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AN ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL DETERMINANTS ON MARITAL CONFLICTS AND SEPARATION IN KOGI EAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Marriage is a foundational social institution that guarantees procreation, child socialization, household stability, and the continuity of human society through lifelong companionship. Despite these critical functions, escalating rates of marital conflict and spousal separation in Kogi East, Nigeria, have introduced severe traumatic risks for couples, children, and broader community structures. This study investigated the social determinants and consequences of marital conflict and separation among spouses in Kogi East Senatorial District, Kogi State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on an integrated theoretical framework combining Communication Theory and Social Exchange Theory, which collectively account for micro-level communicative breakdowns and macroeconomic cost-reward imbalances in marital unions. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the investigation. Using a simple random sampling technique across the nine (9) Local Government Areas in the senatorial zone, a structured sample size of 450 respondents was selected. Empirical findings revealed that children bear the primary socio-economic and psychological burden of marital breakdown and divorce in the study area. Furthermore, the inquiry identified childlessness, extramarital infidelity, failed gender-role expectations, and chronic financial instability as the primary determinants driving marital conflict. Based on these findings, the study recommends that couples adopt constructive, internal dispute-resolution mechanisms before involving external third parties. Additionally, the study recommends targeted public policy interventions to alleviate household poverty, promote economic empowerment, and expand educational access as essential strategies for reducing divorce rates and reinforcing family stability in sub-national Nigeria.

Keywords: *Marital Conflict, Divorce, Family Stability, Communication Theory, Kogi East, Nigeria*

Introduction

Globally, divorce cases have increased substantially, but they are higher in developed than in developing countries, though they are stabilizing in some countries (UN DESA, 2022). Despite the benefits of being married, divorce rates continued to rise in sub-Saharan African countries (John & Nitsche, 2022). Within 20 years, one-third of the first marriages were thought to end in divorce, while more than 40% were dissolved within 25 years (John & Nitsche, 2022). The terms marriage and family, though difficult to separate, are not the same. Brown (2020) defines family as a household or those who live in one house; for example, parents, children, and servants. A family is conceptualized as a bio-social group, a primary

network of individuals bound together by social cohesion, kinship, or blood ties (Eze & Okonkwo, 2021). In the Nigerian context, where the extended family system is predominant, the family unit includes married couples, their biological or adopted offspring, immediate kith and kin, and non-parental dependents (Omoniyi et al., 2022). Ojonugwa et al. (2023) posit that a family constitutes a cohabiting social group bound by consanguinity or marriage, within which adult members enter socially and legally approved unions. Structural functionalism emphasizes that marital cohabitation requires systemic cooperation, internal governance, mutual role expectations, and shared values (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024).

Contemporary literature widely establishes the vital role of family stability, free from persistent conflict, in driving sustainable family development and overall societal well-being (Nwachukwu & Ibiam, 2023). A stable family environment, characterized by low rates of reciprocal punitive behavior, creates an essential foundation for human capital development and social cohesion (Inakefe et al., 2024). Conversely, marital disharmony manifests as psychological or social strain resulting from conflicting interests, values, or goals, in which partners perceive a threat to their individual or collective needs (Inakefe et al., 2024). Although mild marital friction is a normative aspect of relational interaction, often signifying that partners remain engaged in defining household boundaries, unmanaged conflict degrades relational stability over time (Inakefe et al., 2024; Okafor & Danjuma, 2022).

The rising incidence of family instability, informal separations, and formal divorces across modern Nigerian society underscores a growing prevalence of domestic disharmony (Okafor & Danjuma, 2022). Disharmony frequently emerges when one partner's behavior and expectations diverge sharply from the other's, creating systemic friction over household goals, career priorities, or child-rearing strategies (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024). Because each partner enters the marital union with distinct socio-cultural backgrounds, personality traits, economic expectations, and personal values, differences in coping mechanisms often strain the relationship (Eze & Okonkwo, 2021; Okafor & Danjuma, 2022). Among the empirical factors driving marital disharmony in contemporary households, economic stress and financial management stand out as primary catalysts (Afolabi, 2025; Inakefe et al., 2024). Fluctuating household real incomes, unemployment, and systemic economic contraction put severe strain on marital cohabitation, often escalating secondary conflicts over role performance and domestic responsibilities (Afolabi, 2025; Inakefe et al., 2024). Ademiluka (2024) argued that financial challenges put undue strain on family relationships. He further argued that contemporary marriages experience more strain from financial matters than from other factors. Variables such as changes in growth and development, individual differences, home conditions, family size, human needs, parental attitudes, and child training methods are associated with marital disharmony (Fensterheim, 2018).

