

Impact of Forgiveness Therapy on the Self-Esteem of Working Women Exposed to Spousal Emotional Abuse in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria

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Abstract

Spousal emotional abuse is a deeply distressing and pervasive issue, exacting a profound toll on the self-esteem of working women exposed to it. These adverse effects encompass a range of emotional, psychological, and social challenges which make life burdensome for the victims. Therefore, this study examined the impact of forgiveness therapy on the self-esteem of working women who have endured emotional abuse within their spousal relationships in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria. Quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design was adopted. A sample of 23 participants, comprising 12 wage and 11 self-employed women was selected for the study using purposive sampling processes. Two instruments used to collect relevant data were the Profile of Psychological Abuse of Women by Sackett and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE) with reliability indexes of 0.91 and 0.77 respectively. A researcher designed questionnaire was employed to capture the biodata of respondents such as age group, employment type, marital status. The hypotheses were tested using two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance. The study revealed that participants' levels of self-esteem were significantly different when exposed to Forgiveness Therapy. It was also discovered that employment type was a significant factor on self-esteem when the therapy was applied. Hence, one of the recommendations is that Forgiveness Therapy should be employed to improve self-esteem among working women with emotionally abusive spouses.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Spousal abuse, Forgiveness, Working women

Introduction

The prevalence of spousal abuse against women is as old as marriage itself. The World Health Organization (2021) considered abuse against women as a global pandemic with approximately 33% of women experiencing intimate partner violence in Africa. In Nigeria alone,

about a quarter of women have experienced violence from intimate partners (Benebo et al., 2018). Spousal abuse involves various methods engaged by a partner to control or manipulate the other partner in a marriage setting, usually through the exercise of a pattern of misuse of physical, sexual, psychological and or moral power (Odebode et al., 2018).

Spousal abuse, which is also known as intimate partner violence is a violation of marital trust and it can be physical, sexual, emotional and/ or economic abuse. When abuse pervades a marriage, the union itself becomes a source of fear, pain, and shame. (Mulaudzi et al., 2022). Intimate partner violence remains a pervasive and complex societal issue with profound implications for the well-being of individuals, particularly within the context of emotional abuse. While physical violence often garners immediate attention, the subtle yet insidious nature of emotional abuse is equally detrimental, leaving lasting imprints on victims, especially women (Lin-Roark et al., 2015).

Spousal emotional abuse also known as psychological abuse is one of the most prevalent forms of intimate partner violence where a spouse employs verbal or nonverbal means to attack the victim's self-worth and sense of safety (Heise et al., 2019). It involves controlling, manipulating and demeaning behaviours such as threatening to abandon and harm, insulting, humiliating, stalking, intentional ignoring and avoidance, as well as restricting married women's relationships with other family members and friends, their movements and access to economic resources. It also includes gaslighting - a form of psychological manipulation where the abuser causes the abused to question her own sanity, memories or perception of reality.

Though emotional abuse may appear difficult to detect, victims experience immediate adverse emotional impact. They also continue to manifest damaging psychological outcomes even a long time after the abuse. Some of the adverse psychological outcomes of these abusive acts which endure long after the abusive episodes include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorders, low self-esteem, learned helplessness, incapacitating bitterness, sexual dysfunctions as well as other psychosomatic problems (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Odebode et al., 2018).

The impact of emotional abuse on women's self-esteem is profound and far-reaching. Self-esteem can be described as the subjective evaluation of one's own worth. Merriam Webster dictionary online (2024) defines it as "a confidence and satisfaction in oneself" and because emotional abuse is characterized by a pattern of behaviours designed to coercively control, manipulate, and demean the victim, its destructive effects on self-esteem can be both immediate

and enduring. Women who experience emotional abuse often have a sense of diminished self-worth due to the constant intimidating, criticising, and humiliating comments and actions from victimising spouses which erode their confidence and incur feelings of inadequacy (Lin-Roark et al., 2015; Tomaz, et al., 2022). By internalizing these messages, they develop a diminished perception of their own value. Those who live in abusive environments often have a constant fear of verbal attacks and emotional manipulation. They can't trust their partners and live in constant suspicions. These chronically stressful situations leave them feeling highly insecure further impacting on their self-esteem.

