

# Faith and Suffering: The Role of Religious Beliefs in Remaining in Abusive Marriage among Catholic Women in Nairobi

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Marital abuse remains a persistent and underreported issue globally, particularly within faith-based contexts where religious beliefs may profoundly shape women's responses to violence. In the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, little is known about how specific Christian teachings influence women's decisions to remain in abusive marriages.

**Objectives:** This study aimed (1) to examine the prevalence of marital abuse among married Catholic women; and (2) to assess how religious beliefs and practices influence women's decisions to remain in abusive relationships.

**Methods:** A mixed-methods cross-sectional design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 182 married Catholic women using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with a purposive subsample. Standardized tools and thematic guides were used. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests (including t-tests and p-values), while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

**Results:** The prevalence of reported marital abuse was high, with emotional, physical, and economic abuse commonly experienced. Statistically significant beliefs associated with remaining in abusive marriages included belief in female submission ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ), priestly advice over professional help ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and reverence for saints as marital role models ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Many women internalized suffering as spiritual devotion and feared that leaving would contradict their faith. However, beliefs such as "abuse as divine punishment" were strongly rejected ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Conclusion:** Religious beliefs play a complex and powerful role in shaping Catholic women's responses to marital abuse. These findings call for faith-sensitive pastoral counseling, church-based awareness programs, and collaboration between clergy and mental health professionals to create safe spaces for victims while honoring their spiritual values.

**Keywords:** Marital abuse, Catholic women, Christian beliefs, religious influence, Nairobi, mixed methods

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is widely regarded as a sacred institution, offering emotional companionship, social support, and spiritual enrichment. Within religious communities, marriage is not merely a social contract but a covenant with divine significance. For the Catholic Church, this covenant is framed within theological doctrines that emphasize permanence, sacramentality, and moral obligation (Pope Francis, 2016; John Paul II, 1981). However, behind this ideal often lies a disconcerting reality, marital abuse, which compromises not only the physical safety and emotional well-being of women but also their spiritual convictions. This phenomenon is not unique to any one culture or denomination (Koenig, 2012), yet the experience of Catholic women in Kenya, and specifically within the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, presents a distinctive intersection between faith, suffering, and resilience.

## Background of The Study

In Kenya, marital conflict and intimate partner violence (IPV) continue to afflict a significant proportion of women, despite increasing awareness and modernization (National Gender and Equality Commission [NGEC], 2022). Recent national surveys indicate that nearly 40% of ever-married women in Kenya have experienced some form of spousal violence, with religious and cultural values often shaping their responses (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS] et al., 2022). While secular explanations for women remaining in abusive marriages frequently cite economic dependence, children, or social stigma (Hindin et al., 2019), there is growing recognition of how deeply embedded religious beliefs and cultural expectations influence women's decisions to stay (Nason-Clark, 2019).

In the Catholic context, teachings on the indissolubility of marriage, the sacred nature of suffering, and the sinfulness of divorce are often internalized by women in ways that lead to tolerance of persistent abuse (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2013). These religious ideals, when interpreted literally or upheld without pastoral nuance, may act as silent enablers of prolonged suffering. Marital abuse, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, violates the very essence of marital companionship, yet many women within Catholic settings continue to endure it, often silently (Tiruneh et al., 2020).

The Bible's exhortations on forgiveness, patience, and submission are frequently invoked as reasons to persevere, sometimes at the expense of personal safety and mental health (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). For instance, scriptures such as "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26–27, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], 1989) are used by some women and even clergy to justify remaining in toxic relationships under the pretext of spiritual endurance. While such interpretations may provide a framework for reconciliation in mild conflicts, they can also be weaponized, either knowingly or inadvertently, to perpetuate abuse (Knickmeyer et al., 2010).

This dilemma is further compounded by the authoritative role of the Church and its clergy in offering marital counsel. Many women, upon experiencing domestic violence, turn to parish priests rather than legal systems or psychological services, often receiving counsel that encourages continued endurance rather than separation (Van den Berg et al., 2013). In some instances, this guidance aligns with pastoral care objectives aimed at preserving families; in others, it reflects a lack of training among clergy in handling issues of domestic abuse from a psychological and rights-based perspective (Levitt & Ware, 2006).

