
GEOSPATIAL ANALYSIS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Marital dissolution remains a critical socio-demographic issue in Nigeria, with significant regional disparities in divorce and separation rates across the country's six geopolitical zones. This study employs a geospatial approach to examine the patterns and socio-economic implications of marital dissolution using data from the Nigeria Living Standard Survey (NLSS) 2018/2019 and the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2018. The findings reveal that marital dissolution rates (MDRs) vary significantly by region, with the South-South zone recording the highest MDR (7.2%), while the North-West reports the lowest (1.3%). The study identifies several key factors influencing divorce trends, including educational attainment, economic conditions, cultural practices, and religious beliefs. Divorce is highly stigmatised in the North, where women often face economic hardship and social exclusion. In contrast, in the South-West and South-South, rising financial independence among women and changing gender roles contribute to increased MDRs. The study also highlights the impact of urbanisation, polygamous marriages, early marriage practices, and economic instability in shaping marital outcomes. Based on these findings, the study recommends targeted policy interventions, including legal reforms, economic empowerment initiatives, and public awareness campaigns, to mitigate the adverse effects of marital dissolution and promote stable and equitable marital relationships across Nigeria's diverse regions.

Keywords: Divorce, Separation, Geospatial, Nigeria, Gender Roles, Stability

INTRODUCTION

Marriage, as a fundamental institution of human society, forms the cornerstone for family formation and the transmission of culture, values, and economic resources (Oloyede et al., 2024). However, marital dissolution, commonly referred to as divorce, has emerged as a global phenomenon, challenging traditional family structures and societal norms. Divorce is defined as the legal dissolution of a marriage, which terminates the marital relationship and grants both parties the right to remarry (Stykes and Guzzo 2020). Divorce rates vary significantly across regions, shaped by cultural, economic, and legal frameworks. In high-income countries, individualism, gender equality, and shifting societal expectations are closely tied to higher divorce rates. On the other hand, in developing regions, marital stability is often influenced by patriarchal norms, economic dependencies, and limited access to legal redress mechanisms. This variation underscores the importance of understanding divorce not only as a personal or family issue but also as a spatially embedded phenomenon (Statistics South Africa, 2021).

Africa offers a fascinating context for examining the spatial aspects of divorce. While marriage remains deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, the continent has witnessed a gradual increase in divorce rates over the past decades (Corno et al., 2020). Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is characterised by profound regional diversity across its six geopolitical zones, each with distinct cultural, religious, and economic attributes. While marriage remains deeply rooted in tradition and religion, MDR have shown notable spatial variation. (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Aref et al., 2024). This regional variation in divorce patterns highlights the need

for a spatially informed approach to understanding marital stability in Nigeria.

Furthermore, despite the growing body of research on MDR, its spatial dimensions remain underexplored. Many studies (Ntoimo & Akokuwebe, 2014; Gaya, 2017; Killewald et al., 2023) focus on individual or household-level determinants of marital dissolution, including communication, financial stability, and personal values. While these factors are important, they overlook the broader spatial context in which marriages exist and dissolve. Spatial analysis examines the impact of location-specific factors, including economic disparities, cultural norms, and social differences, on shaping patterns of divorce. In Nigeria, the stark contrasts between location-specific factors and geopolitical zones highlight the need for such an approach. Given the above, this study aims to bridge the gap between spatial analysis and research on marital dissolution. By investigating divorce patterns in Nigeria, it explores how spatial factors intersect with cultural and economic dynamics to shape marital stability.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to examine disparities in divorce rates across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. The theory highlights how interactions between individual, social, economic, and cultural systems shape marital stability. Differences in macrosystem factors, such as religious beliefs, gender roles, and cultural expectations, contribute to regional variations, with divorce being more stigmatised in the North than in the South. Exosystem influences, including economic conditions, employment opportunities, and legal frameworks, vary by zone and affect marital dissolution rates. Additionally, microsystem dynamics, such as family structure and spousal relationships, differ based on socio-cultural contexts. Lastly, the chronosystem accounts for historical shifts, including urbanisation and changing societal norms, that impact divorce patterns across Nigeria's regions.

This study aims to analyse the spatial patterns and implications of marital dissolution in Nigeria. This will be achieved by the following objectives which are to: examine the geographical distribution of marital dissolution rates (MDRs) across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using geospatial analysis, identify the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing marital stability, and analyse the regional variations in the consequences of divorce, particularly in terms of financial stability, social acceptance, and post-divorce opportunities.