Emotional abusive spouses often employ gaslighting- a tactic to make their victims question their perception of reality. This can make the victim develop confusion and self-doubt as they can't trust their own judgement, which is a strong marker of low self-esteem. In addition to this, spousal emotional abuse involves blame-shifting and making the victim spouse feel responsible for the abuser's actions. This can create cycles of guilt and shame, where women internalize blame for the abusive behaviour. Such feelings can be corrosive to self-esteem, fostering a belief that they are inherently flawed or deserving of mistreatment. The goal of these manipulative and invalidating remarks is to leave the victim unsure of herself as the primary intent of intimate partner violence is to damage the self-esteem of the victim (Güler et al., 2022).

Emotional abusers often use tactics of isolation to control their victims. This isolation can lead to a sense of alienation from support networks, making it difficult for women to receive validation and affirmation from others (Qasim & Muzaffar, 2021). This lack of external validation can contribute to a decline in self-esteem. Women experiencing emotional abuse may struggle to assert themselves in personal and professional spheres. The pervasive self-doubt and fear of judgment can hinder their ability to pursue goals, contribute to decision-making, and advocate for their needs, ultimately affecting their self-esteem in multiple domains of life.

The impact of emotional abuse can extend into the long term. Even after the removal from an abusive environment, individuals may continue to grapple with the emotional aftermath. Rebuilding self-esteem and overcoming the psychological scars often require time, therapy, and support. Despite this, some women in Africa especially in Nigeria may remain in violent domestic relationships despite the damage to their physical and psychological wellbeing. The common question often asked is why do these women stay in such relationships? Cultural, religious, and

economic factors play a significant role in explaining why some women tolerate and conceal spousal abuse. Reasons attributed for non-disclosure are similar to those explaining why women do not leave and include protecting children from abuse, scarcity of financial resources, women's psychological readiness to confront the abuser, lack of social or communal support as well as religious and social norms (Chiweta-Oduah et al.2020). Others include fear of retaliation, distrust of the country's justice system and ignorance of personal rights. Incidentally, a good percentage of women themselves believe that spousal abuse is normal and justifiable (Agene, 2017), while some believe their spouses' jealousy and control are signs of being loved.

In a marital relationship, the primary objective is to establish and nurture a strong emotional bond while having the capacity to mend it when strained. Forgiveness plays a pivotal role in repairing emotional rifts within couples, fostering effective communication, emotional attachment, and healing (Lin, 2016). Holding on to offenses can pose a threat to mental and physical health, perpetuating feelings of resentment, anger, and fear that hinder emotional well-being. Employing forgiveness therapy therefore can be a valuable tool for families and couples to resolve issues, recover from emotional wounds, and mend relationships, as it has gained prominence in mental health treatment (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018).

The concept of forgiveness is very important in emotional healing. Forgiveness has been shown to be positively correlated with mental health and enhances wellbeing (Kaleta & Mroz, 2018; Xie et al., 2020). Decisional forgiveness is a conscious intention to resist holding onto negative feelings and to respond otherwise to a wrongdoer and has a profound effect on relational wellbeing (Riek & Mania, 2012), whereas emotional forgiveness involves replacing negative emotions with positive, other-oriented feelings such as understanding and compassion and has more direct physical and psychological health benefits (Onyemaechi et al.2022). Together, these components contribute to the process of forgiveness. In spousal abuse for instance, a victim may experience an all-time decisional forgiveness and still feel enormous emotional unforgiveness, especially if the unfair event is traumatic with emotional triggers or the unfair event being repeated. However, emotional forgiveness comes with positive oriented emotions such as understanding, compassion and love which serve the needs of forgiveness and supports the process. None the less, if a person is abused by a partner, the person may forgive the perpetrator without seeking reconciliation (Davis et al., 2016).

Forgiveness therapy has been found to be effective in improving the self-esteem of spousal abuse victims in some western countries, however there is a scarcity of studies on the application of forgiveness therapy in resolving the psychological trauma and emotional distress experienced by abused spouses in Nigeria. This creates a research gap which this study focused on to contribute to knowledge in reducing the research gap by investigating the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy on improving the self-esteem of spouse abused working women in Lagos, Nigeria. Forgiveness Therapy has been chosen on the premise that it can be an effective treatment option to improve the self-esteem of spouse abused women.

