the multigenerational transmission of relational dysfunction.

Theoretical Framework

Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, developed in the 1960s and articulated in his seminal work *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (1978), provides a comprehensive lens for understanding marital dynamics. Bowen proposed that individuals are not isolated psychological units but are embedded in multigenerational family systems that shape their emotional functioning, relational patterns, and capacity for intimacy (Bowen, 1978). Central to Bowen's theory is the concept of differentiation of self, which refers to the ability to maintain one's emotional autonomy while remaining emotionally connected to significant others. Individuals with low differentiation tend to be emotionally reactive, easily overwhelmed by relational stress, and prone to fusion with or cutoff from family members (Skowron, 2000).

In the context of marriage, Bowen's theory predicts that couples who enter matrimony with unresolved emotional ties to their families of origin will struggle to establish a stable, autonomous marital unit. They may triangulate a child, a parent, or even a job into the marital relationship to diffuse anxiety. They may also replicate the dysfunctional communication patterns they observed in their parents' marriage. Premarital counselling, from a Bowenian perspective, is not merely about teaching communication techniques; it is about helping each partner understand their family of origin influences, recognize their differentiation level, and develop the emotional maturity needed to navigate marital stress without regressing to reactive patterns (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Bowen's concept of the genogram, a visual mapping of family relationships across three or more generations, is a particularly powerful premarital counselling tool. By constructing and discussing their genograms, couples gain insight into inherited patterns of conflict, intimacy, and emotional distance. They learn to anticipate how their family histories might resurface in their own marriage and develop strategies for maintaining differentiation. In the Nigerian context, where extended family involvement in marriage is both culturally expected and frequently a source of conflict, Bowen's emphasis on differentiation is especially relevant. Premarital counselling that addresses family of origin dynamics can help couples establish boundaries that honour cultural obligations without sacrificing marital autonomy.

Bowen also introduced the concept of chronic anxiety in family systems, which is the baseline emotional tension that exists in all relationships and intensifies under stress. Well-differentiated couples can manage this anxiety through calm, rational dialogue. Poorly differentiated couples escalate into conflict, withdrawal, or symptom formation such as physical illness or emotional breakdown. Premarital counselling that builds differentiation skills, including emotional self-regulation, clear communication, and the ability to hold multiple perspectives, therefore serves as a preventive intervention against the chronic anxiety that destabilizes marriages.

Conceptual Review of Literature

The empirical and conceptual literature on premarital counselling and marital stability has expanded considerably over the past two decades. This review synthesizes relevant scholarship with particular attention to African and international contexts.

Hawkins et al. (2008) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of marriage and relationship education programmes and found that participants generally showed modest but meaningful gains in relationship quality and communication skills. Fawcett et al. (2010), in a subsequent meta-analytic review specifically focused on premarital education, reported that these programmes produce immediate and short-term gains in interpersonal skills and overall

relationship quality, although they cautioned that effect sizes are variable and depend heavily on programme design and delivery. Carroll and Doherty (2003) earlier reached similar conclusions, noting that premarital prevention programmes are generally effective but that stronger research designs are needed to confirm long-term marital outcomes.

In the African context, Egbo (2012) examined the influence of premarital counselling on social adjustment and marital stability among couples in Enugu Metropolis, Nigeria, and found that structured counselling was positively associated with marital stability. Udofia et al. (2021), in a cross-sectional survey of 720 married couples in Accra, Ghana, found that couples who attended premarital counselling were significantly more satisfied with their marriages than those who did not, with intimacy and self-esteem serving as important mediating variables. Ansah-Hughes et al. (2015) surveyed married people in Techiman, Ghana, and reported overwhelmingly positive perceptions of premarital counselling, with respondents viewing it as essential for marital success. Adzoviel and Dabone (2021) similarly found that married Christians in Ghana perceived a strong relationship between premarital counselling and marital success, particularly when counselling addressed communication and financial management.

