

## **EFFECT OF MARITAL INSTABILITY ON CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING**

**<sup>1</sup>Shehu, Haliru, <sup>2</sup>Adejare, Toosin Adeyinka and <sup>3</sup>Habiba Sani Bodinga**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education, Faculty of Education, Sokoto State University, Sokoto  
e-mail: [hallirushehu@gmail.com](mailto:hallirushehu@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education & Extension Services,  
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto  
e-mail: [princeadejare1986@gmail.com](mailto:princeadejare1986@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Education, Faculty of Education, Sokoto State University, Sokoto

---

### **Abstract**

*This paper focused on marital instability and its effect on children development. The paper explained on the concept of marriage and marital instability as well as causes of marital instability which included dissimilarities between spouse in social and economic characteristics such as ethnicity, religion and age. Marital instability is associated with separation, divorce, and widowhood; its effects were also looked at such as parental separation and psychological well being of a child. Suggestions were made that family counselling be emphasized by the stakeholders, government, religious leaders, and counsellors to minimize instability in the family and effort should be intensified to discourage marital discord. Counselling can also help individuals cope with various life situations, such as adjustment and marital stability.*

### **Introduction**

Happiness in marriage is the ardent desire of all intending couples. Marital instability is always a human tragedy that is desired by no one. It causes hurt and suffering to human persons. It is an experience, which involves serious disruption of life at many levels. Many people who have been through the experience of a marital instability liken it to the experience of bereavement. One of the most important relationships between a man and a woman is marriage which involves emotional and legal commitments to each other in adult life. Selecting a partner and entering into a marriage contract is considered a personal achievement and the selection of marriage partner is indeed one of the most important decisions one makes in a lifetime. People marry for many reasons which include; physical attraction, love, happiness, companionship and the desire to have children. Marriage is a socially and legally approved sexual relationship where parties involved have mutual understanding for procreation and protection of their future offspring (Musa, 2017). Marriage is the oldest social institution ordained by God as a social contract between two individuals to become husband and wife. Marriage is the state of being united with a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife for the purpose of companionship, procreation and maintaining a family (Luka, 2019).

However, marital instability has become a thing of concern in this contemporary society and this is associated with widowhood, separation and divorce. Separation and divorce are social aspects in marital instability created by either husband or the wife or both, but widowhood is beyond the control of human being, it is related to death and thus universal (Aminu, 2016:4).

Meanwhile, separation may be in two categories:

Physical separation (i.e. when the husband and the wife reside separately without resolving their marital tie);

Mental separation (i.e. when the couple decides to live together in the same household but without having biological and psychological relations.

It is imperative to note that when marriage is dissolved in the court of law, it is called divorce, but when it is dissolved by death is called widowhood (Aminu, 2016). Meanwhile, the term marital instability is used to refer to the process whereby marriages breakdown through separation, desertion or divorce (Oyafunke, Olubusanyo & Salau, 2014).

In reacting in this regard, the following definition of the term marriage has therefore been proposed. The word "marriage" means different things to different people and it comes about in different ways in different culture and religion, whatever way the marriage is consummated, there must be social approval. It is a means of unity that connect a man and a woman who aim to share a life together for establishing a family (Ridwan in Abubakar, 2017). Marriage is a culturally approved relationship of one man and one woman (monogamy), one man and two or more women (polygyny), of one woman and two or more men (polyandry) in which there is cultural endorsement of sexual intercourse between the marital partners of the opposite sex and with the expectation that children would be born of the relationship (Lar, Okpede and Bulus in Abubakar, 2017). Marriage is a socially, legally, culturally and religiously approved intimate relationship between a man and woman (Akinade, 2015). Marriage is an institution ordained by Allah as well as the culture of many society, it is a union between a man and woman and a life long commitment. Obidoa and Oparanozie (2011). Marriage in itself, is a sacred and permanent contract which is assumed to be enacted when two people (usually a man and a woman) decide of their own accord and in the presence of at least two witnesses to exchange the formal consent to live a life of vocation of love and sharing for each other, for the purpose of promoting their mutual growth and welfare as persons, in their journey together through life.

