



Changing Household Financial Dynamics and Domestic Violence against Men in Nigeria: A Socio-Cultural Analysis.

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Abstract

Globally, domestic violence is usually framed through a female-victim, male-perpetrator lens rooted in women's economic dependency. Rising numbers of Nigerian women are, however, becoming primary or sole breadwinners, producing complex socio-cultural shifts that can produce domestic violence against men. Drawing explicitly on Relative Resource Theory, the Backlash Hypothesis, Masculine Discrepancy Stress, and Role Overload, this paper uses a qualitative desktop approach with thematic content analysis of interdisciplinary literature, socio-legal texts, media reports, and advocacy documents to examine how breadwinner reversal reshapes household power and precipitates violence against men. Analysis identifies two interacting pathways: (1) status threat and Masculine Discrepancy Stress among men who lose provider status, which can produce compensatory aggression, withdrawal, or increased vulnerability to partner-perpetrated abuse; and (2) female role overload when women shoulder paid work and traditional domestic duties, which can generate frustration-aggression directed at non-earning husbands. Findings further document socio-cultural stigma and institutional invisibility - where gender norms delegitimize male victimhood and practical enforcement of gender-neutral laws (notably the VAPP Act) remains female-centred - creating a legal and support "desert" for men. The paper argues for legislative and socio-cultural recalibration that decouples masculinity from financial dominance, recognizes male victimhood, and advances gender-inclusive protections and social supports to promote reciprocity and safety in shifting matrimonial financial paradigms.

Keywords: Breadwinner Reversal, Masculine Discrepancy Stress, Role Overload, Backlash Hypothesis, Domestic Violence (DV).

Introduction

For decades, the global narrative of domestic violence has been dominated by a focus on female victimization, often framed as a consequence of women's financial dependency (World Health Organization, 2021) and men's economic and cultural power. While this framing remains valid in many contexts, contemporary global and national socio-economic transformations are complicating this one-dimensional view. Across many societies, women are increasingly assuming the role of primary or sole breadwinner (BAEL - University of Bonn, 2023-2024; Klesment & Van Bavel, 2023), challenging the long-standing male-breadwinner/female-dependent model that undergirds traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity (Mshweshwe, 2020; Centre for African Justice, 2021).

In Nigeria, these global trends intersect with deeply rooted patriarchal expectations that define men as economic anchors and heads of households (Centre for African Justice, 2021). As economic disruptions, unemployment, and shifting labour markets undermine male provider capacity, more women are moving from matrimonial dependency to financial dominance. This transition represents not just a change in income streams but a profound socio-cultural disruption of status, identity, and power within the home. While such shifts are celebrated as milestones of women's empowerment, they have concurrently birthed an under-researched crisis: an upsurge in domestic violence against men (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Allen & Straus, 1980; Klesment & Van Bavel, 2023; Centre for African Justice, 2021).

Men who lose patriarchal economic dominance



and become matrimonially dependent may experience shame, status loss, and Masculine Discrepancy Stress (Reidy et al., 2019; Patrick, 2014; Centre for African Justice, 2021), making them vulnerable as potential perpetrators seeking to reclaim authority and as victims of psychological, economic, and physical abuse (Achem & Ani, 2023). Simultaneously, women who carry the entire financial burden, yet still perform traditional domestic roles, face role overload (Liu et al., 2021; Adebayo, 2014; Eagly, 2002) that may translate into frustration-aggression directed at non-earning spouses (Voices4Change, 2016).

This paper situates Nigerian male victimization within a global reconfiguration of gendered economic roles. It argues that the shift from dependency to dominance is not merely a financial reordering but a socio-cultural shock that destabilizes normative expectations, triggers backlash, and exposes a critical gap in existing discourses, laws, and support systems (Matthew, 2021).

The problem addressed is twofold. First, the rise of female breadwinning in Nigeria has intensified Masculine Discrepancy Stress, as men who are unable to meet the culturally prescribed provider ideal experience a disjuncture between internalized masculine norms and lived economic realities. This status inconsistency destabilizes male identity, producing psychological strain, shame, and heightened risk of domestic conflict. Men may resort to violence to restore lost authority, yet simultaneously become targets of abuse where their economic weakness is weaponized (Centre for African Justice, 2021; Klesment & Van Bavel, 2023; Voices4Change, 2016).

