

**EVALUATION OF DIVORCE AND SEPARATION AMONG NIGERIAN
COUPLES IN RIVERS STATE. (2020 -2025)**

Ukoha Grace

Department of Social Work, Babcock University, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State. Nigeria

Email: graceway320@gmail.com

Abstract

Marriage remains a central social institution in Nigeria, deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and communal values. However, recent years have witnessed increasing cases of divorce and separation among Rivers State couples in Nigeria, raising concerns about family stability and social cohesion. This study evaluates the trends, causes, and implications of divorce and separation in Rivers State, Nigeria between 2020 and 2025 using a qualitative exploratory approach based on secondary data and literature review. Findings indicate that divorce and separation are increasingly influenced by socio-economic pressures, domestic violence, changing gender roles, and evolving cultural expectations. Despite limitations in official data due to multiple marital systems (customary, religious, and statutory), available evidence suggests a steady rise in marital dissolution. The study concludes that addressing economic instability, promoting marital education, and strengthening culturally responsive counselling services are essential for reducing marital breakdown and enhancing family stability in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Keywords: Divorce and separation, Marriage, Marital dissolution, Socio-economic factors, Family stability

1. Introduction

Marriage is universally recognized as a fundamental social institution that provides emotional, economic, and social stability for individuals and the societies. Across the globe, it serves as the primary framework for family formation, child-rearing, and socialization, thereby ensuring cultural continuity and societal order. Beyond its personal significance, marriage also performs broader social functions, including regulating social behaviour, promoting economic cooperation, and sustaining intergenerational relationships. Traditionally, marriage has been viewed as a lifelong commitment anchored in mutual obligations, sacrifice, and societal expectations (Afutuyo, 2025). However, this perception has evolved significantly over time due to processes such as modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and globalization. These transformations

have altered traditional value systems and introduced new perspectives on individual rights, personal fulfilment, and relational satisfaction. Consequently, rising rates of divorce and separation have been observed in many parts of the world, as individuals increasingly prioritize autonomy, emotional well-being, and self-actualization within marital relationships (Amato, 2020).

In many developed societies, divorce has become more socially acceptable and institutionally supported through well-established legal frameworks and social welfare systems. Changing cultural attitudes toward marriage, gender equality, and individual rights have reduced the stigma historically associated with marital dissolution. In these contexts, marriage is increasingly perceived as a partnership based on mutual satisfaction rather than a permanent obligation (Ononokpono et al., 2025). Similarly, developing regions, including those in Africa, are experiencing gradual but significant shifts in marital patterns. Although marriage in African societies has historically been deeply rooted in communal values, extended family systems, and strong cultural and religious norms, contemporary realities are reshaping these traditional structures. Factors such as economic pressures, rural–urban migration, increased access to education, and exposure to global ideologies through media and technology have contributed to changing expectations within marital relationships. As a result, divorce and separation, once strongly stigmatized and often suppressed are becoming more visible across the continent. However, these changes are not uniform and continue to be mediated by deeply embedded socio-cultural and religious constraints that influence both the decision to dissolve marriages and societal reactions to it.

In the Nigerian context, marriage remains one of the most important social institutions, serving as the foundation for family life, socialization, and cultural continuity. It is not merely a union between two individuals but a complex social arrangement that connects families, kinship networks, and communities (Ononokpono et al. 2025). Marriage in Nigeria is reinforced by cultural traditions, religious doctrines, and societal expectations that emphasize stability, procreation, and collective identity. Traditionally, marriage was regarded as permanent, and divorce or separation was relatively rare and strongly discouraged due to the associated stigma and communal pressure to maintain family unity. The extended family system often played a mediating role in resolving marital conflicts, thereby preventing dissolution. However, recent years have witnessed a noticeable increase in cases of marital dissolution across different regions of the country, suggesting a shift in both attitudes and lived realities (Afunugo, 2025).

Divorce, defined as the legal dissolution of marriage, and separation, means couples living apart without formally terminating the union, have become increasingly common phenomena in Nigeria. These developments have raised significant concerns among scholars, policymakers, and social workers due to their implications for family stability, child development, and broader societal cohesion (Amato, 2020). While Nigeria has historically maintained a conservative stance on marriage, it is not insulated from global trends. Divorce rates have risen steadily worldwide due to modernization, urbanization, and changing gender roles, and these dynamics are increasingly evident in the Nigerian context. Empirical studies have identified several interrelated factors contributing to marital instability, including economic hardship, infidelity, domestic

violence, poor communication, and unmet expectations within marriage (Olawale, 2021; Adebowale, 2022). Furthermore, the increasing participation of women in the workforce, coupled with their growing financial independence and educational attainment, has contributed to shifts in traditional power dynamics within marriages. While these changes have empowered women, they have also introduced new tensions, particularly in contexts where patriarchal norms remain dominant.