Study Area

Nigeria is situated between latitudes 4°16' and 13°53' North, and Longitudes 2°40' and 14°41' East (Figure 1). It is located in the West African sub-region, bordered by the Republic of Benin to the west, Niger Republic to the north, Chad to the northeast, and Cameroon to the east. The southern boundary is defined by the Atlantic Ocean, which forms an approximately 800-kilometre-long coastline extending from the Badagry inlet in the west to the Rio del Rey, east of the Cross River estuary (Allu & Ochedi, 2015). The country spans 923,769 km², stretching across 36 states from the northern to the southern regions (Onah, 2020).

Nigeria is broadly divided into two main climatic zones. The tropical rainforest area extends from the southern coast to approximately 9°N latitude and includes all southern states, as well as parts of Kwara, Benue, Gongola, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The savannah zone covers the rest of the country, reaching the Nigeria- Niger border in the north (Edokpa et al., 2024).

Nigeria's population is highly diverse ethnically, comprising numerous groups, with the largest

being the Hausa (30%), Yoruba (15.5%), Igbo (15.2%), and Fulani (6%). Other notable ethnic groups include Tiv (2.4%), Kanuri/Beriberi (2.4%), Ibibio (1.8%), and Ijaw/Izon (1.8%), while other smaller groups collectively constitute 24.9% of the population (NBS, 2020).