Statement of the problem

Globally, cohabitation among couples is becoming common. In Nigeria, particularly in Kogi East, marital conflicts and separation are on the rise because of childlessness, culture and tradition, infidelity, lack of trust, economic depression, among others. As a result, anger, resentment, dissatisfaction, frustration, and hopelessness take control of relationships and, at times, break down marriages irretrievably. These conflicts can threaten societal values, children, and the community where couples live, despite various attempts to find lasting solutions to marital conflict in Kogi East, Nigeria. It is, therefore, necessary that the causes of

marital conflicts and separation, as well as resolution strategies among couples, be investigated. Hence, this study interrogates the causes of marital conflict and the rate of separation among couples in Kogi East, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Marital Conflict and Dysfunction

Marital conflict connotes a systemic deviation from normative relational functionality, signaling that a marriage is experiencing severe operational and emotional deficiencies (Ademiluka, 2024; Inakefe et al., 2024). Marital dysfunction is thus understood as a union that fails to perform its core socio-emotional and institutional functions (Ademiluka, 2024). Today, marital dysfunction manifests in unions marked by a lack of affection, destructive communication, managerial ineptitude, and institutional mistrust (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024; Eze & Okonkwo, 2021). It thrives in domestic environments marked by chaotic interactions, rigid personal pride, and cognitive inflexibility (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024). In the Nigerian context, Ademiluka (2024) conceptualizes marital dysfunction as any marital arrangement that ceases to function satisfactorily relative to societal, religious, and socio-economic expectations.

Modern theoretical frameworks on family stability emphasize that optimal marital functioning requires a delicate balance between individual autonomy and systemic cohesion (Inakefe et al., 2024). Ideal marriages are characterized by strong mutual intimacy, open communication channels, high relational satisfaction, and collective problem-solving capabilities (Okafor & Danjuma, 2022). Couples who successfully navigate domestic stress do so through mutual emotional intelligence, constructive negotiation, and shared governance rather than punitive behaviors (Inakefe et al., 2024; Nwachukwu & Ibiam, 2023).

As a primary socio-legal contract, marriage differs fundamentally from other interpersonal relationships because the parties involved share deep, multi-layered intimacy and shared economic assets (Gautam et al., 2021). Marital conflict is not merely disagreement, but an interactive dynamic indicating that spouses remain interdependently tied despite severe friction (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024). As long as active negotiation or conflict persists, a relational bond remains, regardless of its quality (Okafor & Danjuma, 2022). Within contemporary empirical studies, marital dysfunction is operationalized as chronic strain in marital interaction among cohabiting spouses, evidenced by deficits in love, mutual respect, communication, role execution, and household cohesion (Eze & Okonkwo, 2021; Inakefe et al., 2024). Dysfunctional marital environments often lead to personal maladjustment between spouses, triggering domestic disruption that adversely affects the physical, psychological, and economic security of children and extended family networks (Omoniyi et al., 2022).

The Nature of Marriage and Determinants of Marital Disharmony

Marriage represents a dynamic social contract and a foundational lifetime commitment among consenting adults (Gautam et al., 2021). Contemporary legal and sociological literature frames marriage as a binding socio-economic partnership designed to navigate socio-economic shocks, such as health crises and economic instability (Afolabi, 2025; Ojonugwa et al., 2023). Culturally approved across Nigerian societies, marriage establishes

formal sexual commitments, legitimate inheritance rights, expectations of child-rearing, and gender-defined household roles (Ademiluka, 2024; Eze & Okonkwo, 2021). It functions as a sacred, long-term covenant enacted when individuals voluntarily commit to mutual care, socio-economic collaboration, and shared human development (Gautam et al., 2021; Ojonugwa et al., 2023).

Despite its institutional significance, marital disharmony remains widespread, driven by multi-dimensional socio-economic catalysts. Financial stress and economic contraction represent primary drivers of marital disruption in contemporary Nigerian households (Afolabi, 2025; Inakefe et al., 2024). As Ademiluka (2024) shows, severe macroeconomic pressures strain family dynamics, making financial disagreements over household upkeep, debt, and income generation a leading cause of marital instability. Beyond financial pressures, variables such as shifting career demands, personality clashes, domestic living conditions, family size, unaligned child-rearing strategies, and intrusive parental attitudes significantly aggravate domestic friction (Nwachukwu & Ibiam, 2023; Omoniyi et al., 2022).