Second, there is a marked conceptual and empirical gap regarding the female perspective within breadwinner reversal. Much scholarship concentrates on male reactions to loss of dominance, overlooking how women's role overload, under conditions of minimal support and limited recognition, creates its own stress pathway. Women may experience chronic frustration and resentment that manifests as

frustration-aggression in which the non-earning husband becomes the focus of anger, control, and even physical violence, sometimes framed as "payback" for historical patriarchal oppression. Within a culture that symbolically assigns headship and authority to men (Centre for African Justice, 2021), this dynamic creates a volatile socio-cultural "desert" for male victims: their experiences are delegitimized as weakness, normalized as deserved, or dismissed by communities and institutions. Laws that are nominally gender-neutral are often operationalized in ways that privilege female victimhood, leaving men trapped between ridicule, silence, and inadequate protection.

Main Objective: To analyze how changing household financial dynamics - specifically female breadwinner reversal - reconfigure power, identity, and risk within Nigerian intimate relationships, producing pathways to domestic violence against men and exposing gaps in socio-legal recognition and protection.

Literature Review

Masculinity, Discursive Norms, and Male Victimization

Contemporary scholarship on masculinities in Africa shows that men are positioned as both potential perpetrators and potential victims of domestic violence within patriarchal systems. The Comparative Discursive Construction of Men, Masculinities, and Domestic Violence in Nigeria and Uganda project finds that in Sub-Saharan Africa, young males are implicated as aggressors but also experience domestic violence, yet their victimhood remains poorly theorized and under-researched (BAEL - University of Bonn, 2023-2024). Ideologies that equate masculinity with economic provision, authority, and emotional invulnerability render male victimization culturally unintelligible and institutionally invisible (BAEL - University of Bonn, 2023-2024; Institute of Development Studies, 2016).

Global analyses reinforce this pattern. Bhardwaj (2025) reports that approximately one in three domestic violence victims worldwide is male, but pervasive stigma and expectations of hegemonic masculinity-strength, stoicism, dominance,



suppress reporting and recognition. Earlier work framed men as "unacceptable victims" whose narratives disrupt dominant gender scripts (George, 1994) and examined the puzzle of women's violence against men in intimate relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kumar, 2012; Sarkar et al., 2007). Male victimhood is thus empirically significant yet systematically marginalized.

Breadwinner Reversal, Relative Resources, and Backlash

A central theme is the destabilizing effect of breadwinner reversal on intimate partner dynamics. Building on Goode's (1971) Resource Theory, which links marital power to control of valued resources, recent work suggests that when the "purse strings" shift from men to women, power relations within the household are renegotiated in often conflictual ways. Zhang and Breunig (2023), using Australian population-level data, find that when women earn more than male partners, domestic abuse increases by about 33% for partner violence and 20% for emotional abuse, identifying a distinct "female breadwinner" effect. They interpret this as backlash to disrupted male economic dominance rather than a simple function of poverty or stress (Schneider et al., 2016).

Comparative reviews indicate that rising female economic power coincides with increased reports of male victimization, filtered through local gender norms that continue to script men as natural leaders and providers (Bhardwaj, 2025). The Backlash Hypothesis thus operates at structural and relational levels: macro-level gains in women's resources unsettle patriarchal hierarchies, while micro-level relationships absorb the shock as partners renegotiate status and control.

In Nigeria, these dynamics intersect with entrenched patriarchy. Okumagba and Ogisi (2023) argue that domestic violence against men is linked to the criminalization of female-perpetrated abuses previously ignored, combined with shifting economic roles that place women in positions of financial dominance. They call for "Legislative Equilibrium" to address new

patterns of female-perpetrated abuse within the domestic sphere.

Gender Role Strain, Masculine Discrepancy Stress, and IPV

Gender Role Strain theory explains how shifting matrimonial financial paradigms translate into psychological tension and intimate partner violence. Reidy et al. (2014) describe strain arising when individuals cannot fulfil culturally mandated roles; for men, failure to meet provider expectations creates a profound status gap. Masculine Discrepancy Stress (MDS) captures the distress men feel when perceiving themselves as "less masculine" than societal norms, particularly in economic provision, which can lead to aggression, withdrawal, or vulnerability to partner control (Reidy et al., 2014).