As Otite and Ogionwo in Adejare (2018) have indicated, the concept of marriage is a difficult one to define mainly because of the diversities in the systems of marriage throughout the world. In their view, however, there are, at least, three known important prerequisites before a marriage can be assumed to occur. These are the approval and involvement of the families of the spouses, the bride wealth payment and a religious factor.

Marital instability, which simply refers to the interpersonal difficulties within the marital relationship, has many causative factors. Ajai and Ipaye in Adejare (2018) wrote thus: the family is the most basic unit of society and building block for national development. Just as there cannot exist any society without families or home, there cannot be sustainable development without stable families or home. Nothing man does is ever perfect, therefore, there are bound to be imperfections in marriages. Marital instability according to Abubakar (2017) is affective and cognitive states along the related actions that are precedent to terminating a relationship and a situation in an intact dyad not to ones that already have been distrusted. Oyafunke and Salau (2014) referred to marital instability as the process whereby marriages breakdown through separation desertion or divorce. Unfortunately, many children today are faced with the challenges of multiple divorces or

separations within their families. Parents who divorce, often go on to remarry or form other intimate relationships have higher incidence of failure (Amato in Muhammad, 2019). The children as defined here are also victims of marital instability of their parents and they are below 18 years of age.

There are number of study that had been conducted on the effect of marital instability on children. According to Tolorunleke (2018) in her study on “Causes of marital conflicts amongst couples in Nigeria: Implication for Counselling psychologists” investigated and obtained information on causes of marital conflict that were prevalent among couples in the area of study. The study revealed that couple in Ijumu experience marital conflicts under physical, social and economic causes. It was also discovered that marital conflicts were caused majorly by the inability of the couples to meet each other’s sexual needs and especially the inability of the family heads to provide for both economic and social needs of the family among other causes. The study also reviewed that the two hypotheses tested were accepted at 0.05 level of significance, which implies that there are no significant differences in the causes of marital conflicts based on such variables as the couples educational levels and length of marriage. This assumption is in agreement with the findings of some scholars like Adegoke in Adejare (2018), Animasahun and Femi (2018), and Odunayo (2012) who in separate studies revealed that marriage in Nigeria are besieged by numerous constraints that lead to increase in divorce and marital separation. Meanwhile it was discovered that children of the divorced or separated parents tend to go wayward, naughty, unruly and rebellious. Besides, children of divorced parents are more likely to be used for child trafficking than the children who grow up in an intact family. In the society for instance, every tribe recognizes some form of the institution of the husband or the wife or of both. Meanwhile, widowhood is beyond the control of human being because it is related to death (Aminu, 2016). Meanwhile, Adejare, (2018) posited that there are numbers of factors that are seriously threatening stability of marriage and most of these factors are traceable to some inherited behaviour and thinking from the ancient society, and imported ideas from other sources that are beyond the concept of marriage. These factors are the significant causes of marriage instability in the society; as a result of their functions and effects within a home. In another development, Maciver and Dimkpa (2012) noted that the conjugal family is weak in residential and economic terms when compared with the marital lineage.

Ayodele, (2020) also observed that families, nowadays, seem not to care about their wards in marriages because in most cases, the choice of partner is made by the wards themselves contrary to tradition, where a choice was made by parents. The trend now is that men and women marry where they are working or studying. In spite of its indispensability, marriage has been affected by many problems which threatens its usefulness and existence. In most cultures and religions a matured man or woman is considered to be incomplete without a spouse. It must be noted that there are different groups, traditions and different marriages but they have one specific thing in common and that is the changes of the weddings and marriages pattern, which are influenced by the Western societies (Holley in Muhammad 2019). The influence of the western culture is making the traditional polygyneons marriage fading away and gradually disappearing in this contemporary society (Aiyetan & Kolapo in Muhammad, 2019) in favour of monogamous marriages.