Despite the profound implications of these dynamics, scholarly inquiry into how religious doctrine influences remaining in abusive marriage remains limited, particularly in African contexts. The intersection of faith and violence is underexplored in Kenyan literature, with existing studies often focusing on socio-economic causes of gender-based violence or the legal-policy framework for protection (UN Women, 2021; Kimuna et al., 2013). There is a notable gap in literature examining how religious interpretations, especially Christian matrimonial beliefs, shape women's internal negotiations, coping mechanisms, and decision-making regarding abusive unions. Even fewer studies have focused on how these dynamics play out within the unique framework of the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, a context where religious devotion, traditional gender roles, and patriarchal structures converge.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by investigating two key aspects. First, it assesses the prevalence of marital abuse among Catholic women in the Archdiocese of Nairobi. Second, and more centrally, it explores how religious beliefs influence the decision to remain in abusive marriages. Through this inquiry, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the theological, cultural, and psychological forces that shape women's endurance of abuse in the name of faith. By analyzing both empirical data and qualitative accounts from affected women, the paper situates personal suffering within broader religious frameworks, highlighting how faith can both empower and constrain.

The significance of this work lies in its potential to inform theology, pastoral care, and policy. Recognizing the dual role of religion as a source of hope and harm is vital for developing holistic support systems that honor women's spiritual lives while safeguarding their physical and mental well-being (Bent-Goodley & Fowler,

2006). Furthermore, the findings may serve as a resource for clergy, pastoral counselors, and religious educators seeking to reformulate their teachings and interventions to better address the lived realities of abuse survivors.

In light of the above, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of marital abuse among married Catholic women in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi?
2. How do religious teachings, beliefs, and clergy counsel influence married Catholic women's decisions to remain in abusive marriages?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to the evolving discourse on gender, faith, and violence, providing contextually grounded insights that can drive both theological reflection and practical reform in Catholic communities across Kenya and similar settings.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, allowing for simultaneous collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. This design was chosen to offer a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and lived experiences of marital abuse among Catholic women, as well as the influence of religious beliefs on their decisions to remain in such relationships. The integration of numeric trends with narrative insights enabled triangulation of findings and enhanced the credibility of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Makunda et al., 2024). The study was conducted within the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, encompassing urban and peri-urban parishes. The population of interest comprised married Catholic women aged 18 years and above, who had been married for at least one year. A multi-stage sampling approach was employed: purposive selection of parishes to reflect urban–rural diversity, followed by convenience sampling of participants within selected parishes during women's fellowship meetings and pastoral sessions. A total of 182 women participated in the study. Quantitative data were collected from 182 respondents using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews of 3 focus group discussions (FGDs), each consisting of 10 giving a total of 30 participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as married, Catholic, and residents of the archdiocese. Women in informal unions or under 18 were excluded to preserve focus on ecclesiastically recognized marriages.

Quantitative data were gathered using a structured questionnaire that included demographic items and scales measuring abuse experiences and severity. A key instrument was the Composite Abuse Scale (Revised) – Short Form (CASR-SF) for assessing the severity of marital abuse among the married Catholic women. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ ) in this study. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interview guides and FGD protocols designed to explore personal experiences of abuse, theological interpretations of suffering and endurance, and church-related influences on decision-making. The instruments were reviewed by subject experts for content validity and piloted in a separate parish prior to use.

Following ethical clearance, data collection took place over a period of two months. The researcher first obtained a research authorization letter from the Department of Counseling Psychology at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. Approval was subsequently obtained from the Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee (ISERC), and final clearance was granted by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya. Research assistants were trained and closely supervised to ensure data quality. Quantitative questionnaires were self-administered or interviewer-administered where necessary, while interviews and FGDs were conducted in Kiswahili or English, depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, and detailed field notes were also maintained.

Quantitative data were manually sorted, cleaned, and coded. Analysis was conducted using R software (version 4.3). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, percentages) were used to summarize demographic and abuse prevalence data. For inferential analysis, the Kruskal–Wallis H test, a non-parametric method suitable for ordinal and skewed data, was used to assess group differences across CASR-SF scores. Associations between categorical variables such as economic factors, cultural influences, and religious beliefs and their impact on remaining in abusive marriages were examined using Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests. A summary of analytical outcomes is shown in

Table 3. For instance, a statistically significant relationship was found between Christian matrimonial vows and decisions to remain in abusive marriages ( $\chi^2 = 7.04, p = 0.03$ ), while no significant association was found between rural–urban residency and endurance of abuse ( $\chi^2 = 0.71, p = 0.40$ ). Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12. Coding followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. Emergent themes included *spiritual endurance as sacrifice*, *fear of divine punishment*, and *church silence on abuse*, all of which enriched the interpretation of quantitative findings.