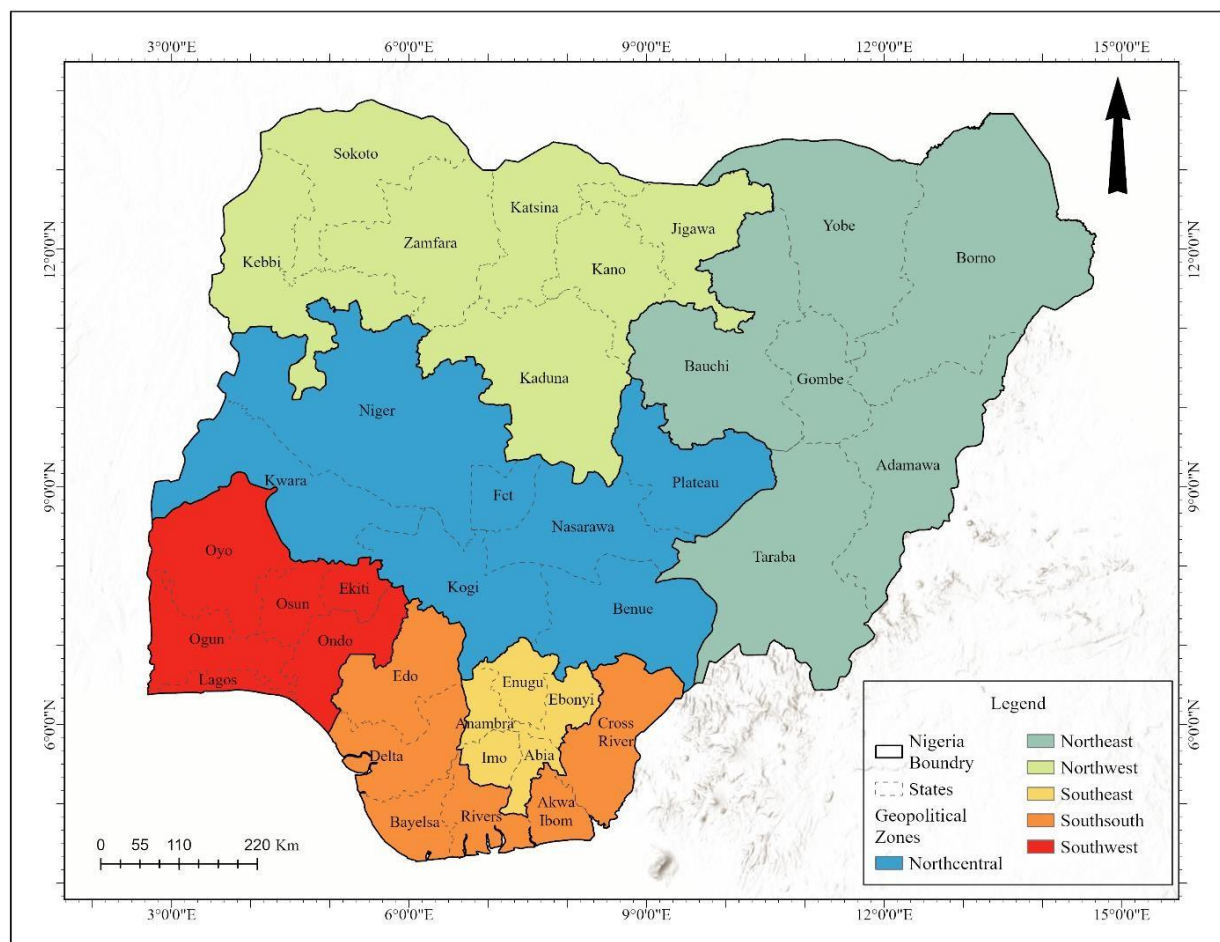


Figure 1: Nigeria Showing Geopolitical Zones
Source: Adapted from Administrative Map of Nigeria.

The official language of Nigeria is English, reflecting its colonial history. Religiously, the population is predominantly Muslim (53.5%), followed by other Christian denominations (35.3%) and Roman Catholics (10.6%). Additionally, 0.6% adhere to other religions (Akindele et al., 2022).

Nigeria's population has experienced significant growth over the years, and this trend is projected to continue. In 2016, the population exceeded 186 million, and it is projected to reach 392 million by 2050, making Nigeria the fourth most populous country in the world (Abubakar & Dano, 2018).

Materials and Methods

A mixed-methodology approach was employed in this study to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing marital stability across different geopolitical zones in Nigeria. This methodological framework combined qualitative and quantitative data analysis with spatial mapping techniques to provide a nuanced examination of the subject. To analyse spatial

patterns and contextual factors, Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis and thematic analysis methods were utilised.

GIS analysis was particularly instrumental in visualising the distribution of divorce rates across the geopolitical zones, allowing for a clear identification of regional disparities. The document review method facilitated the integration of relevant secondary data sources, ensuring the study's findings were grounded in robust and reliable datasets.

In addition to these methods, twelve (12) in-depth interviews, two (male and female) from each of the six geopolitical zones, were conducted to obtain qualitative data on the socio-economic implications of divorce. These interviews provided valuable insights into how divorce affects individuals and communities, particularly in terms of financial stability, social networks, and overall well-being.

The primary data for MDRs were sourced from the 2018/2019 Nigeria Living Standard Survey (NLSS). This dataset was selected because it provides the most recent and comprehensive information on divorce rates segmented by geopolitical zones.

Additionally, data on spatial factors influencing marital stability were obtained from the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). The NDHS dataset was particularly valuable for its detailed demographic and health indicators, which are crucial for understanding the broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics that affect marital stability. The rationale for adopting the NLSS 2018/2019 and NDHS 2018 datasets lies in their unique capacity to capture both the crude divorce rate and associated demographic and health data, disaggregated by geopolitical zones. These datasets represent the most reliable and authoritative sources available for such analysis, ensuring that the study's findings are both valid and representative.

Advanced analytical tools were employed to process and analyse the data. ArcGIS Pro software was utilised to generate spatial visualisations of crude divorce rates. This enabled the creation of maps that highlighted regional patterns and potential hotspots of marital instability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Marital Dissolution in the Study Area

The marital dissolution rates across Nigeria's geopolitical zones reveal significant spatial variations in marital stability. These variations are shaped by diverse socio-cultural, economic, and demographic factors unique to each zone. This is revealed in Figure 2.

North West Zone

The North-West zone comprises states such as Kano, Kaduna, and Sokoto. Figure 2 shows that this region has the lowest MDR of 1.2. This report, according to the NDHS, is in stark contrast to reality, which may be a result of various factors, such as the non-documentation of divorce cases and the fact that most divorcees hardly remain single for long before getting remarried.

In reality, this zone has one of the highest divorce rates in the country. Kano State, in particular, has been labelled the "divorce capital" of Nigeria, with reports indicating that around 32% of marriages end within three to six months (Suleiman, 2021). Several factors, including Islamic Law, influence the high prevalence of divorce in this region. According to Yahaya (2019), under Islamic jurisprudence, men can easily divorce their wives by pronouncing "*talaq*" three times, making the dissolution of marriages relatively straightforward. Another major contributor to high MDR is economic hardship. Abubakar (2020) established in his study how financial instability

contributes to strained relationships, leading to higher MDRs, particularly among low-income families. Another factor is the practice of polygamy, which is common in this region and has been pointed out as a major player in MDR. In his research, Bello (2018) stated that many men who enter polygamous unions struggle to maintain fairness among wives, leading to marital dissatisfaction and eventual separation.