The pervasive and damaging impact of emotional abuse on women's self-esteem presents a critical problem warranting focused attention among working women in Nigeria. This is a widespread issue causing severe psychological distress among this population. This form of abuse, characterized by control tactics, manipulation and verbal degradation not only impinges on victims' self-esteem during the abusive relationship but also leaves scars with the long-term effects which persist even after the removal from an abusive environment. It results in emotional health consequences such as feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, fear, anxiety, feelings of isolation, depression, chronic stress. All these make it difficult for women to experience happiness, contentment, and a sense of well-being. Additionally, acquired mindsets of self-blame, self-doubt, shame, inadequacy and undermine the confidence and consequently, the productivity of these women, further chipping away at their sense of self-worth.

The importance of self-esteem of women who have been emotionally abused by their spouses seem to have been underplayed by the abused and the society at large and many cases have either gone unreported or unnoticed because the evidence is not easily visible and so the impact on the emotional health of victims remains largely under addressed. One potential path for healing and personal growth in the aftermath of emotional abuse is forgiveness. By exploring and embracing forgiveness, women who have experienced spousal abuse can lean towards emotional liberation, improved self-concept, and the restoration of trust in relationships, which all lead to overall improved emotional wellness.

Despite the recognition of forgiveness therapy as a potential intervention for individuals affected by various forms of domestic violence, there is a notable gap in the understanding of its effectiveness in the specific context of spousal emotional abuse among working women in Lagos.

This study investigated the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy on the self-esteem of spouse-abused working women in Lagos State Nigeria

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were tested based on the research questions at 0.05 level of significance.

- i. There is no significant difference in the post- test mean scores on self-esteem experienced by working women who have been emotionally abused by spouses in the two experimental conditions (Forgiveness Therapy and control group)
- ii. Post-test mean scores on self-esteem among participants exposed to Forgiveness Therapy and the control group will not differ significantly due to the employment type.

Methodology

Quasi experimental pre-test, post-test control group design was the research design for the study which was conducted among identified emotionally spousal-abused working women in Lagos metropolis. This research was conducted in the Lagos metropolis, a densely populated, low-lying coastal area in southwestern Nigeria.

The target population comprised of all working women who had been emotionally abused by their spouses and seeking interventions in domestic violence welfare shelters in Lagos Metropolis. The emotionally spouse abused working married women seeking help were used for the study because they constitute a stable, purposive, and consenting group. A sample of 23 participants were used for the study. The participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select two shelters from two different locations for this study. Convenience sampling was used to ensure the protection of the participants. The researcher worked closely with the domestic violence welfare shelter in recruiting participants. The women who approached each domestic violence shelter for domestic violence interventions during the specified selection period were invited to participate in the study. They were provided with a brief consultation with the researcher / research assistant and upon confirmation of their willingness to participate, their informed consents were obtained. Candidates were administered the Profile of Psychological abuse of women respectively to identify emotionally spousal abused working married women. The selected participants from each shelter were assigned to the two experimental groups respectively.

Inclusive criteria:

1. They must be married (have been married) and be between 18 and 65 years old.
2. Participants are included if they indicated psychological abuse in at least four items with at least a score of three on the Profile of Psychological Abuse of Women.
3. They must indicate willingness and give informed consent to take part in the treatment.
4. They must be working or employed.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants across Shelter and Employment Types

Baseline participants				Experiment participants			
Shelter	Employment Type			Group	Employment Type		
	Self-employed	Wage employed	Total		Self-employed	Wage employed	Total
Shelter A	8	7	15	FT	7	4	11
Shelter B	6	10	16	Control	4	8	12
Total	14	17	31		11	12	23

The experiment started with 24 women across the two groups but 23 finished the study. The Forgiveness Therapy (FT) group had 11 participants while Control group had 12 participants.