Cultural and religious transformations have also played a role in shaping contemporary attitudes toward marriage and divorce in Rivers State, Nigeria. Historically, divorce was highly stigmatized and often considered a sign of personal or familial failure. However, in recent times, it is increasingly perceived as a viable and sometimes necessary option in situations of marital distress, especially in cases involving abuse, neglect, or irreconcilable differences. This shift reflects broader societal changes driven by globalization, increased access to education, and the influence of digital media, which exposes individuals to alternative lifestyles and value systems (Okeke & Bello, 2023). Social media platforms, in particular, have contributed to changing perceptions by normalizing discussions around marital challenges and individual well-being, thereby reducing the stigma associated with divorce.

The consequences of divorce and separation are far-reaching and multifaceted, affecting individuals, families, and society at large. For children, growing up in disrupted family environments is often associated with emotional distress, academic challenges, behavioral problems, and difficulties in forming stable relationships later in life. Adults, on the other hand, may experience psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and reduced overall well-being (Amato, 2020). Economically, marital dissolution can result in financial instability, particularly for women and children who may have limited access to resources and social support. At the societal level, increasing divorce rates may contribute to the weakening of family structures and social cohesion.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that divorce can also serve as a necessary and protective response in cases of unhealthy, abusive, or toxic relationships, thereby safeguarding the well-being and dignity of individuals involved. Recent developments between 2020 and 2025 have further intensified marital instability in Rivers State, Nigeria. This period has been characterized by significant socio-economic challenges, including economic recession, rising unemployment, inflation, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These conditions have increased financial stress, disrupted family routines, and heightened emotional strain within households, all of which contribute to marital conflict (Ononokpono *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, the rapid pace of urbanization has led to the weakening of traditional extended family support systems that previously played a crucial role in mediating marital disputes and providing social support. As couples increasingly rely on nuclear family structures, they may lack the communal resources needed to sustain long-term marital stability.

To this context, examining divorce and separation within the Nigerian context is not only academically relevant but also socially imperative. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is important for informing policy formulation, strengthening family support systems, and guiding effective social work interventions. This study, therefore, evaluates divorce and separation among Rivers State, Nigerian couples by examining

existing literature from 2020 to 2025, with the aim of providing insights that can contribute to the promotion of stable and healthy family relationships.

2. Statement of Problem

Despite the central role of marriage in Nigerian society as a foundation for family life, socialization, and cultural continuity, there is growing evidence of increasing marital instability characterized by rising cases of divorce and separation in Rivers State. Traditionally, marriage in Nigeria has been sustained by strong cultural, religious, and communal values that emphasize permanence and collective responsibility. However, recent empirical evidence suggests a gradual shift from this norm, with more couples opting for separation or divorce as a response to marital dissatisfaction and conflict (Ononokpono, Ugwu, & Odimegwu, 2025). This emerging trend raises concerns about the sustainability of family structures and the broader implications for societal stability. Consequently, many couples struggle to maintain stable relationships amid financial hardship, evolving gender roles, and weakening traditional support systems such as extended family networks (Okeke & Bello, 2023). Therefore, without a comprehensive evaluation of these intersecting factors, the persistence of marital instability may continue to undermine family cohesion, child development, and broader social development in Nigeria.

3. Aim of the study

This study aims to critically evaluate the trends, causes, and implications of divorce and separation among Rivers State, Nigerian couples between 2020 and 2025 within the context of the country's evolving socio-economic and cultural landscape.

4. Objectives of the study

This study seeks to examine the emerging patterns of marital dissolution during this period, taking into account the influence of economic instability, changing gender roles, and shifting societal values on marital relationships. Specifically, the study intends to:

- 1, examine the trends of divorce and separation among Rivers State, Nigerian couples;
- 2, identify the major causes of marital dissolution in Rivers State, Nigeria; and
- 3, analyze the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing divorce and separation in Rivers State, South-South, Nigeria.