North-East zon

This includes States such as Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe. Figure 2 shows that the MDR in this region is 3.2. This is slightly higher than the National MDR average of 3.0. Factors influencing marital instability in this region include: conflict and displacement, which were spearheaded by the insurgency, have led to significant displacement, causing family separations and increased divorce rates (Aliyu, 2022). The Northeast region practices early marriage, which often results in failed unions due to a lack of maturity and preparedness for marital responsibilities (Allen & Adekola, 2016). Also, similar to the North-West, Islamic traditions influence divorce rates, with men able to dissolve marriages easily (Abdulhameed & Mohammad Sanusi, 2016)

The North-Central zone

This includes states such as Benue, Kogi, and Plateau, which have a moderate MDR. According to Figure 2, the MDR of the North Central Zone is 2.6. This is slightly lower than the National average, with some factors contributing to marital dissolution peculiar to this region, including urbanisation and Western Influence. Okeke (2021) revealed that the growing influence of Western ideals about marriage and gender equality has led to increased MDRs, especially in urban centres. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages are common in this region due to its diversity. These marriages, however, sometimes lead to conflicts due to differences in traditions, customs, expectations and religious beliefs (Ojo, 2010; Adebayo, 2020).

The South-West zone

According to Fig. 2, this has an MDR of 6.5. This is one of the highest marriage dissolution rates in the country, more than doubling the national average. This region, dominated by the Yoruba ethnic group, has witnessed increasing divorce rates, particularly in cities such as Lagos and Ibadan. The high figure of the MDR also signifies a good documentation of the status of legal marital unions. According to research, some reasons fueling a high MDR in the region include a cultural acceptance of marriage dissolution; according to Adaki and Wajim (2024), in the Yoruba culture, divorce is not heavily stigmatised, and individuals who are unhappy in their marriages often choose separation as a viable option. This region is also recognised as having infidelity and domestic abuse as primary reasons for divorce (Adetunji, 2020). Many women from the southwestern region are highly educated and have achieved financial independence; therefore, they are less inclined to remain in unhappy marriages (Akinyemi, 2021).