In another development, marital instability has been described as a situation whereby the couples deliberately decided to separate for one reason or the other. The concept of

---

marital instability is associated with separation, divorce and widowhood (Oyafunke & Salau, 2014).

One theoretical framework guided this study, Social Exchange Theory goes back to Burns in Abubakar (2017). It is a social psychological and sociological perspective that explains social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties. Social exchange theory posits that human relationships are formed by the use of a subjective cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. Social Exchange Theory is a social psychological theory that views relationships as the result of a cost-reward calculation made by the individuals concerned. It states that if we feel the rewards received from being in a given relationship are outweighed by the costs of being in that relationship then the relationship will remain intact. If the inverse is true, then the relationship will dissolve. Costs of being in a relationship may be effort, money spent, time spent, or low self-esteem, whilst the rewards may be pleasure, satisfaction, financial support, etc.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) according to Nakonezny and Denton in Abubakar (2017) is a viable theoretical framework to examine rationale processes and familial relationships. Adding that, the paradigm of social exchange theory which borrows from behavioural psychology, sociology and classical economics.

Social Exchange Theory seeks to explain the development, maintenance (e.g. solidarity, power) and decay of exchange relationships in terms of the balance between rewards and the marital partners obtain and the cost that they incur by selecting themselves into marital relationship. Costs according to this theory are the factors that inhibit or deter a performance of a sequence of behavior within a marriage, whereas rewards are the pleasures, satisfactions and gratifications that a person enjoys within a marriage. Hence, marital exchange relationship in this regard can be conceptualized as the cyclic patterns of transactions of valued resources, tangible or intangible between partners and there wards and costs associated with such transactions which culminate into dyadic or individual outcomes of profit or loss (Abubakar, 2017).

### **Causes of Marital Instability**

A lot of factors have been identified as the obstacles to a happy marriage according to Adejare (2018:52), which eventually lead to a marital instability. If those about to marry give a serious thought to the following factors, there is no doubt that many marriages might be saved. Let us now consider them one by one:

- a. **Communication:** Lack of communication is a powerful causes of marital instability among couples. While some couples discusses issues of their marriage others just patch up or pretend that all things are well until the marriage become irretrievable. Communication block is a major source of marital breakdown. Communication has been called the lifeline of love. In its root meaning, it refers to sharing. It implies that two persons have now something “in common” because it has been shared. In its most profound sense, communication is a sharing of the persons themselves. It is through communication that two parties get to know each other, their hidden angers and humiliating fears. Where there is no communication, small difficulties become big problems, and silence is understood as hostility.