5. Literature Review

Divorce refers to the formal and legal dissolution of a marriage through recognized judicial or statutory processes, resulting in the termination of the marital relationship and the legal rights and obligations attached to it. It typically involves court proceedings where issues such as child custody, division of property, and spousal support are determined in accordance with existing laws. In the Nigerian context, divorce is governed by statutory law (e.g., the Matrimonial Causes Act) as well as religious and customary systems, depending on the type of marriage contracted (Adebowale, 2022). Separation refers to a situation in which married couples live apart and discontinue cohabitation without formally dissolving the marriage through legal means. Unlike divorce, separation does not terminate the legal status of the marriage, and couples may remain legally bound while functioning independently.

Marital dissolution is a broader conceptual term that encompasses both divorce and separation, referring to the breakdown or termination of a marital union, whether

formally or informally. It captures the processes through which marital relationships cease to function as cohesive units, including both legal termination and physical or emotional disengagement between partners. This concept is particularly useful in the Nigerian context, where many unions end without formal legal procedures due to the pluralistic nature of the marital system. Marital dissolution is often influenced by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and interpersonal factors, including financial stress, domestic conflict, and shifting societal values. Understanding marital dissolution as a continuum allows researchers to capture both visible and hidden forms of marital breakdown, thereby providing a more comprehensive analysis of family instability (Ononokpono et al., 2025).

Marriage is a socially and legally recognized union between individuals, typically involving mutual rights, responsibilities, and expectations, and is regulated by cultural, religious, and statutory norms (Macionis, 2017). It serves as the primary institution for procreation, socialization, and the transmission of cultural values across generations. In Nigeria, marriage exists in multiple forms, statutory, customary, and religious each governed by distinct norms and practices (Ebigbo, 2012). Beyond its legal dimension, marriage carries significant social and cultural meaning, often involving extended family networks and communal obligations.

6. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on social exchange theory, a widely used framework in relationship research that explains interpersonal dynamics in terms of costs and benefits. According to social exchange theory, individuals make decisions about relationships by weighing the rewards (e.g., emotional support, companionship, stability) against the costs (e.g., conflict, financial strain, emotional distress) associated with maintaining them (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Ahmad, 2023). When the perceived benefits outweigh the costs, individuals are more likely to remain committed to the relationship; conversely, when costs exceed benefits, dissatisfaction increases and the likelihood of relationship dissolution rises (Lavner et al., 2016). This cost–benefit calculus underpins how partners evaluate marital satisfaction and stability, with positive exchanges reinforcing commitment and negative exchanges eroding it.

In the Nigerian context, this evaluative process may be influenced by broader socio-economic and cultural factors. For example, economic hardship, such as unemployment or financial instability, can heighten the costs of marriage by increasing stress and conflict, while changing gender roles and greater exposure to alternative lifestyles through media and education may shift individuals' expectations of marriage (Esiri, 2021). Under conditions where traditional supports and expectations are in flux, individuals may reassess the rewards and burdens of marital life more critically, potentially contributing to rising rates of **marital** dissatisfaction, separation, or divorce. Social Exchange Theory thus provides a useful lens for understanding how both individual experiences and structural pressures interact to shape marital outcomes in Rivers State, Nigeria.

7. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design anchored on a narrative literature review approach. This design is particularly suitable for examining complex and multifaceted social issues such as marital dissolution, as it allows for the integration of insights from diverse scholarly perspectives and the interpretation of existing findings within their socio-cultural contexts. Secondary data were sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, institutional reports, and credible online publications focusing on marital trends, divorce, and separation, particularly within Rivers State, Nigeria and the wider Nigeria and African contexts. Literature was obtained through academic databases and open-access platforms such as Google Scholar and other reputable repositories. Rivers State has the highest divorce rate estimated at approximately 7.2% according to geopolitical recording. To ensure relevance and academic rigor, inclusion criteria were limited to sources that addressed themes related to marriage, family dynamics, and socio-cultural factors influencing marital stability in Nigeria or comparable African settings. Studies that fell outside these thematic and geographical parameters were excluded to maintain focus and contextual consistency.

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the selected literature. This involved a systematic process of familiarization with the data, and identification of recurring patterns. These themes were then synthesized to highlight patterns related to the causes, experiences, and implications of divorce and separation between 2020 and 2025. The thematic approach facilitated the organization of diverse viewpoints into coherent findings, allowing for a structured interpretation of trends across different studies. Furthermore, this study is guided by an Afrocentric methodological perspective, which emphasizes the importance of African cultural values, norms, and lived realities in research. This perspective ensures that the interpretation of findings reflects the diversity of Nigeria's socio-cultural environment. Through adoption of this lens, this study avoids reductionist interpretations and instead situates marital experiences within indigenous social structures, belief systems, and contextual realities, thereby enhancing the cultural validity and relevance of the findings.