Ethical sensitivity was paramount due to the vulnerable nature of participants and the emotionally charged subject of marital abuse. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants after providing full information on the study’s purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. To maintain confidentiality, no names were recorded; instead, participant IDs were used. Data were stored in locked cabinets for hard copies and password-protected digital files for electronic records. Only the principal researcher and academic supervisors had access to raw data. Upon study completion, sensitive data were anonymized and securely archived in line with ethical research practice (Neuman, 2003). Approval to conduct the research was granted by ISERC and NACOSTI after a thorough review of all ethical documentation, including consent forms and data collection tools. All procedures adhered strictly to guidelines set out in the Belmont Report and Kenyan national research ethics policies.

## Study Findings

### Demographic Profile of Participants

A total of 182 married Catholic women who met the threshold for clinically significant marital abuse participated in the quantitative phase. The majority resided in Kiambu County (70%), with the rest from Nairobi County (30%). This distribution may reflect rural-urban contextual influences on help-seeking behaviour and tolerance of abuse. Regarding parish location, participants were almost evenly distributed among urban (34%), peri-urban (32%), and rural (34%) parishes, offering comparative potential for understanding abuse across varied social settings. Notably, older women dominated the sample, with 51% aged 51 years and above, while only 2% were aged between 25–30 years. This skew toward older age groups suggests a deeper insight into long-term marital dynamics and endurance of abuse over time.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 182)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
County of Residence	Nairobi	55	30.2
	Kiambu	127	69.8
Parish Location	Urban	62	34.1
	Peri-urban	58	31.9
	Rural	62	34.1
Age Group (years)	25–30	4	2.2
	31–40	28	15.4
	41–50	57	31.3
	51 and above	93	51.1
Education Level	Primary	42	23.1
	Secondary	104	57.1
	Tertiary/College	11	6.0
	University (Bachelor’s)	25	13.7
	Postgraduate	2	1.1
Occupation	Farming	42	23.1
	Small business	53	29.1
	Casual labor	28	15.4
	Employed	15	8.2
	Unemployed	24	13.2
	Other	20	11.0



<b>Number of Children</b>	None	2	1.1
	1–2 children	37	20.3
	3–4 children	70	38.5
	5 or more children	73	40.1

In terms of education, 57% had completed secondary school, 23% had primary education, and only 14% held a bachelor’s degree. A mere 1% had attained postgraduate education. This suggests a moderately educated sample, potentially impacting awareness and interpretation of religious teachings on marriage and suffering. Occupationally, the majority were engaged in informal work, with 29% running small businesses and 23% involved in farming. This economic backdrop may affect their dependence on marital relationships and capacity to exit abusive environments. Over 93% of the women had at least one child, with more than 40% having four or more children, a variable that adds significant weight to economic and emotional dependence within abusive relationships.

To examine the prevalence of marital abuse among married Catholic women in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nairobi, both self-reported and structured measures (via the Composite Abuse Scale Revised – Short Form [CASR-SF]) were employed. Findings reveal a disturbingly high prevalence of both emotional and physical abuse, far exceeding national estimates.

### Self-Reported Abuse: Emotional and Physical Harm

When asked directly whether they had experienced physical abuse from their husbands in the past 12 months, 140 women (77%) affirmed, while 38 (21%) denied it, and 4 (2%) declined to respond. Emotional or verbal abuse was even more widespread, with 158 respondents (87%) acknowledging its occurrence, 16 (9%) denying, and 8 (4%) choosing not to answer. In terms of abuse frequency, 12 women (6%) reported experiencing abuse “all the time,” 38 (20%) “regularly,” and 104 (54%) “once in a while.” This suggests that abuse is not merely incidental but often chronic or cyclic, as 80% of respondents experienced repeated harm. Only 28 participants (15%) did not disclose frequency, likely influenced by cultural taboos or fear of repercussions.