Empirical findings in sub-Saharan Africa highlight several specific triggers of marital disharmony, including:

i. Rigid patriarchal expectations versus evolving gender roles (Ademiluka, 2024; Adebayo & Lawal, 2024).
ii. Extramarital infidelities and breaches of trust (Okafor & Danjuma, 2022).
iii. Excessive interference by extended in-laws (Omoniyi et al., 2022).
iv. Conflicts between female career trajectory and unpaid domestic labor (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024).
v. Religious incompatibility and ideological divergence (Ademiluka, 2024).
vi. Male breadwinner distress resulting from chronic unemployment or poverty (Afolabi, 2025; Inakefe et al., 2024).

Furthermore, structural variables such as age at marriage, educational attainment, religious affiliation, household income levels, type of marriage contract (customary, statutory, or religious), and sexual compatibility directly influence marital stability (Eze & Okonkwo, 2021; Gautam et al., 2021). Recent empirical evidence also identifies unmanaged expectations, equitable division of household labor, and insufficient quality time spent together as critical points of contention that push couples out of harmony (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024; Okafor & Danjuma, 2022).

Gap in Literature

Existing literature extensively explores the multi-faceted causes of marital dysfunction. Works by scholars such as Gautam et al. (2021), Eze and Okonkwo (2021), and Adebayo and Lawal (2024) demonstrate that marital dysfunction stems from breakdowns in emotional intimacy, constructive communication, and mutual trust. Conversely, economic-centered studies (Ademiluka, 2024; Afolabi, 2025; Inakefe et al., 2024) argue that macroeconomic hardship and financial stress drive modern marital breakdown. Additional empirical inquiries (Omoniyi et al., 2022; Nwachukwu & Ibiam, 2023) emphasize structural factors, including extended family interference, career-domestic work imbalance, and clashes over patriarchal authority.

While these scholars have comprehensively established the general determinants of marital instability, a critical empirical gap remains regarding the macro-level socio-economic consequences of localized marital dysfunction on human capital development, particularly within the Eastern Senatorial District of Kogi State (Kogi East), Nigeria. Existing studies overwhelmingly analyze marital disharmony as an isolated clinical, psychological, or micro-level domestic problem. Consequently, there is a scarcity of research examining how persistent marital conflict, spousal abandonment, and informal parental separation structurally exacerbate child poverty, school dropout rates, youth vulnerability, and regional economic stagnation in Kogi East. This study bridges that gap by examining how localized marital dysfunction impedes sub-national economic development and human capital formation in Kogi East, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Communication Theory in Marital Relations

This study adopts Communication Theory, as originally conceptualized in systemic interaction models by Bateson (1956) and expanded in marital interaction studies by Gottman (1994, 2015). The theory posits that continuous interaction is the primary mechanism through which relational boundaries are negotiated, establishing that in interpersonal dynamics, "one cannot communicate" (Bateson, 1956). Applied to marital stability, the theory holds that miscommunication, ambiguous message encoding, and incongruent metacommunications drive marital distress. Dysfunctional communication patterns arise when exchanges lack clarity, or when struggles for relational control drive verbal and non-verbal cues.

According to this framework, effective marital interaction requires deliberate emotional regulation and clarity of expression. Spouses must filter provocative language and eliminate destructive verbal patterns such as nagging, stonewalling, and contemptuous remarks, which systematically escalate domestic conflict (Gottman, 2015). Positive and constructive communication serves as a protective factor, fostering intimacy, reinforcing self-esteem, and deepening relational cohesion.