- b. **Financial Problems:** Poor financial status of the husband is one of the major factors for divorce. It may be because the man loses his job or is down graded or the business is declining and can no longer sustain the family, if this persist it may cause a speedy rate of divorce.
- c. **Criminal Behaviour:** Some spouses may find out after their marriage that their partners are criminally inclined persons. Some of them are thieves, drug abusers, fraudulent individual among others. They do not have clean means of livelihood, they are not what they claimed to be.
- d. **Sexual Incompatibility:** Individual demand or enjoy sexual intercourse in various degree, some demand for excessive and frequent sex more than what their partner can cope with, others barely tolerate or want it, some individual have some sexual problems that may be sexual arousal, sexual performance or sexual demand all these can cause divorce among couples.
- e. **Childlessness or Infidelity:** Having a sexual or romantic affairs with someone other than ones spouse. Childlessness in marriage is one of the major causes of marital maladjustment and final breakdown of marriages in Nigeria. Given the premium which Africans in general and Nigerians in particular attach to children, any marriage that has nothing to show for it in terms of children after two years is usually in tension. Even where the man claims that he is not perturbed and is not worrying the wife about the childlessness, the woman herself does not feel at ease. The family of the man usually blames the woman for the childlessness even when the man is responsible for the problem. She is often called all sorts of names including being “a man”. If there is convincing evidence that a partner has engaged in sexual unfaithfulness, the marriage foundation is broken. This is a frequent and legally accepted cause of divorce.
- f. **Age at marriage:** Those who marry early are found to divorce more and earlier than more mature partner. This may be because they were not fully prepared for such stage of life, they probably do not have enough education or profession to fall back to. They may even bear more children than they can cope with within a short time in marriage or old men who marry very young wives, all these can lead to divorce.
- g. **Alcohol/Substance Abuse:** Excessive indulgence in these items is inimical to stability of marriage. It reduces money available for the development of the home; it pushes the offending partner away from the other spouse, worsen the home climate and reduce reasonable communication. Alcohol use may result to diverse violence such as physical, sexual, emotional and financial.
- h. **Workaholism:** Some spouse devote too much time to their work to the extent that they neglect their partner, children and home. Some may claim they need to work to take responsibilities for every one in the family as best as they can; some are business men and women who cross the state and even the country they hardly stay at home and their partners may miss them while they are apart. Some academicians spend plenty of their time lecturing, paper presentation, attending conferences and rendering public services, some women are now executives, some of them rise fast and high far above their husband, some of them may look down on their partners who may not like this, it is a potent cause of divorce.
- i. **Lack of Preparation:** Many young people today dabble into marriage without any adequate preparation. It is true that at the age of 14 for a girl and 16 for a boy, they are already physically matured for marriage, but then physical maturity is not all that is required for marriage. There is need for two people who are about to enter into marriage to be prepared for it. This preparation can come in various

- forms – emotional, psychological and intellectual. They are supposed to know what marriage is all about, what is expected of them in terms of the duties and obligations, and how they are to relate with each other meaningfully after marriage. In my interaction with many young men and women whose marriages have broken down, I discovered that at the very time they entered into the marriage, they knew next to nothing of what marriage actually entailed.
- j. **Mother-in-law interference:** Many mother in-laws contribute to the breakdown of the marriage of their sons/daughters by their interference. Some find it difficult to accept the reality and implication of their sons being one flesh with their wives which translates into more love and affection for their spouses than themselves. They at times find it difficult to understand that the new couples are to start their own lives and be independent of them. This attitude does not encourage marital happiness. Hence, in some cases, the mother in-laws do disrupt the marriage of their children by their frequent and inordinate interference.
- k. **Unfulfilled Expectation:** It has been observed that some men marry hoping for material or financial benefits from the family of the woman. The underlining element and motive of the marriage is the assistance to be received. In such a situation, the love necessary to sustain the marriage is basically lacking. Many a time, this expectation is not usually met and it brings about friction and tension in the marriage, and consequently its breakdown. A man should never agree to marry a woman he does not love, and who is much older than he is, only because he hoped that through the marriage, the family of the woman would transfer their wealth to him. This hope is rarely fulfilled after the marriage. Such unfulfilled expectation has been the cause of many broken marriages in Nigeria.
- l. **Unfaithfulness in Marriage:** The first characteristic of conjugal love is fidelity. Faithfulness is essential to a happy life in marriage. In marriage, the man and woman are supposed to be faithful to each other. To have affairs with another person of the opposite sex means practically to “divide” oneself, which eventually leads one to withdraw from a real love relationship. This is why promiscuity, either on the side of the woman or the man, often times leads to marital breakdown. In the storms of problems and difficulties, a marriage can only stand firm if it is rooted in faithfulness. Hence, whenever a man or a woman betrays the promise to be faithful to the other party by engaging in extra-marital affairs, the seed for the breakdown of the marriage is sown.