Data collection for this study was carried using a researcher designed questionnaire to capture the biodata of respondents such as age group, employment type, marital status. Two psychological inventories were employed: the first was the Profile of Psychological Abuse of Women by Sackett and Saunders (1999), a multifactorial measure of psychological abuse. It is a 21- item scale with subscales identifying four major types of abuse: Criticize Behaviour, Ignore, Ridicule Traits and Jealous/Control with each subscale having sufficient internal reliability. This scale was slightly modified for cultural appropriation and responses to each item are scored in terms of frequency of occurrence ranging from Never (0), Once in a while (1), A few times (2), Most times (3), All the time (4). The second inventory employed for data collection in this study was Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSE) by Rosenberg (1965), a 10 - item self-report instrument to evaluate self-esteem with responses answered on a four–point scale, from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

To determine the reliability of the inventories, a test-retest reliability was used to determine their stability. The researcher conducted a pilot study which involved the administration of the questionnaire on thirty respondents that had all the characteristics as the population under study. Two weeks later, the same instrument was re-administered on the same respondents given similar administrative condition. Consequently, each respondent's responses on the 1st and 2nd test were collated before using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to determine the correlation coefficient. A value of 0.76 and 0.88 were derived.

The researcher sought the permission of the two selected domestic violence shelters both in Lagos metropolis with a letter of introduction from the Head of Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Lagos, Akoka, Yaba to conduct the research. The letters were acknowledged, and approval granted. The questionnaires were administered to the participants at the respective domestic violence shelters for the study. The issues of confidentiality of data were ensured, and participants were assigned codes for their pre-and post-test assessments. The study was divided into 3 phases as follows:

Phase 1: Pre-treatment Assessment:

The research instruments were administered to the participants enrolled in the study by the researcher with the help of the research assistants one week before the treatment session as pre-test.

Phase 2: Treatment Phase:

There was one treatment group and one control group. The selected participants were randomly assigned to each of these groups respectively. The treatment group (as group 1) was exposed to Forgiveness Therapy (FT) Group sessions consisted of content from Enright's (2019) "Forgiveness is a choice" using a developed manual as a guide for uniformity amongst participants. Participants went through the twenty (20) units of the four phases of forgiveness: uncovering, decision, work and deepening in six sessions of one and a half hour each. The Control group (as group 2) received no treatment. The treatments were one and half hours per session for six weeks.

Phase 3: Post –test Assessment:

All the research instruments were administered again at the end of the treatment as post-test to the participants in both experimental and control group.

Data generated was collated and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The hypotheses formulated were tested using two way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance. The percentage, mean standard deviation, mean differences were the descriptive statistics used in the analysis.

Results

Research Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the post- test mean scores on self-esteem among working women who have been emotionally abused by spouses in the two experimental conditions (Forgiveness Therapy and control group).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Self-Esteem and Experimental Groups

Experimental Group	N	Pre-test Score		Post-test Score		Mean Difference
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Forgiveness Therapy Group	12	3.58	1.56	7.50	1.88	3.92
Control Group	11	6.18	2.82	6.00	2.79	-0.18
Total	23	4.83	2.57	6.78	2.43	1.96

Analysis in Table 2 shows an increase in self-esteem among participants in the Forgiveness Therapy Group while a fringe decline was noticed among those in the Control Group. ANOVA was computed to identify the significance of the mean difference. Table 3 has the outcome.

Table 3: ANOVA on Self-Esteem based on Experiment Groups

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	88.089	2	44.045	21.062	.000
Intercept	26.250	1	26.250	12.552	.002
Covariate	75.176	1	75.176	35.949	.000
Group	57.075	1	57.075	27.293	.000
Error	41.824	20	2.091		
Total	1188.000	23			
Corrected Total	129.913	22			

A computed F value of 27.293 was gotten as the difference in the self-esteem experienced by working women emotionally abused by spouses exposed to Forgiveness Therapy, and in the control group. This was noted to be greater than the critical value of 4.35 given 1 and 20 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was rejected, and it was concluded

that there is significant difference in the post-test mean score of self-esteem experienced by working married women on the psychological wellbeing of spousal emotional abuse exposed to Forgiveness Therapy, and in the control group.

Research Hypothesis 2: There is no significant employment type effect on the post-test mean scores on self-esteem among working women on affected by spousal emotional abuse across the treatment and control groups.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Experimental Groups and Employment Type based on Self-Esteem.