Trends of Divorce and Separation in Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

Recent scholarly evidence indicates that divorce and separation in Nigeria have been gradually increasing, although reliable national statistics remain limited due to inconsistencies in civil registration and the coexistence of multiple marital systems. Contemporary empirical studies using pooled national data suggest a notable rise in marital dissolution among women, with socioeconomic and demographic factors playing a significant role in shaping these trends (Ononokpono et al., 2025). This increase reflects broader global patterns where modernization, urbanization, and changing social expectations contribute to higher rates of marital instability (Amato, 2010). In the Nigerian context, divorce and separation are no longer confined to specific regions, ethnic groups, or social classes, but are increasingly observed across diverse populations. The growing visibility of marital dissolution also reflects changing attitudes toward marriage, with individuals placing greater emphasis on personal satisfaction and emotional well-being.

Major Causes of Divorce and Separation

Multiple interconnected factors contribute to marital breakdown in Nigeria. Economic conditions remain one of the most significant determinants of marital stability. Studies have shown that households experiencing financial hardship, unemployment, or low income are more likely to report marital strain, which often escalates into separation or divorce (Ononokpono et al., 2025). Economic stress tends to reduce relationship satisfaction by increasing conflict over resource allocation and daily survival needs. In addition, domestic violence is a critical factor influencing marital dissolution. Research consistently demonstrates that exposure to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse significantly increases the likelihood of divorce, as affected individuals seek safety and psychological well-being outside the marriage (World Health Organization, 2021).

Beyond economic and safety concerns, changing gender roles also contribute to marital instability. Increased access to education and employment among women has altered traditional expectations within marriage, sometimes creating tension where spouses hold divergent views about roles and responsibilities. These evolving expectations may lead to dissatisfaction when partners perceive a mismatch between anticipated and actual marital roles. Furthermore, broader social transformations have introduced alternative perspectives on marriage, making individuals more willing to exit unions that no longer meet their personal or relational expectations. Collectively, these factors interact to produce cumulative stressors that weaken marital bonds over time.

Socio-Cultural Influences

Nigeria's socio-cultural diversity significantly shapes marital outcomes, as marriage is embedded within a complex interplay of customary, religious, and statutory systems. Each of these systems carries distinct norms regarding marital formation and dissolution, often leading to variations in how divorce or separation is initiated and recognized. Cultural values traditionally emphasize marital permanence, family cohesion, and communal responsibility, which can discourage formal divorce due to stigma or perceived social consequences (Otite & Ogionwo, 2021). However, increasing exposure to modernization and globalization has introduced individualistic values that prioritize personal happiness, compatibility, and self-fulfillment within marriage.

This coexistence of traditional and modern value systems creates a tension that influences marital decision-making. In many cases, couples may opt for informal separation rather than formal divorce due to the complexities associated with legal procedures, religious constraints, or fear of social disapproval. As a result, marital dissolution in Nigeria often occurs within both formal and informal frameworks, reflecting the broader socio-cultural environment in which marriages are situated. These dynamics highlight the importance of understanding marriage and divorce not only as legal or individual decisions but also as culturally mediated processes shaped by social expectations and communal norms.

Impact of Contemporary Realities (2020–2025)

Between 2020 and 2025, several contemporary socio-economic and global events have further influenced marital stability in Nigeria. Economic instability, including inflation, unemployment, and declining purchasing power, has intensified financial pressures on households, thereby increasing marital stress and conflict. Empirical

evidence suggests that economic hardship is closely linked to relationship dissatisfaction and higher risks of marital dissolution (Conger et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic also played a significant role in exacerbating marital tensions by disrupting livelihoods, increasing time spent in confined domestic environments, and elevating psychological stress levels within families (Prime et al., 2020).

In addition, urbanization and internal migration have contributed to the weakening of extended family systems that traditionally provided emotional, financial, and social support to couples. The erosion of these support structures has reduced external mediation mechanisms that previously helped resolve marital conflicts. Without such buffers, couples may find it more difficult to cope with stressors, leading to increased likelihood of separation or divorce. The convergence of economic challenges, public health crises, and shifting social structures during this period has therefore contributed to rising marital instability, reflecting broader societal transformations affecting family life in Nigeria.

Findings

The analysis of literature reveals several key findings regarding trends, causes, and socio-cultural dynamics of divorce and separation in Rivers State, Nigeria within the period under review. As marriage in Nigeria is embedded within diverse cultural, religious, and legal frameworks, patterns of marital dissolution are shaped not only by individual relationship factors but also by broader socio-economic and cultural influences. The effectiveness of understanding marital instability in this context depends on the ability to interpret how these intersecting factors influence couples' decisions to remain in or exit marriages. The study, through qualitative exploration of relevant literature, identified key themes relating to increasing trends of divorce and separation.