### **Effects of Marital Instability on Children**

- a. **Low/absence of education:** Children from unstable families have lower academic achievement than children from stable families. This is because the one parent family structure denies these children both proper role models and sufficient discipline to allow them to accommodate the demands of their school work. The situation is worse among girls since they may be forced to dropout of school to hawk goods to help cater for the family or education of their brothers and they may end up becoming wayward. The problem compounded by the poor state of economy, where the father is absent and the mother is not privileged enough to cater for all the basic needs as well as supervise the academic performance of the children there is likelihood for the children to be backward or withdraw from school. Same is the case when the mother is absent and the father is not privileged enough. Among the childhood explanations, as for educational outcomes, one of the main arguments stresses the decline of children's standard of living after

- separation, since it is well-demonstrated that economic difficulties affect negatively children's psychological well-being during childhood (Wright, 2017).
- b. **Lack of Socialization:** A child from a non-separated home may be well taken care of and socialized in the best way possible. According to Wright (2017), this is because in the process of socialization there is a division of labour where certain roles are to be better performed by the father while others by the mother and jointly they see to it that they go through the process hitch free. A child from a single or divorced parent is likely to have problems in this area. The shame and humiliation of the children may be compounded by the societal tendency to stigmatize them. People often advise their children and relations not to interact or marry girls from single parents for in their view the daughters would go the way of their mothers.
  - c. **Psychological effect:** Instability is associated with diminishing psychological well-being in children which result in greater unhappiness, less satisfaction with life, weaker sense of personal control, juvenile delinquency or high rate of anti-social behaviour, substance abuse and dependence, sexual promiscuity, adjustment problems, anxiety and depression. Parental separation has the potential to cause a lot of stress to children and adults alike, even though there is major individual heterogeneity in the effects, with some benefiting, others experiencing short-term drops in well-being, and others entering a longer term negative consequences.

This difference is linked to the quality of the marriage prior to separation, the rate of conflict in the separation process, personal adjustment skills, and social support. Some children whose parents put an end to a particularly conflicting or abusive marriage may benefit from parental separation, but the average outcome seems to be negative, with more children suffering from it, although according to many reviews the effects are not very strong (Muhammad, 2019).

### **Economic Deprivation**

Family income is a good predictor of children's educational outcomes. Low cognitive stimulation provided in poor households is a major pathway linking childhood poverty to childhood intellectual development. Separation is often associated with decreased material well-being and downward social mobility. In developed countries, usually, provisions are made for the children thus; separating couples need to divide their economic resources, though losing their economies of scale but the reverse applies in developing countries. It is also common for children of separation to continue residing with their mothers, who tend to suffer economically more than their fathers (Uche, 2019). Single-mother families are more likely to experience a higher level of economic insecurity and fathers may find it hard to transfer their resources and aspirations to their non-resident children. It is well-established that divorce is associated with a decrease in the quantity and quality of the relationship between children and non-custodial parent. It seems that parental-child contact is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. However, these show that child's feelings of closeness with the non-custodial parent have a positive impact on children's educational outcomes although its effect is lower than authoritative parenting. However, even if there is a close relationship between the non-resident father and the child, some parents behave toward their children as an adult friend.

### **Counselling Implication**

Counselling as an applied psychology has a psychological process of helping individuals cope with various life situations, such as adjustment and marital stability. Thus, there is need for pre-marital and in-Marital counselling for married couples and those intended to, so as to assist have a greater understanding of marriage and marital instability. Counselling is aimed at assisting the counsellor to understand their strength and work towards encouraging their clients to be able to live a stabilized life. More often instability erupts between spouses due to their inability to understand and appreciate themselves, counselling will help the couples to understand the differences between them so as to be able to tolerate each other.