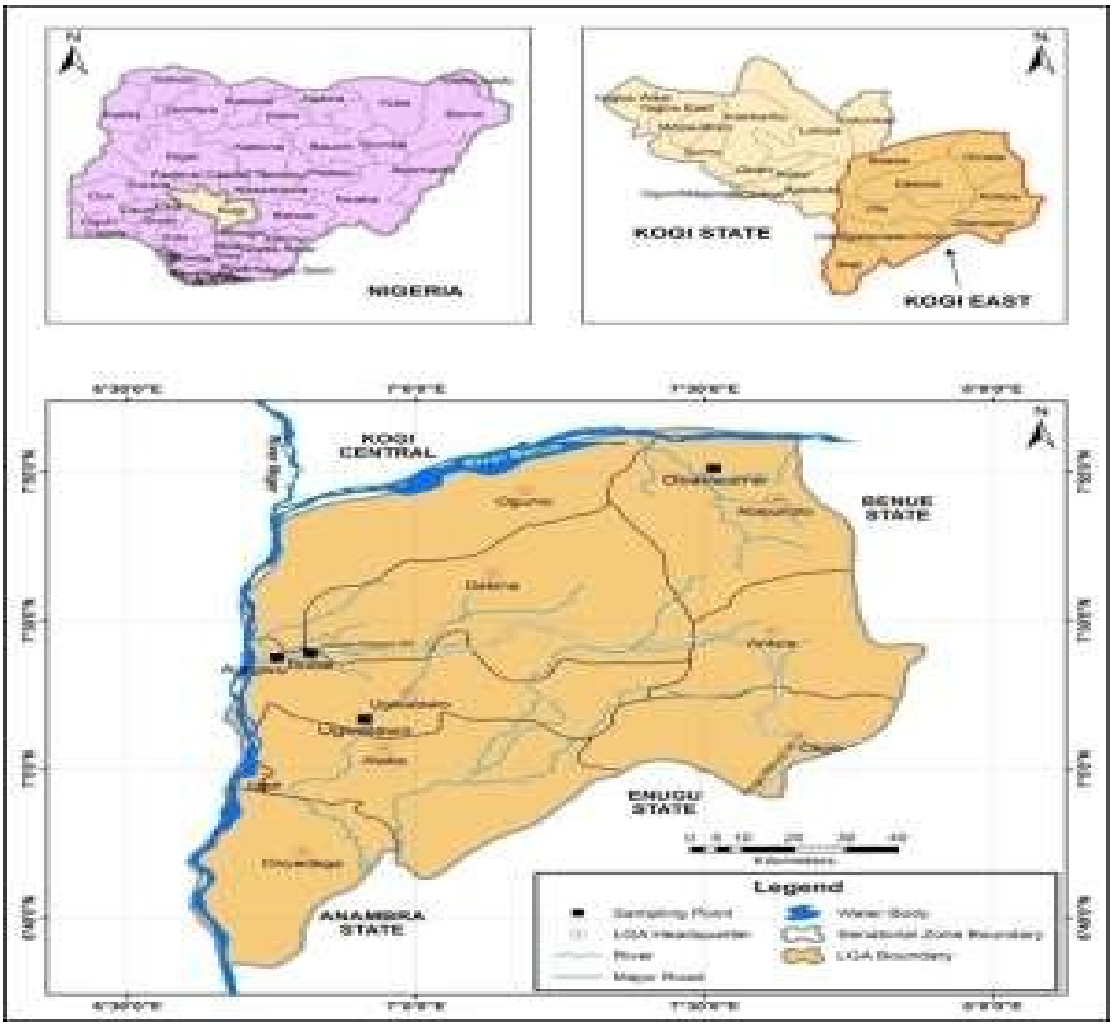
Furthermore, the model emphasizes that healthy marital communication is inherently transactional and requires a balance between respectful expression and active listening. Effective listening prevents misinterpretation, bridges communication gaps, and de-escalates emerging friction. When spouses lack the patience to listen empathetically, structural communication gaps emerge, precipitating relational disharmony. Communication Theory is directly relevant to this study, providing a robust analytical lens for examining how daily interaction patterns, dialogue quality, and conflict-resolution strategies influence household stability and socio-economic well-being across the study area.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design. According to Fletcher (2016), a descriptive survey research design is a systematic plan of study aimed at collecting primary data from a representative sample of a population to describe its characteristics, opinions, and existing features in a structured and accurate manner. The choice of a descriptive survey design is methodologically justified on several grounds. First, the study covers the Eastern Senatorial Zone of Kogi State, Nigeria, a geographically wide region comprising nine Local Government Areas (Ankpa, Bassa, Dekina, Ibaji, Idah, Igalamela/Odolu, Ofu, Olamaboro,

and Omala). Given the spatial dispersion and demographic diversity of respondents across these nine LGAs, a descriptive survey provides the most effective mechanism for collecting standardized, representative, and generalizable data without manipulating the natural environment of the subjects. Second, the descriptive survey design allows the researcher to utilize structured instruments (such as questionnaires and schedules) to measure the prevalence, distribution, and interrelationships of the target variables across the study area. This ensures high data reliability, cost-effective field coverage, and the generation of empirical baseline evidence necessary for policy formulation and academic inquiry within Kogi East.