Experimental Group	Employment Type	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean Difference
			Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Forgiveness Therapy Group	Self-Employed	8	4.13	1.25	8.00	1.31	3.88
	Wage Employed	4	2.50	1.73	6.50	2.65	4.00
	Total	12	3.58	1.56	7.50	1.88	3.92
Control Group	Self-Employed	3	7.67	1.53	5.33	1.15	-2.33
	Wage Employed	8	5.63	3.07	6.25	3.24	0.63
	Total	11	6.18	2.82	6.00	2.79	-0.18
Total	Self-Employed	11	5.09	2.07	7.27	1.74	2.18
	Wage Employed	12	4.58	3.03	6.33	2.93	1.75
	Total	23	4.83	2.57	6.78	2.43	1.96

Table 4 shows that both self-employed and wage employed in the Forgiveness Therapy Group had better increment in self-esteem with 3.88 and 4.0 respectively than those in the Control Group. ANCOVA was computed to determine the significance of the mean differences in self-esteem. The outcome of the analysis is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: ANCOVA on Self-Esteem based on Experimental Conditions and Employment Type

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	104.619	4	26.155	18.613	.000
Intercept	9.122	1	9.122	6.492	.020
Covariate	83.873	1	83.873	59.687	.000
Group	65.809	1	65.809	46.832	.000
Employment Type	8.851	1	8.851	6.298	.022
Group * Employment Type	9.507	1	9.507	6.766	.018
Error	25.294	18	1.405		
Total	1188.000	23			
Corrected Total	129.913	22			

Observation from Table 5 shows that the F-calculated value of 6.766 was greater than the critical value of 4.41 given 1 and 18 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. It was concluded that there is significant employment type effect on the post-test mean scores on self-esteem among working women emotionally abused by spouses exposed to Forgiveness Therapy, and in the Control Group.

Discussion of Findings

The study observed a significant difference on the self-esteem among working women who have been emotionally abused by spouses exposed to Forgiveness Therapy and the control group. This demonstrated the potential effectiveness of this therapeutic intervention in enhancing self-esteem in these population. This finding aligns with the report of Kim & Lee (2014) who noted the effectiveness of Forgiveness therapy in improving the self-esteem of wives of alcoholic men. This is also in consonance with the submission of Dehghan Menshadi et al. (2017) who found that self-worth among divorced women improved with the application of Forgiveness therapy. Dike et al. (2018) in their study identified forgiveness as an important factor in improving individual's subjective wellbeing which consecutively directly impacts on self-esteem. Some studies however found that forgiveness did not improve psychological wellbeing of some adolescent victims of bullying as they assumed forgiving bullies meant they approved such actions of the bullies themselves (Barcaccia et al. 2017; Utami et al. 2018)

However, self-esteem among working women emotionally abused by spouses exposed to Forgiveness Therapy was found to be significantly impacted by employment type. Manju and Nirmala (2018) corroborated the impact of employment on self-esteem of working women emphasizing its importance as a tool of economic and social empowerment. Although, Pettersson (2012) reported that employment type may not impact self-esteem if other supportive systems are available, varying with this finding.

Conclusion

The prevalence of spousal emotional abuse has serious and lasting effects on the self-esteem and emotional wellbeing of working married women. Exposure to this form of abuse leads to acquired mindsets of self-blame and inadequacy serving as potent forces that systematically chip away at the confidence and productivity of these women, exacerbating their compromised sense

of self-worth. Overall, the results of the current study provided robust evidence that exposure to spousal emotional abuse is associated with significant depletion in working married women's self-esteem. Based on the findings from the study, it was concluded that there is a significant impact of Forgiveness Therapy on the self-esteem of working women who have been emotionally abused by their spouses and employment type significantly influenced self-esteem among spouse abused working women. In conclusion, the findings indicate that Forgiveness Therapy has the potential to positively impact the self-esteem of working women who have endured spousal emotional abuse.

Recommendations

The insights gleaned from this study present valuable implications for stakeholders in mental health, academia, and government.

- i. Practitioners can integrate Forgiveness Therapy into interventions for working women who have experienced spousal emotional abuse, recognizing its potential positive impact on self-esteem.
- ii. Longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of Forgiveness Therapy on the self-esteem of working women who have experienced spousal emotional abuse is recommended. This could provide crucial insights into the sustainability of therapeutic impacts over time.
- iii. Government should launch public awareness campaigns to educate the polity about spousal emotional abuse and advocate for policies that support both mental health services and economic empowerment for women who have experienced abuse. This helps in reducing stigma around seeking help and encouraging reporting of abuse and further contribute to improving victims' self-esteem.

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