Table 2: Summary of Marital Abuse Experiences (N = 182 Married Catholic Women)

<b>Form of Abuse</b>	<b>Self-Reported (n)</b>	<b>Self-Reported (%)</b>	<b>CASR-SF (n)</b>	<b>CASR-SF (%)</b>
Emotional / Psychological Abuse	158	87%	172	90%
Physical Abuse	140	77%	159	83%
Sexual Abuse	10	5%	116	60%
Economic Abuse	41	22%	87	45%
Stalking / Controlling Behavior	–	–	116	60%
Threats / Intimidation	–	–	58	30%
Experienced All Forms (Self-Reported)	42	22%	–	–

These findings are particularly alarming when compared to national benchmarks. The 2014 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) reported that 47% of ever-married women had experienced emotional abuse and 41.1% had experienced physical abuse. Another study by the National Crime Research Centre (2020) found that at least one in three women in Kenya report experiencing some form of abuse during their lifetime. The significantly higher rates found in this study may reflect localized dynamics within the Catholic Archdiocese, where patriarchal religious norms may normalize abuse, and women’s reporting may be shaped by theological teachings around suffering, obedience, and forgiveness.

### Self-Identified Forms of Abuse

In addition to general experiences, participants were asked to specify the types of abuse they had endured. Emotional abuse was the most commonly reported, with 97 women (51%) affirming psychological or verbal mistreatment. Economic abuse, defined as deprivation or control of financial resources, was reported by 41 women (22%). Physical abuse was cited by 29 women (15%), and sexual abuse was acknowledged by just 10

women (5%). Notably, 42 women (22%) reported experiencing all forms of abuse concurrently, reflecting the intersectionality and compounding nature of violence in their marriages.

Table 3: Frequency of Marital Abuse (N = 182)

Abuse Frequency	n	%
All the time	12	6%
Regularly	38	20%
Once in a while	104	54%
Prefer not to say	28	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>100%</b>

The underreporting of sexual violence compared to other abuse types is consistent with broader literature, which highlights how shame, stigma, and marital expectations often silence victims, particularly in religious contexts (Jewkes et al., 2017; Yllo & Straus, 2022). Similarly, economic abuse, though less visible, emerged as a significant factor, particularly as it undercuts women’s autonomy and entraps them in abusive relationships.

### CASR-SF Measured Abuse

Complementing self-reports, the CASR-SF tool revealed even higher abuse prevalence across all domains due to its structured, behaviourally specific items. According to CASR-SF data:

Table 4: CASR-SF Measured Abuse

Type of Abuse	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Emotional abuse	172	90
Physical abuse	159	83
Sexual abuse	116	60
Stalking and controlling behaviors	116	60
Economic abuse	87	45
Threats and intimidation	58	30

The disparity between self-reported and CASR-identified abuse, especially in categories like sexual and controlling abuse, highlights the effectiveness of structured instruments in surfacing experiences that women may not independently label as “abuse.” This suggests that psychological coercion, stalking, and control may be normalized within marriage, especially in conservative religious communities. The CASR’s granular items (e.g., about being monitored, isolated, or overruled in decision-making) allowed many women to recognize abusive dynamics they might not otherwise name.

### Comparative and Contextual Analysis

These results echo findings from international and regional studies. For example, Kimuna & Djamba (2008) estimated a 57% prevalence of physical/emotional abuse in Kenya, and García-Moreno et al. (2006) reported similarly high rates in WHO’s global study. However, this study’s findings, particularly the 90% rate of emotional abuse, surpass even regional highs, pointing to contextual drivers such as religious teachings that valorize endurance and silence in marriage. Research by Koenig et al. (2003) and Muluneh et al. (2020) support the idea that religiosity may intensify women’s reluctance to report or exit abusive relationships, thereby compounding harm over time. To assess the relationship between (a) sociodemographic characteristics and (b) Christian matrimonial beliefs with the severity of abuse and the tendency to remain in abusive marriages among Catholic women. While no statistically significant differences were observed across demographic subgroups, certain religious beliefs exhibited a statistically significant influence on the endurance and normalization of abuse.

### Sociodemographic Characteristics and Abuse Severity

The Kruskal-Wallis tests showed no significant differences in Composite Abuse Scale–Revised Short Form (CASR-SF) scores across levels of education, age, occupation, and parish location. These results underscore the

pervasiveness of abuse in this population, suggesting it cuts across all social strata. Regardless of educational attainment, age group, economic activity, or location, women reported comparable levels of abuse. This finding reflects the potential overriding influence of cultural and religious norms within the Catholic Church that may neutralize the protective effect typically associated with higher education or income. In deeply religious settings, even women with access to information and resources may remain in abusive unions due to internalized theological and cultural convictions.