Map of Kogi East, Nigeria



Population and Sample size

The study sample comprised 450 respondents (250 literate and 200 non-literate), drawn through a multi-stage random sampling technique from a population of 450 married people in the area. This ensured each element in the population had an equal and independent chance of being included in the sample. Fifty (50) respondents were selected from each of the nine local

government areas in the zone. A 20-item structured questionnaire was developed and used for the study. The questionnaire used a four-point response scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD).

Data collection

Trained research assistants administered the questionnaire directly and collected copies. Explanations were provided to non-literate couples to help them understand the concept under review. The researchers collected data using a structured questionnaire based on the research objectives.

Discussion of Findings: Empirical Determinants of Marital Conflict and Separation

The empirical findings reveal that marital conflict and subsequent separation in contemporary society, particularly in sub-national contexts like Kogi East, Nigeria, stem from a complex interplay of sexual, behavioral, technological, religious, and socio-economic variables. Below is a detailed, academically structured discussion of these findings, integrated with current scholarly literature (2020–2026).

1. **Sexual Deprivation and Intimacy Starvation**

The findings demonstrate that sexual starvation and the withholding of marital intimacy represent major triggers of marital instability and legal separation. In many instances, extreme or unbalanced religious practices such as prolonged, uncoordinated fasting, daily prayer routines, and continuous night vigils are leveraged, intentionally or unintentionally, to deny spouses sexual rights. Within both statutory and customary jurisprudence, persistent and unexcused denial of sexual intimacy constitutes marital cruelty and constructive desertion, creating grounds for divorce (Odeleye, 2019; Ademiluka, 2024). When intimacy is chronically withheld, affected partners experience severe emotional disconnection, which frequently escalates into extramarital affairs, domestic hostility, or the complete dissolution of the union (Inakefe et al., 2024).

2. Pre-Marital Deception, Misrepresentation, and Falsehood

A significant proportion of marital breakdowns stems from contracts entered into under falsehood, non-disclosure, or deliberate misrepresentation (Alieke, 2022). The field data highlight that non-disclosure of critical personal conditions such as undiagnosed medical infertility, undisclosed surgical hysterectomies, hidden chronic health conditions (HIV status), or pre-existing reproductive impotence severely undermines the foundation of marital trust (Baima, 2017; Tolu, 2022). When a marriage is founded on half-truths or unfulfilled material promises, discovering the deception shatters relational trust and can lead injured partners to seek legal annulment or divorce (Vanguard, 2022). Furthermore, the trend among young adults to bypass traditional family vetting, pre-marital counseling, and consultation with community or religious elders increases the likelihood of entering incompatible unions (Ademiluka, 2024).

3. **Technological Intrusion and Digital Disruption**

While modern information and communication technology (ICT) has enhanced global connectivity, findings indicate that digital tools often act as catalyst mechanisms for marital erosion (Felix, 2024). Modern smartphones, social media platforms, and internet access have created a form of "digital presence but emotional absence" within households. Excessive internet use and digital addiction disrupt real-time spousal communication, leading to emotional detachment and neglect of marital responsibilities (Priyamk, 2002; Inakefe et al., 2024). Furthermore, easy access to online pornography distorts expectations surrounding intimacy, erodes sexual satisfaction within marriage, and fosters secret digital infidelity, all of which directly contribute to higher divorce rates in modern households (Felix, 2024).

4. ***Erosion of Mutual Respect and Reciprocal Spousal Obligations***

The findings underline that the erosion of mutual respect and reciprocal affection is a fundamental catalyst for marital crisis. Scriptural and cultural benchmarks across both major faith traditions, such as Christian injunctions on mutual love and respect (Ephesians 5:33) and Islamic principles of peace, love, and compassion (Quran 30:21), frame spousal respect as vital to marital stability. When a partner shows contempt, refuses to acknowledge spousal authority, or fails to show care, the marriage's reciprocal feedback loop breaks down (Adebowale, 2018). The absence of mutual respect fosters resentment, making constructive conflict resolution nearly impossible and turning minor domestic disagreements into irreconcilable disputes (Adebayo & Lawal, 2024).