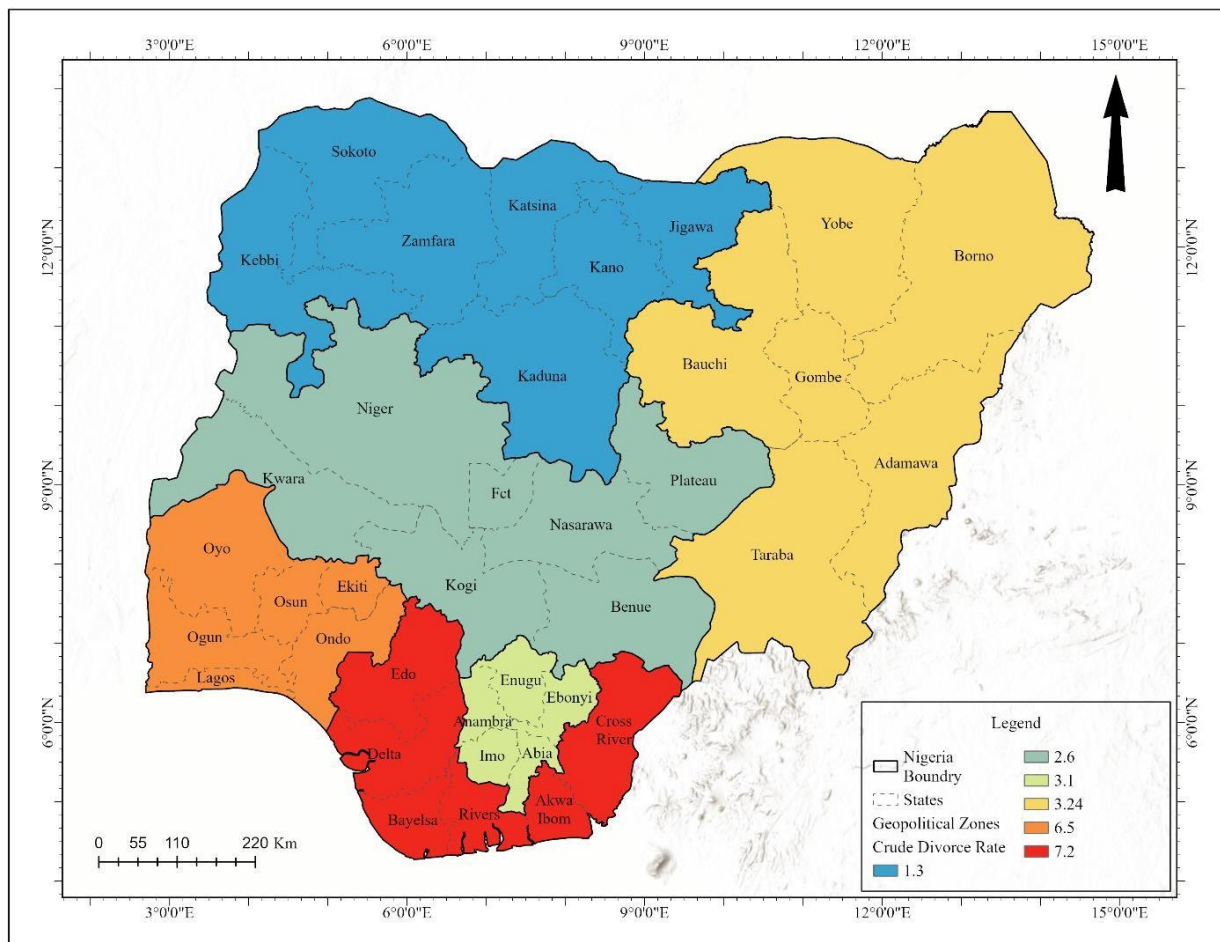


Figure 2: Distribution of Divorce Rate in Nigeria

Source: Adapted from NLSS 2018/2019

The South-East zone

Home to the Igbo ethnic group, records some of the lowest divorce rates in Nigeria. The MDR, as shown in Fig. 2, is 3.1. Apart from the commendable documentation of marital status in the region, other reasons for this MDR include strong traditional values, as Igbo culture places a high premium on marriage and divorce is often discouraged (Nwosu, 2019). Little wonder that the high bride price system makes divorce economically burdensome, deterring couples from separating (Umeh, 2020). Other structures in place to preserve marital unions within this region include the extended family system, which plays a significant role in mediating conflicts and thereby preventing marital breakdown (Obi, 2021). However, recent studies suggest an increase in divorce rates in urban Igbo areas due to modernisation and changing gender roles (Ajao & Olatunji, 2024)

The South-South zone

The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising states such as Rivers, Delta, and Bayelsa, has the highest divorce rates in the country, with a Marital Dissolution Rate (MDR) of 7.2. Several interrelated socio-cultural and economic factors contribute to this trend. Ekpenyong and Ingiabuna (2017) note that marriage inherently involves a mix of stress, disappointments, and occasional success, and when these challenges become overwhelming, they can destabilise the union. In this

region, such pressures are often intensified by additional strains, including economic hardship and shifting family dynamics.

Moreover, infidelity and domestic violence have been identified as some of the most common triggers for divorce in the area (Esang, 2020). The growing autonomy of women—particularly in terms of financial independence and education—has also reshaped traditional marital dynamics. As seen in the South-West, women in the South-South are increasingly empowered to challenge patriarchal norms and are more willing to exit unfulfilling or abusive relationships (Ntoimo, 2022). This shift towards greater gender assertiveness, combined with persistent marital challenges and social tensions, has significantly contributed to the region's high rate of marital dissolution.

Implications of Marital dissolution in the study area

The thematic analysis revealed shared challenges and experiences of divorce in the north-west and north-east, reflecting the deeply ingrained socio-cultural and economic realities of these regions. In both zones, divorce is heavily stigmatised, rooted in conservative traditions and patriarchal norms that dominate societal expectations. Participants reported that divorced women often face severe social exclusion and limited opportunities for remarriage, with many becoming economically vulnerable due to their dependence on men. This economic instability leaves divorced women at significant risk of poverty, as opportunities for employment or education are scarce. The assumption agrees with Hamid and Sanusi (2016), who stated that the adverse effects of divorce in Northern Nigeria include economic hardship, psychological trauma, poor performance in life activities, immoral behaviour, among others.