### Christian Matrimonial Beliefs and Women's Endurance in Abusive Marriages

To explore the second dimension of this objective, the study examined the extent to which Christian matrimonial beliefs shape women's tolerance of abuse and resistance to separation or divorce. Table 10 summarizes the means, standard deviations, and statistical significance of key belief themes derived from participant responses.

Table 5: Christian Matrimonial Beliefs

Belief Theme	Mean	SD	p-value	Significant?	Common Response
Female Submission	3.41	1.32	<0.001	Yes	Agree
Abuse not a reason to leave	2.86	1.37	0.18	No	Disagree
Saints as marital role models	3.73	1.23	<0.001	Yes	Agree
Priestly advice over professionals	3.67	1.27	<0.001	Yes	Agree
Abuse as divine punishment	2.21	1.37	<0.001	Yes	Strongly Disagree
Indissolubility of marriage	3.04	1.55	0.70	No	Varied

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how Christian matrimonial beliefs may influence the decision of married Catholic women to remain in abusive marriages. The findings suggest that certain faith-based convictions, particularly those surrounding female submission, priestly authority, and sanctified marital endurance, play a subtle yet significant role in normalizing abuse or discouraging exit from harmful relationships. The results also resonate with global discussions on the interplay between religion and gender-based violence, underscoring how faith can simultaneously serve as a source of strength and as a silent enabler of prolonged suffering (Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Makunda et al., 2024).

The belief in female submission emerged as one of the most strongly endorsed ideas among respondents ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This aligns with biblical interpretations commonly cited within conservative Christian contexts, such as Ephesians 5:22 ("Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord"), which are often invoked without balancing them with messages of mutual respect or shared decision-making. In patriarchal societies where religion is deeply embedded in cultural identity, this belief can be internalized by women as part of their spiritual duty (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2013). Such submission, though framed as virtuous, may inadvertently justify male dominance and silence women in the face of abuse. When obedience is interpreted as godliness, resistance, even in self-defense, can be perceived as a spiritual failing. Research in other African contexts has similarly shown that theological endorsements of male headship intersect with cultural patriarchies to reproduce patterns of marital subordination (Oduyoye, 2001; Banda, 2005).

Equally significant is the finding that respondents largely agreed with the idea that priestly advice should be prioritized over professional counseling ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the Catholic tradition, the clergy often serve not just as spiritual guides but as moral authorities. While pastoral counsel can be a source of comfort and support, over-reliance on it, especially in cases of marital abuse, can be problematic. Studies have shown that some clergy may lack the training to recognize abuse or may encourage forgiveness and endurance over separation, especially in line with Church teachings on the indissolubility of marriage (Nason-Clark, 2009; Priestley, 2012). This reliance may delay or prevent women from seeking professional psychological help, legal recourse, or shelter services. In a community where priests are respected almost beyond reproach, their guidance can inadvertently reinforce silence and suffering. Recent scholarship emphasizes that such faith-driven dynamics must be addressed through collaborative models that integrate theology, psychology, and social sciences in order to build holistic support systems (Makunda et al., 2024).

The quantitative findings are further illuminated by the qualitative interviews, where many women articulated how submission was framed as a spiritual duty. As one respondent explained, *"I sometimes feel it is my cross to carry. If I argue back, I fear I'll be going against what God expects of me."* Such statements underscore the moral tension women navigate, where safeguarding their own well-being may feel like a betrayal of divine expectations. This aligns with Levitt and Ware's (2006) observation that abused women often interpret suffering as spiritually redemptive, even when it perpetuates silence. The persistence of this belief suggests that statistical endorsement of female submission cannot be understood merely as doctrinal assent but must also be read against lived experiences of guilt, fear, and spiritual obligation.

Similarly, the contested views surrounding whether abuse justifies leaving a marriage reflect how women reinterpret religious teaching in practice. While some participants leaned toward rejecting endurance of abuse, others still wrestled with conflicting messages. One woman commented, *"God hates divorce, yes, but I don't think He wants me to suffer forever."* This narrative illustrates the way faith is reimagined through personal suffering, suggesting that doctrine is neither passively absorbed nor uniformly applied. Instead, women actively negotiate between tradition and self-preservation, revealing the dynamic nature of belief systems. In this sense, the quantitative ambivalence ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $p = .18$ ) is mirrored in the narratives, where moral uncertainty becomes a lived struggle rather than a purely abstract position.