However, recent Nigerian research has introduced important caveats. Aondona et al. (recent), in a study of Catholic dioceses in Benue State, found that premarital counselling did not have a significant positive effect on couples' emotional, social, and financial adjustments. Using chi-square goodness-of-fit tests, the researchers concluded that premarital counselling within Catholic dioceses in Benue State appeared to have limited effectiveness in addressing key marital adjustment areas. From a Bowenian perspective, this finding is not surprising: programmes that are too generic, insufficiently interactive, or culturally mismatched may fail to produce the desired outcomes because they do not address the underlying differentiation deficits and family-of-origin reactivity that actually drive marital dysfunction. Even when delivered through established institutions, counselling that neglects multigenerational emotional processes cannot alter the systemic patterns that destabilize marriages (Aondona et al., recent).

From a policy perspective, Ismail (2021) documented the evolution of marriage preparation programmes in Singapore, where the government has actively supported premarital education through the Ministry of Social and Family Development. Singapore's Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programme, adapted from the American PREP model, is now offered with government subsidies and has been integrated into the marriage registration process for minors (Ismail, 2021). This demonstrates that policy integration is both feasible and culturally adaptable, though Bowenian theory would caution that such programmes must be adapted to address family-system dynamics rather than merely teaching behavioural skills.

In the broader African family systems literature, Nwoye (2006) emphasized that effective family interventions in Africa must address the extended family and community, not just the couple. He argued that marital stability depends on the approval and support of kinship networks, and that counselling models imported from the West must be adapted to reflect collectivist family structures. This ecological perspective aligns closely with Bowen's insistence that the family of origin cannot be separated from the marital unit; in the North Central Nigerian context, where marriage is as much a union of families as of individuals, premarital counselling that ignores the extended family system fails to address the very source of chronic anxiety.

Recent geospatial analysis by Arigbede (2025) has added a critical dimension to understanding marital dissolution in Nigeria. Using data from the Nigeria Living Standard Survey (2018/2019) and the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (2018), the study revealed significant regional disparities in marital dissolution rates. The South-South zone recorded the

highest MDR (7.2%), while the South-West followed at 6.5%. The North-West reported the lowest official rate (1.3%), though this figure may be deceptive due to under-documentation and the ease of Islamic divorce procedures. Kano State, in particular, has been labelled the divorce capital of Nigeria, with reports indicating that around 32% of marriages end within three to six months. Factors identified include Islamic jurisprudence allowing men to divorce by pronouncing talaq three times, economic hardship, and the practice of polygamy (Arigbede, 2025). Bowenian theory would interpret these rapid dissolutions as evidence of extremely low differentiation: individuals enter marriage with minimal emotional autonomy, quickly become overwhelmed by the chronic anxiety of shared life, and exit through cutoff rather than developing adaptive relational skills.

Taken together, the literature establishes that premarital counselling is associated with improved marital outcomes when properly designed and delivered, that African couples and communities are generally supportive of counselling, and that policy integration is both feasible and desirable. However, the specific conceptual dynamics of premarital counselling and policy support in rural and semi-urban North Central Nigeria remain underdeveloped, justifying the present conceptual examination as a necessary contribution to the literature.

Conceptual Discussion

Premarital Counselling and Marital Stability

The conceptual analysis advanced in this paper suggests that premarital counselling plays a significant role in strengthening marital stability when it is grounded in systemic rather than behavioural principles. Hawkins et al. (2008) found meaningful positive effects for relationship education across multiple outcomes, while Fawcett et al. (2010) confirmed that premarital programmes improve couple communication and relationship satisfaction. The present conceptualization extends these findings to the North Central Nigerian context by arguing that such improvements are sustainable only when they reflect genuine gains in differentiation of self rather than superficial technique acquisition.

Communication improvement and conflict resolution emerge as the domains most strengthened by premarital counselling, but only when understood through a Bowenian lens. In rural and semi-urban Northern Nigerian communities, where extended family interference and economic pressure are common sources of marital conflict, the ability to communicate effectively depends not on learning scripted responses but on reducing emotional reactivity rooted in family-of-origin patterns. Premarital counselling that uses genogram construction to help partners recognize how their parents managed conflict, and whether they are replicating or reacting against those patterns, addresses the systemic source of dysfunction rather than its symptoms.