### **Conclusion**

It is a fact that he who has failed to plan has already planned to fail. This is applicable to marriage also for a successful marital life devoid of bitterness and rancor equally requires planning, adequate knowledge and information. One has to be aware of the things that can wreck havoc to a marriage and prevent it from being a lifelong commitment that is peaceful, harmonious and enriching. Marital instability is a cankerworm that destabilizes the family and brings about untold hardship to the children of the marriage. The causes of this malady can be uprooted only if counsellors know them and take necessary precautions, as “prevention is better than cure” and “a stitch in time saves nine”. Married people need to go through mutual efforts and cooperation between themselves in order to promote peace in their homes, while our Parents, Religious and Educational institutions, Guidance and Counselling experts, Human Rights Activists, Governmental and Non-Governmental Organization should constantly organize marriage seminars with couples, bachelors and spinsters time without number in order to inculcate love and true concept of marriage into them with emphasis on the effects on child development.

### **Suggestions**

1. Counsellors should explore public gatherings, conferences, seminars in reaching out to the public of different educational backgrounds on marital conflict resolution issues with the hope of promoting happily married homes.
2. Family counselling should be emphasized by the stakeholders, government, religious leaders, and counsellors to minimise instability in the family and effort should be intensified to discourage marital discord.
3. Pre-marital and In-marital counselling should be provided to the couples irrespective of their gender to enable them manage their marital conflicts.
4. Marriage counsellors, therapists, social workers, clergymen should encourage couples to live harmoniously by adjusting with their spouses so as to have stable families that will impact positively on their children.
5. Family life and peaceful means of sustaining marriage counselling should be provided by couples.
6. Husband and wives should build their relationship on love and respect for each other's individuality.
7. They should learn to say “I am sorry” and “thank you”. These two can make or mar any marital relationship.

## References

- Abubakar, H. S. (2017). Family instability and children's early problem behaviour. *Social Forces*, **85** (1): 551-81.
- Adejare, T. A. (2018). Marital Instability As Perceived By Married Academic Staff of Shehu Shagari College of Education Sokoto, Sokoto State Nigeria. Unpublished M.Ed Dissertation Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, Sokoto State Nigeria.
- Aminu, R. N. (2016). Marital Instability and its Impact on Women and Children of Bangladesh. Shahid Sharawardi College Laxmibazar, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Animasahun, R. A. & Femi. A. E. (2018). Pattern of marital instability among married couples in Lagos, Nigeria, *Journal of Africa Studies and Development*, **3** (10), 192-199.
- Ayodele, M, O. (2020). Gender and agenda in marital instability and productive adult life, *Journal of gender Development*, **2** (1): 150-154.
- Luka, T. (2019). Effect of Marital Instability on Children, Christian Women Mirrow, Deeper life publication, Lagos.
- Maciver, J. E. & Dimkpa, D. I. (2012). Factors Influencing Marital Stability, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Science*, **3** (1): 437-442.
- Muhammad, Y. (2019). Feeling caught between parents: adult children's relations with parents and subjective well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, **68** (1): 222-235.
- Musa, T. (2017). The differential of Marital Stress among Working and non Working Married Women in Sabon Gari Local Government of Kaduna State, Nigeria. Unpublished M.Ed Dissertation, UDU, Sokoto.
- Obidoa, F. K. & Operanozie G. (2011). Religion in Families 1999-2009: A Relational Spirituality Framework. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, **72**: 805-827
- Oyafunke, C. O. Olubusoye, F. H & Salau, P. O. (2014). Effects of marital instability on children in Abeokuta Metropolist. *European Journal of Business and Innovation Research*, **2** (3): 68-77
- Tolorunleke, S. I. (2018). *Causes of Marital Conflicts amongst Couples in Nigeria: Implication for Counselling Psychologists*. Procedia-Social and Behavioural Science 140, 21-26
- Uche, B. P. (2019). Short-run effects of parental Job loss on children's academic achievement. *Economics of Education Review*, **30** (2): 289-99
- Wright, M. (2017). Factors affecting marital instability and its impacts on fertility in Bangladesh. *Asa University Review*, **7** (2): 35-41.