Nigerian studies confirm this. Adebayo (2014) notes that masculinity is closely tied to financial responsibility and headship, so men who cannot provide are seen as having failed in core masculine duties. This failure produces shame, ridicule, and distress that fuel domestic tensions. Dienye and Gbeneol (2009) find that male victims in primary care settings report psychological and emotional abuse linked to their economic status, including belittling and threats to their legitimacy as husbands and fathers. MDS in Nigeria is thus a socially produced condition rooted in rigid gender norms.

Role Overload, Frustration-Aggression, and Female Breadwinning

Role Overload occurs when the demands from multiple roles exceed an individual's capacity (Adebayo, 2014). Women who become primary or sole breadwinners often continue to shoulder domestic and caregiving responsibilities, creating a compounded load. Evidence suggests that such overload can activate a frustration-aggression pathway: when women's efforts lack recognition, support, or reciprocity, frustration may be redirected toward non-earning partners through emotional, economic, or physical aggression (Adebayo, 2014; Zhang & Breunig, 2023). Olowu and Ahigbe (2024) likewise note that as women's financial dominance grows, unresolved tensions over authority may surface as emotionally abusive



behaviours, especially where masculine headship remains culturally presumed.

The female breadwinner is therefore both empowered and structurally strained - expected to "do it all" while embedded in normative systems that prioritize male symbolic dominance. Violence against men emerges partly as an unintended consequence of the clash between new economic roles and old gender norms.

Empirical Evidence on Domestic Violence Against Men in Nigeria

Empirical Nigerian studies increasingly document domestic violence against men in urban and rural settings. Voices4Change's (2016) multi-state study in Lagos, Rivers, Kaduna, and Borno shows that gender socialization emphasizing male toughness, control, and provision creates power imbalances that shape household violence. Urban young men facing unemployment experience heightened pressure to perform breadwinner roles; when female partners become primary earners, these men confront identity loss and shame, increasing vulnerability to partner aggression (Voices4Change, 2016).

In rural Nigeria, patriarchal enforcement is stronger. Achem and Ani (2023) show that rural male victims face ridicule and sanctions when disclosing abuse, leading to high "socio-cultural cost" of victimhood. Low-income rural men, whose masculinity is tightly tied to provision and authority, are disproportionately affected when they cannot meet expectations and when partners' economic roles expand. Emotional abuse - verbal emasculation, humiliation, social denigration, often links directly to financial status (Achem & Ani, 2023). Dienye and Gbeneol (2009) likewise identify emotional abuse and controlling behaviours, while Karakurt and Silver (2013) highlight verbal emasculation and financial belittling where women leverage economic superiority. Male victimization is patterned along economic and demographic lines, with young unemployed urban men, low-income rural men, and men in female-breadwinner relationships particularly at risk (Voices4Change, 2016; Achem & Ani, 2023; Adebayo, 2014; Obarisiagbon & Omege, 2019).

Legal and Institutional Invisibility: Toward Legislative Equilibrium

Despite growing evidence, Nigerian legal and institutional frameworks have been slow to recognize male victimization. Okumagba and Ogisi (2023) argue that while statutes such as the VAPP Act are drafted in gender-neutral language, enforcement, public awareness, and support services remain female-centric, creating a "legal vacuum" in which men feel unprotected and disbelieved. Adebayo (2014) observes that interventions, shelters, and campaigns predominantly target women and children, leaving male victims without tailored support. In clinical practice, male patients often hesitate to disclose abuse due to fears of ridicule and non-recognition (Dienye & Gbeneol, 2009). Adetoro and Adetoro (2021) and others call for "Legislative Equilibrium" encompassing statutory reform, gender-inclusive implementation, and public narratives that acknowledge men as legitimate victims of IPV.

The literature converges on several themes central to this paper. First, masculinity in Nigeria is anchored in economic provision and authority, making men vulnerable to Gender Role Strain and MDS when breadwinner roles are disrupted (BAEL - University of Bonn, 2023-2024; Reidy et al., 2014; Adebayo, 2014). Second, evidence on female breadwinning demonstrates that income reversals are associated with increased domestic conflict and abuse, including female-perpetrated violence against men (Zhang & Breunig, 2023; Bhardwaj, 2025; Okumagba & Ogisi, 2023). Third, Role Overload among female breadwinners who retain domestic responsibilities clarifies how empowerment can coexist with intense stress, leading in some cases to frustration-aggression against non-earning husbands (Adebayo, 2014; Olowu & Ahigbe, 2024). Fourth, Nigerian studies confirm that male victimization is significant yet systematically obscured, with vulnerabilities clustered among young, unemployed, or low-income men in breadwinner-reversal relationships (Voices4Change, 2016; Achem & Ani, 2023; Dienye & Gbeneol, 2009; Obarisiagbon & Omege, 2019). Finally, persistent legal and institutional invisibility reinforces the argument



that socio-economic empowerment without inclusive gender security is unsustainable (Adetoro & Adetoro, 2021; Goode, 1971; Okumagba & Ogisi, 2023).