From a theoretical perspective, Bowen's Family Systems Theory explains why premarital counselling strengthens marital stability. By helping couples understand their family of origin patterns, counselling reduces the emotional reactivity that often derails marriages. A husband who recognizes that his explosive anger mirrors his father's pattern can consciously choose a differentiated response rather than fusing with the multigenerational transmission of reactivity. A wife who understands that her tendency to withdraw during conflict stems from her mother's example can practice staying engaged without losing self. This differentiation of self, the capacity to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining connected, is the cornerstone of Bowen's theory and the mechanism through which premarital counselling exerts its stabilizing effect (Bowen, 1978; Skowron, 2000).

Bowen's concept of triangulation is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context, where in-laws, children, and even community members are frequently drawn into marital tensions to diffuse anxiety. Premarital counselling that builds differentiation helps couples contain their anxiety within the marital dyad rather than triangulating third parties. When partners can regulate their own emotional functioning, they cease to require external stabilizers, and the marriage develops into a solid self rather than a fragile fusion of undifferentiated selves.

Chronic anxiety represents another critical Bowenian mechanism. Nigerian marriages operate under extraordinary systemic stressors, including economic instability, polygamous pressures, ethnic and religious differences, and intense extended family involvement, that elevate baseline anxiety. Poorly differentiated couples experience this anxiety as an existential threat to the relationship, leading to escalation, withdrawal, or rapid dissolution. Premarital counselling that builds differentiation skills, including emotional self-regulation, the ability to hold multiple perspectives, and the capacity to remain an individual while emotionally connected, serves as a preventive intervention against the chronic anxiety that destabilizes marriages.

Policy Integration: A Public Mandate

The need for integrating premarital counselling into national marriage policy appears strongly justified from a family systems perspective. The highest priority policy mechanism is mandatory counselling before marriage registration, suggesting that the married population views premarital counselling not as a voluntary luxury but as a prerequisite for responsible marriage. This aligns with findings from Ghana, where married couples expressed strong support for mandatory premarital counselling (Ansah-Hughes et al., 2015; Adzoviel & Dabone, 2021).

The strong conceptual case for government funding of community-based programmes and amendment of the Marriage Act indicates that policy integration should be understood as a government responsibility, not merely a religious or civil society initiative. In a country where public trust in government is often low, the fact that citizens are calling for government involvement in marriage preparation suggests a recognition that the state has a legitimate stake in family stability. Stable families produce healthier children, more productive workers, and more cohesive communities, all outcomes that serve the public interest.

Recent state-level initiatives provide both encouragement and caution. Lagos State's compulsory pre-marital preparatory counselling, launched in August 2022, represents the most comprehensive sub-national policy intervention to date. The programme was developed after the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency found that 80% of clients reporting matrimonial abuses had pre-existing knowledge of their partner's anomalous behaviour but proceeded with the union regardless. From a Bowenian perspective, this pattern reflects poor differentiation: individuals who cannot maintain emotional autonomy in the face of romantic attachment ignore red flags because they lack the solid self to tolerate the anxiety of ending the relationship. The three-day intensive interactive training workshop for marriage officials covered gender and sex roles, concepts of marriage, understanding love, marital wellness, and best practices for counselling (Lagos State Ministry of Justice, 2022). This evidence-based approach offers a model for other states, though Bowenian theory would recommend adding explicit family-of-origin and differentiation components.

Kano State's premarital health screening law, signed in May 2024, takes a different but complementary approach. By mandating medical screenings for HIV, hepatitis, and sickle cell anaemia before marriage, the law addresses a critical health dimension of marital preparation. The law carries significant enforcement power, with violators risking five-year imprisonment. While primarily a public health measure, this legislation creates a precedent for state-mandated

pre-marital requirements that could be expanded to include psychological and relational preparation (The Guardian Nigeria, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024).

Integrating counselling into traditional marriage rites reflects the complexity of policy implementation in a pluralistic society. Traditional marriage ceremonies in Nigeria are governed by ethnic and community customs that vary enormously across regions. Mandating counselling within these ceremonies would require navigating a labyrinth of cultural protocols, family hierarchies, and religious sensitivities. Bowenian theory supports this integration because traditional ceremonies already involve the extended family system; adding a systemic counselling component would simply make explicit the multigenerational dynamics that already shape the marriage. However, the practical challenges of implementation remain significant.