The study finds that divorce and separation are increasing among Rivers State, Nigerian couples, although the phenomenon is likely underreported due to limitations in official record-keeping and the coexistence of formal and informal marital dissolution processes. Empirical evidence from recent analyses of national and pooled datasets indicates a rising trend in marital dissolution, particularly among women, suggesting that more individuals are exiting marriages than in previous decades (Ononokpono et al., 2025). However, because many separations occur outside the formal legal system, actual figures may be higher than reported statistics. This underreporting is further reinforced by cultural and religious influences that discourage public acknowledgment of divorce, thereby masking the true prevalence of marital instability.

The findings also indicate that socio-economic factors particularly poverty, unemployment, and financial stress are major determinants of marital instability in Rivers State, Nigeria. Economic hardship places strain on household resources, increases conflict over financial responsibilities, and reduces overall relationship satisfaction. Recent empirical research demonstrates that household socioeconomic status significantly predicts the likelihood of divorce, with financial insecurity increasing the probability of marital dissolution among couples (Conger et al., 2022). From a broader perspective, socioeconomic stress disrupts family processes by limiting access to basic needs and increasing emotional tension between partners. In line with social exchange theory, when the perceived costs of maintaining a marriage such as financial strain and

unmet needs outweigh the benefits, individuals are more likely to reassess the viability of the relationship and consider separation or divorce.

Another key finding is that domestic violence significantly increases the likelihood of divorce or separation. Exposure to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse undermines trust, safety, and emotional well-being within marriage, often prompting victims to exit abusive relationships. The World Health Organization identifies intimate partner violence as a major global public health issue with serious consequences for relationship stability and individual health (World Health Organization, 2021). In marital contexts, persistent abuse represents a high relational cost that outweighs any perceived benefits of remaining in the union. In Nigeria, where awareness of legal protections and support systems is increasing, victims of domestic violence are more likely than before to seek separation or divorce as a coping and survival strategy.

Finally, the findings show that many couples in Nigeria prefer informal separation over formal divorce due to cultural stigma and legal complexities. Divorce is often viewed negatively in many Nigerian communities, where marriage is regarded as a lifelong commitment influenced by religious and cultural values. As a result, couples may avoid formal legal processes to escape social judgment or maintain family honor. Additionally, the plural nature of Nigeria's marriage systems statutory, customary, and religious can make the legal dissolution of marriage complicated, time-consuming, and costly. This encourages some couples to opt for informal arrangements that are socially less visible and administratively less burdensome. Such practices contribute to the underestimation of divorce statistics and reflect the enduring influence of socio-cultural norms on marital behavior (Ononokpono et al., 2025).

8. Conclusion

Ultimately, the shifting landscape of marital relationships in Nigeria reflects a deeper negotiation between tradition and transformation, where individuals are increasingly redefining the meaning and expectations of marriage within a rapidly changing socio-economic reality. Rather than viewing divorce and separation solely as indicators of societal decline, they can also be understood as signals of evolving agency, awareness, and resistance to unsustainable or harmful unions. This underscores the urgent need for adaptive social structures that do not merely attempt to preserve marriage at all costs, but instead prioritize the quality, safety, and mutual fulfillment within it. A forward-looking response therefore lies in encouraging resilient relationship frameworks, strengthening institutional support, and aligning cultural values with contemporary realities in a way that sustains both individual well-being and collective social stability.

9. Recommendations

- 1, There is a need to strengthen the availability and accessibility of marital counselling services across Nigeria. Counselling should be made culturally relevant and sensitive to the diverse religious and ethnic contexts within the country. Pre-marital counselling programs should be encouraged by religious institutions, community leaders, and social service agencies to help prospective couples develop realistic expectations about marriage.
- 2, Given the significant role of economic hardship in marital instability, government agencies and non-governmental organizations should prioritize economic empowerment initiatives aimed at reducing unemployment and poverty.
- 3, There is a need for sustained public awareness campaigns that promote healthy relationship practices. These campaigns should focus on educating individuals and couples about effective communication, emotional intelligence, mutual respect, and conflict resolution skills.
- 4, Improving access to legal and social support systems is important for addressing marital dissolution in Nigeria. Efforts should be made to simplify legal procedures related to marriage and divorce to make them more accessible and less intimidating for couples seeking formal resolution.

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