By integrating these strands, the study positions domestic violence against men in Nigeria as a structurally patterned outcome of contested gender orders, rooted in transitions from dependency to dominance in matrimonial financial paradigms.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpin of this study resurrects from the Eurocentric, Afrocentric perspectives of Relative Resource Theory (Goode, 1971), the Backlash Hypothesis (Jones, 2019), Masculine Discrepancy Stress (MDS) Theory (Reidy et al., 2014), and Role Overload (Eagly, 2002).

Relative Resource Theory posits that power within intimate relationships is shaped by comparative resources - income, education, occupational status - that partners bring into the union. When women command greater economic resources, the established gender order is disrupted. The Backlash Hypothesis suggests such disruptions provoke compensatory efforts to reassert traditional hierarchies (Jones, 2019). In Nigeria, status inconsistency is acute because masculinity is strongly tethered to provider and headship roles. When women's earnings surpass men's, economic power may shift, but cultural scripts often lag. Men may respond with controlling or violent behaviours to reclaim symbolic authority, while women may use financial dominance to discipline, belittle, or marginalize "failed" husbands. Economic superiority becomes both a status marker and a potential tool of domestic control.

Masculine Discrepancy Stress (MDS) refers to the tension men experience when lived realities diverge from internalized masculine ideals. Customary provisioning expectations magnify this stress: manhood is equated with breadwinning, strength, and command. When men lose employment, earn less than their wives, or become economically dependent, they suffer loss of "masculine capital" - authority, respect, and social legitimacy. Intrinsically, men may

internalize failure, leading to shame, self-blame, depression, and fear of reporting abuse that keeps victimization hidden (Tsui, 2014). Extrinsically, MDS can manifest as aggression toward female partners as men attempt to reclaim power and respect through coercion or violence (Zhang & Breunig, 2023; Dobash & Dobash, 2004). In breadwinner-reversal scenarios, MDS links shifting financial paradigms to both the perpetration and experience of domestic violence by men (Mayo Clinic, 2024; National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2025; The MEND Project, 2024).

The Frustration-Aggression Path: The Female Breadwinner's Perspective. A central contribution of this paper is attention to female role overload and the frustration-aggression pathway. When women assume primary or sole earner roles in a socio-cultural environment with little institutional support and minimal symbolic reward for reversed households, they confront compounded expectations: to perform as full-time providers while continuing unpaid domestic labour. This produces intense role overload and cumulative frustration. In communities where leadership and respect are coded as male, women's economic contributions may not translate into decision-making power or recognition. Some women may then turn frustration toward non-earning husbands, demanding obedience or emotional submission as a form of "earned" leadership. Aggression - verbal, psychological, economic, or physical can become a reactive mechanism that mirrors patriarchal dominance, reproducing patterns of control now directed at men.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative socio-cultural desktop analysis appropriate for unpacking complex, norm-laden phenomena at the intersection of gender, economy, and violence. The methodology involves:

1. Critical review and synthesis of interdisciplinary literature on domestic violence, breadwinner reversal, Relative Resource Theory, the Backlaw Hypothesis, Masculine Discrepancy Stress, and Role



Overload.

2. Contextual analysis of Nigerian socio-legal frameworks, especially the VAPP Act and related policies, to evaluate their practical inclusivity regarding male victimhood.
3. Examination of publicly available case reports, media narratives, and advocacy documents highlighting instances or patterns of domestic violence against men in Nigeria and comparable settings.
4. Thematic analysis integrating global trends with Nigerian socio-cultural specificities, identifying key patterns such as status threat, frustration-aggression, institutional invisibility, and socio-cultural stigma.

The approach does not seek statistical generalizability but aims at conceptual clarity, theoretical integration, and policy-relevant insight into a neglected dimension of domestic violence.

Findings:

Status Threat and MDS

Men who fall short of the breadwinner role experience acute status threat and Masculine Discrepancy Stress. This psychological strain increases their risk of engaging in controlling or abusive behaviours as compensatory attempts to restore authority, while simultaneously heightening vulnerability to being demeaned or abused by partners who interpret economic weakness as grounds for disrespect or domination.