Carroll and Doherty (2003) emphasized that policy integration is most effective when it combines legal requirements with accessible, high-quality service delivery. Simply mandating counselling without ensuring that competent providers, standardized curricula, and affordable access exist would create a policy facade, with requirements on paper but little real impact. From a Bowenian standpoint, quality assurance must include training counsellors to address differentiation and family-of-origin dynamics, not just communication scripts. The literature on religious leader training and local government marriage preparation centres suggests that stakeholders understand this distinction. They want not just policy but theoretically grounded infrastructure.

For a country like Nigeria, where health and social welfare budgets are chronically underfunded, premarital counselling represents a rare example of a preventive intervention that is both cost-effective and politically popular. When divorce proceedings, child custody disputes, domestic violence interventions, and mental health treatment for distressed couples are factored in, the return on investment is compelling.

The Counselling Effect: Conceptual Mechanisms

The counselling effect, which is the differential impact of premarital preparation on subsequent marital stability, operates through several identifiable mechanisms grounded in family systems theory. Those who receive counselling typically report higher marital stability than those who do not, a difference that persists even in challenging contexts where access to professional counselling services is limited and cultural norms may discourage open discussion of marital problems. That the effect persists across diverse African settings suggests that premarital counselling is robust when it addresses systemic rather than merely behavioural change (Udofia et al., 2021; Egbo, 2012).

It is important to note that self-selection may partially explain the counselling effect. Individuals who seek premarital counselling may already possess traits such as conscientiousness, openness to learning, or higher education that predispose them to more stable marriages. Nevertheless, the magnitude and consistency of the effect across multiple studies provides strong circumstantial evidence that premarital counselling contributes to marital stability, particularly when it is theoretically grounded.

From a Bowenian perspective, the counselling effect operates through differentiation. Couples who receive premarital counselling are better able to recognize their family of origin influences, manage their emotional reactivity, and maintain a stable sense of self within the marital relationship. They are less likely to triangulate children or in-laws into marital conflicts, less likely to engage in cutoff or fusion as coping mechanisms, and more likely to approach problems with calm rationality rather than reactive emotionality. These differentiated responses accumulate over time, producing greater stability (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

When counselled couples enter marriage with higher differentiation, they experience the inevitable stressors of shared life, including financial pressure, in-law interference, sexual adjustment, and child-rearing disagreements, not as threats to their individual existence but as manageable challenges within a solid self. Their chronic anxiety remains lower because they do not depend on their partner's emotional state for their own stability. As a result, they can navigate the multigenerational transmission of dysfunction without simply replicating it in the next generation.

Gender and Religious Dimensions of Policy Support

Gender appears to exert a neutral influence on policy integration support. Male and female respondents in Northern Nigerian communities appear to hold similar views on the need for premarital counselling policy integration. This gender neutrality is noteworthy in a context where gender roles in marriage are often sharply differentiated. One might expect women, who typically bear the greater burden of marital breakdown through custodial responsibility, economic vulnerability, and social stigma, to express stronger support for preventive interventions. Alternatively, one might expect men, who often control marriage decisions in patriarchal Northern Nigerian communities, to resist government intrusion into a traditionally male domain.

The absence of a gender difference suggests that the benefits of premarital counselling are perceived as universal rather than gender-specific. Both men and women recognize that differentiation, communication skills, conflict resolution, financial planning, and realistic expectations serve the interests of both spouses. For policymakers, the gender neutrality of support is advantageous. It means that premarital counselling policy is unlikely to face gender-based opposition and may, in fact, serve as a rare area of consensus in a society often divided by gender politics.

Religion, however, introduces meaningful variation in policy support. Christian respondents tend to express higher support for policy integration than Muslim respondents, though both groups endorse the concept at above-average levels. The difference, while notable, is relatively small in practical terms. Nevertheless, the divergence may reflect deeper differences in how each religious community conceptualizes marriage preparation and the role of the state.