Additionally, in all regions, societal pressures make it difficult for women to rebuild their lives post-divorce, as they are often marginalised within their communities. Men, too, face challenges following divorce, particularly in fulfilling financial obligations to former spouses' children, responsibility further strained by the widespread practice of polygamy. In the North East, this burden is exacerbated by the region's economic instability and displacement caused by insurgency, which not only fuels marital tensions but also increases the difficulty of sustaining family life.

On the other hand, in the north central zone, divorce carries a moderate level of stigma, influenced by the mix of Christian and Islamic traditions. The participants noted that economic factors, particularly financial incompatibility, are primary drivers of divorce.

Women in this zone often rely on informal support networks, such as extended families, to mitigate the impacts of divorce. However, the region is witnessing a gradual shift in attitudes, with more individuals embracing divorce as a means of escaping toxic or abusive marriages.

Similarly, the southwest, characterised by higher literacy rates, showed relatively progressive attitudes toward divorce. The participant noted that divorce is increasingly accepted, especially among educated populations. However, economic implications remain significant, with women often struggling to secure financial independence post-divorce. Cultural expectations around child custody also create challenges, with women bearing the brunt of care responsibilities. Psychological impacts, such as stress and depression, were also reported as everyday experiences. Meanwhile, in the southeast, the participants highlighted the cultural importance of marriage as a marker of social status. Divorce is viewed as a failure, particularly for women, who face severe stigma and reduced prospects for remarriage. Economic pressures, such as bride price reimbursements, further complicate the divorce process. For men, the financial burden of supporting estranged families often leads to strained resources. Nonetheless, the participant observed a growing trend of women prioritising their well-being over societal expectations, leading to an increase in divorce cases. The south-south region revealed complex dynamics,

influenced by economic activities such as oil exploration and urban migration. The participant noted that economic disparities and infidelity are common causes of divorce. Women often face dual challenges of societal stigma and financial insecurity, while men deal with pressures to fulfil traditional provider roles. Environmental factors, such as westernisation, were also reported to contribute to shifting attitudes toward marriage and divorce. This is in agreement with the opinion of Adaki and Wajim (2024), who asserted that urbanisation and western influences were associated with a rise in divorces, mainly due to shifts towards individualism and self-interest.

Conclusion

This study highlights the regional disparities in marital dissolution across Nigeria, shaped by economic conditions, education, cultural norms, and religious beliefs. Findings reveal that while higher education and financial independence contribute to increased divorce rates in the South-South and South-West, traditional and religious influences suppress reported MDRs in the North, despite qualitative evidence suggesting high divorce prevalence. Economic hardship, particularly in Northern Nigeria, exacerbates the financial vulnerability of divorced women, while urbanisation and shifting gender roles drive changing marital expectations in urban areas.

Overall, marital dissolution in Nigeria is a multifaceted issue that requires targeted legal, economic, and social interventions to mitigate its adverse effects. Without adequate legal protection, economic support, and awareness initiatives, the adverse consequences of divorce—especially for women and children—will persist. Addressing these challenges through policy reforms, financial empowerment, and inclusive social structures is crucial to promoting stable and equitable marital relationships across Nigeria's diverse regions.

Recommendations

To effectively address marital dissolution in Nigeria, legal reforms should harmonise divorce laws, ensure fair financial and custodial rights, and strengthen mediation services to promote amicable conflict resolution. Economic empowerment initiatives—such as vocational training, microfinance, and housing support—are crucial for supporting divorced individuals, particularly women in vulnerable communities. Additionally, public awareness campaigns should highlight the importance of relationship education, financial literacy, and the socio-economic risks associated with early marriage and polygamy. Mental health services must also provide accessible counselling and community-based support to help individuals navigate the stigma and emotional challenges of divorce.

Furthermore, promoting gender-inclusive policies that support shared financial and caregiving responsibilities, protect workers' rights, and enforce strict measures against domestic violence and marital abuse is essential. Enhanced data collection on informal and customary divorces, combined with ongoing research into the effects of urbanisation and economic conditions, will facilitate more informed and responsive policymaking. Together, these strategies can alleviate the socio-economic burden of divorce and promote healthier, more equitable marital relationships throughout Nigeria.

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