Role Overload as a Trigger: Socio-Cultural Stigma and “Triple Jeopardy”

Evidence suggests that when women assume full financial responsibility while retaining primary domestic duties, role overload becomes a critical trigger of domestic volatility. Unmet financial needs, debt, and economic pressures intersect with gendered expectations, contributing to conflict that may include verbal, psychological, and physical abuse directed at men.

Patriarchal norms produce a triple jeopardy for

men in reversed households. First, they are socialized to view economic failure as personal and masculine failure. Second, the same ideology exposes them to ridicule and disbelief when they attempt to disclose victimization, reinforcing silence. Third, institutional responses, from police to service providers, are often skeptical or dismissive, effectively excluding male victims from protection and redress. Male victims thus become socially and institutionally invisible.

Institutional Invisibility and Legal Desert

Although statutes such as the VAPP Act are drafted in gender-neutral language, their implementation, public messaging, and support services are heavily oriented toward female victims. Shelters, hotlines, and advocacy infrastructures rarely foreground male experiences, creating a legal and practical “desert” where men have rights in principle but limited accessible remedies.

Reproduction of Patriarchal Logics

The analysis indicates that breadwinner reversal does not automatically dismantle patriarchal logics. Instead, it often results in inversion or reconfiguration: women may claim dominance on the basis of income, while men are repositioned as dependents whose value is questioned. The logic of hierarchy and control remains intact, with power changing hands rather than being democratized. This complicates emancipatory narratives of women's economic empowerment and exposes the need for deeper transformation of gender norms and relational ethics.

Discussion

These findings indicate that shifting economic roles interact with entrenched gender norms to produce new injury patterns rather than straightforward emancipation. Relative Resource Theory and the Backlash Hypothesis explain why income-based shifts unsettle household power and can produce compensatory behaviours. MDS clarifies the psychological processes through which men internalize provider failure and either enact or endure violence. Role Overload illuminates how women's increased labor (paid and unpaid) creates chronic stress that may be displaced onto intimate partners. Together the



theories show that material resource changes without concurrent socio-cultural and institutional transformation can exacerbate domestic volatility.

Practically, the socio-cultural silencing of male victims undermines detection, reporting, and redress. The gendered orientation of services and enforcement perpetuates a gap between formal legal protections and lived accessibility. Hence, legal neutrality in drafting is insufficient; implementation, public education, and targeted services must be gender-inclusive in practice.

Conclusion

The transition of Nigerian women from matrimonial dependency to economic dominance is a landmark socio-economic development. Yet, when such change unfolds within an unreformed patriarchal framework, it can generate new forms of vulnerability and violence. Breadwinner reversal disrupts taken-for-granted expectations of male provision and female dependency, triggering status threat in men, role overload in women, and a complex matrix of frustration, backlash, and aggression.

Domestic violence against men emerges not as an anomaly but as a patterned response to contested gender roles and shifting financial paradigms. Continued cultural attachment of masculinity to provider status, coupled with weak recognition of male victimhood and female role strain, ensures that many instances of abuse against men remain unreported, unaddressed, and normalized. Without deliberate theoretical, legal, and policy recalibration, the pursuit of women's economic empowerment risks coexisting with, or indirectly contributing to, a silent crisis of male victimization and relational instability.

Recommendations

- 1. Address Female Role Overload and Systemic Stress.** Implement policies that provide social protection and childcare support for low-income households to alleviate role overload on female breadwinners, thereby reducing frustration-aggression triggers.
- 2. Strengthen Gender-Inclusive Legal**

Implementation. Ensure specialized training for law enforcement and the judiciary so that the VAPP Act and related instruments are applied with genuine gender neutrality, treating male victims' complaints with professional seriousness rather than ridicule and avoiding dismissal of women's complaints as "private family matters."

- 3. Reframe Discourse and Encourage Help-Seeking.** Government at all levels, NGOs, FBOs, and CBOs should launch public awareness campaigns that de-stigmatize male help-seeking and frame domestic violence as a human rights issue rather than a marker of gendered weakness.
- 4. Promote Socio-Cultural Equilibrium.** Utilize community and religious dialogues to decouple masculinity from sole financial provision and to normalize non-hierarchical partnerships, mitigating status threat in changing economic contexts and fostering reciprocity and safety for all partners.

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