In the Christian community, premarital counselling is often already institutionalized through church programmes. Many Christian denominations require couples to undergo counselling before church weddings, and respondents may view policy integration as a natural extension of existing practice. The church-based model of counselling, with its emphasis on communication, compatibility testing, and spiritual alignment, may align well with secular policy frameworks, making the transition to government-mandated counselling seem less disruptive. Bowenian theory would note that church programmes often already address family-of-origin issues through pastoral counselling, creating a natural bridge to systemic premarital preparation.

In the Muslim community, marriage preparation is traditionally handled through religious instruction and family negotiation rather than formal counselling. Islamic marriage preparation in Northern Nigeria rarely addresses interpersonal skills, financial planning, or conflict resolution in a structured way (Ismail, 2021). Muslim respondents may therefore view policy integration with greater caution, fearing that government-mandated counselling could conflict with or supplant religiously grounded preparation. The lower support may also reflect a general wariness of state intervention in religious affairs, a sensitivity that is understandable given Nigeria's history of religious-political tension.

For policymakers, this finding underscores the importance of religious inclusivity in any premarital counselling policy. Rather than imposing a secular model that alienates Muslim communities, the policy should be designed in consultation with both Christian and Muslim religious leaders, ensuring that counselling content respects religious values while incorporating evidence-based systemic relational skills. Religious leaders were identified as the most trusted providers of premarital counselling in several African studies, suggesting that a faith-based delivery model may be more effective than a purely secular one in this region (Ansah-Hughes et al., 2015).

Nwoye (2006) argued that effective family interventions in Africa must address the extended family and community, not just the couple. In the North Central Nigerian context, where marriage is as much a union of families as of individuals, premarital counselling that involves parents, in-laws, and community elders may be more culturally appropriate and effective than couple-focused models imported from the West. Bowenian theory strongly supports this approach because the extended family is not an external interference but an integral part of the family system that shapes the couple's emotional functioning. Policy integration should therefore be flexible enough to accommodate community-based and religiously adapted forms of counselling, provided they meet minimum standards of systemic content and quality.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of premarital counselling in strengthening marital stability and the need for its integration into national marriage policy through the lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory. The conceptual analysis demonstrates that premarital counselling strengthens marital stability primarily by improving differentiation of self, reducing emotional reactivity, and preventing the multigenerational transmission of dysfunctional relational patterns, particularly in the domains of communication, conflict resolution, and boundary management with extended families. The strong public support for policy integration, evident across gender and, with careful design, across religious communities, coupled with the theoretical imperative to address systemic rather than symptomatic dysfunction, makes a compelling case for amending the Marriage Act to mandate theoretically grounded premarital counselling, funding community-based programmes, and learning from state-level initiatives in Lagos and Kano. Nigeria cannot afford to treat marriage as a purely private affair when marital instability imposes such heavy social, economic, and developmental costs; premarital counselling, when properly designed to build differentiation rather than merely teach techniques, offers a proven, cost-effective preventive intervention that enjoys strong public support and aligns with the nation's collectivist family structures.

Recommendations

1. The National Assembly should amend the Marriage Act to require proof of premarital counselling completion as a condition for all marriage registrations, specifying minimum hours and core curriculum standards that include family-of-origin assessment and differentiation training. This amendment must apply uniformly to civil, customary, and Islamic marriages to prevent regulatory fragmentation and ensure comprehensive coverage.
2. The Federal Ministry of Health should develop a standardized national framework for premarital counselling that mandates genogram-based family-of-origin assessment, emotional self-regulation training, and quality assurance mechanisms. The framework must require counsellor certification through accredited institutions and specify that religious leaders complete systemic training before being licensed to issue counselling certificates.

3. State and local governments should establish marriage preparation centres in every local government area, staffed by trained counsellors who deliver free or subsidized services to low-income couples. Mobile counselling units should be deployed to rural communities to ensure geographic equity and reach populations that currently lack access to structured premarital preparation.
4. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and randomized controlled trials to track couples from pre-marriage through the early years of marriage, measuring differentiation levels, chronic anxiety indicators, and long-term stability outcomes. Qualitative studies using in-depth interviews should complement quantitative findings by examining how counselled couples in diverse Nigerian contexts navigate family-of-origin influences during marital stress.

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