5. Behavioral Incompatibility, Egocentrism, and Selfishness

Character incompatibility and ingrained behavioral selfishness emerged as persistent drivers of emotional alienation and marital failure. Incompatibility manifests in contrasting coping styles, rigid habits, and an inability to negotiate differences. When coupled with egocentrism, it affects how partners communicate, divide domestic responsibilities, and handle financial shocks. Selfishness prevents couples from developing a shared "team identity," replacing collaborative problem-solving with power struggles that eventually break the relational bond (Eze & Okonkwo, 2021; Nwachukwu & Ibiam, 2023).

6. Financial Stress, Materialism, and Misaligned Economic Priorities

In alignment with contemporary macroeconomic realities in Nigeria, financial disagreement and materialism stand out as primary catalysts of severe marital strain (Carroll, 2022; Afolabi, 2025). Conflict over household spending, debt accumulation, failure to meet basic domestic obligations, and mismatched saving habits trigger frequent marital disputes. Materialism damages marital cohesion in two distinct ways:

1. **Economic Strain:** Imprudent spending and impulsive material acquisition create acute financial instability, exacerbating household anxiety (Carroll, 2022).
2. **Relational Devaluation:** Prioritizing material wealth over emotional investment reduces empathy and responsiveness toward one's partner (Carroll, 2022; Inakefe et al., 2024).

When husbands, due to systemic poverty or unemployment, cannot fulfill traditional financial responsibilities, or when spouses hold conflicting financial philosophies, the resulting strain often leads to separation (Ademiluka, 2024; Afolabi, 2025).

Summary of Findings

This study investigated the empirical causes of marital conflicts. It evaluated the efficacy of resolution strategies adopted to mitigate domestic disharmony among couples in Kogi East Senatorial District, Kogi State, Nigeria. Using a descriptive survey research design, the investigation examined the structural causes of marital friction, the relationship between spousal behavioral reactions and conflict escalation, and actionable measures required to restore stability in affected households. Furthermore, the study interrogated the comparative socio-economic dynamics between stable and conflict-prone homes, analyzing how innovative intervention strategies, including digital communication management, institutional counseling, and structured mediation, can be applied to resolve marital disputes within the region.

The inquiry also evaluated the impact of third-party interventions. It assessed the extent to which external environmental pressures (such as macroeconomic stress, regional security challenges, and extended family dynamics) influence marital peace across Kogi East. By clarifying the functions and objectives of various conflict-resolution mechanisms, the study measured the success rates of both traditional and contemporary intervention models.

The empirical scope covered the entire Kogi East Senatorial District, encompassing its nine (9) Local Government Areas: Ankpa, Bassa, Dekina, Ibaji, Idah, Igalamela/Odolu, Ofu, Olamaboro, and Omala. The primary units of analysis comprised married couples residing across these LGAs, who constituted the target population and survey respondents. Data collection instruments were aligned directly with the formulated research questions and specific objectives. The empirical findings derived from the field survey provide quantitative and qualitative evidence on household stability, confirming that while structural socio-economic pressures significantly exacerbate marital strain, targeted, innovative mediation frameworks and enhanced facilitating conditions substantially improve conflict-resolution outcomes across the senatorial district.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that marital conflicts exist and have consequences in the study area, regardless of gender or years of marital experience. The study reveals that various social factors significantly contribute to marital conflicts and separation in Kogi East. Key determinants include economic instability, cultural differences, infidelity, and poor communication. Findings show that counseling, economic empowerment programmes, and community engagement can address the social determinants of marital conflict and promote sustainable marriages in Kogi East, Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. Married partners should strive towards achieving sexual satisfaction as this may foster marital stability since sex is an obligation and integral part of marriage; therefore, couples should not deny one another it.
2. Parents should advise couples on the need to marry within their common cultural backgrounds since it may promote an approach to resolving family matters.
3. There is no formula for perfect marriage. Thus, every marriage is unique. Therefore, spouses should be sensitive to the consequences of marital conflicts.
4. It is recommended, therefore, that spouses should ensure that the unique marital relationship is placed above any prejudices and irritations and should never allow sentiments to tear it apart.
5. Families of couples faced with the problem of childlessness should be supportive and not indulge in behaviours that could threaten the stability of such marriages.

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