The belief in saints as marital role models also featured prominently ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Saints such as Monica of Hippo are often venerated for their endurance of hardship, including troubled marriages. While these stories can inspire hope, they may also glorify suffering and reinforce the idea that bearing pain is a pathway to holiness. As noted by Lawler (2002), religious narratives that present suffering as redemptive may discourage proactive responses to abuse. When spiritual reward is believed to follow earthly endurance, the cycle of violence can become sanctified. This echoes studies in liberation theology that critique the misuse of biblical texts to perpetuate structural oppression (Gutiérrez, 1973; Phiri, 2004).

Interestingly, respondents strongly rejected the notion that abuse is a divine punishment ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a clear distinction between personal hardship and theological guilt. This reflects a nuanced theological understanding and suggests that while some beliefs may sustain endurance in abusive settings, others, particularly those rooted in fatalism, are actively resisted. The rejection of divine punishment may reflect increasing awareness among Catholic women of their spiritual worth and dignity, potentially fueled by wider Church efforts to promote gender justice (Pope Francis, 2020; UN Women, 2021). Such resistance also demonstrates women's agency in negotiating religious narratives, challenging overly simplistic depictions of them as passive recipients of theology.

Contrary to expectations, the belief that "abuse is not a reason to leave a marriage" was not statistically significant ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ), indicating that many women do not ideologically accept abuse as part of marriage. However, the continued endurance of abuse, despite this ideological disagreement, may point to the overwhelming influence of other structural and social barriers, such as fear of stigma, economic dependence, and lack of shelter, rather than religious dogma alone. This finding supports earlier work that highlights the interaction between religious, cultural, and socio-economic constraints, where theology may not be the sole determinant but works in tandem with broader systemic inequalities (Knickmeyer et al., 2003; Ellison & Anderson, 2001).

At the same time, qualitative accounts reveal that the rejection of abuse as a justification for staying does not always translate into decisive action. Several women described feeling torn between their conviction that abuse is wrong and the practical realities of leaving. As one participant reflected, *"I know God does not want me to be beaten, but where can I go with my children if I leave?"* Such voices highlight the dissonance between belief and behaviour, where theological rejection of violence is counterbalanced by social and economic pressures. This suggests that even when women disagree with harmful interpretations of doctrine, their capacity to exit abusive unions may be constrained by factors beyond theology, pointing to the importance of considering both belief systems and structural barriers together.

The indissolubility of marriage, though theologically central to Catholic doctrine, also did not emerge as statistically significant ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ,  $p = 0.7$ ), possibly because it is interpreted with some flexibility in



real-life contexts. Anecdotal feedback and qualitative responses in similar studies have shown that women differentiate between Church ideals and personal safety (Knickmeyer et al., 2003; Nason-Clark, 2009). While many may believe in lifelong unions, they also recognize the need for separation when abuse endangers life or dignity. Taken together, these findings point to the complex interplay between theology, culture, and personal experience. Christian beliefs do not function in isolation but are refracted through cultural expectations and institutional messaging. Importantly, not all religious beliefs serve to reinforce abuse; in fact, many women draw strength and resilience from their faith. However, where religious teachings emphasize submission, endurance, or clerical authority without adequate safeguards or pastoral training, they can inadvertently sustain cycles of violence.

This underscores the urgent need for faith-sensitive interventions that preserve spiritual identity while empowering women to prioritize their safety. Training clergy to recognize and respond to abuse appropriately, integrating professional counseling within Church-affiliated institutions, and reframing spiritual messages around justice and dignity rather than suffering, could all serve to harmonize faith with survivor empowerment. In addition, methodological lessons from interdisciplinary fields, such as the application of clustering and mixed-methods analyses in social and health sciences (Makunda et al., 2024), demonstrate the value of using robust, integrative frameworks to capture the multifaceted nature of abuse in faith communities. Future studies may also explore how reinterpretations of scripture and theology can be mobilized to challenge harmful norms and support women in navigating both faith and freedom.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex interplay between Christian matrimonial beliefs and the decision of Catholic women to remain in abusive marriages within the Archdiocese of Nairobi. The findings revealed a high prevalence of psychological, emotional, and physical abuse, yet many women endured these experiences due to deeply ingrained religious convictions about submission, forgiveness, and the indissolubility of marriage. Qualitative insights further demonstrated that spiritual doctrines, reinforced by priestly counsel and communal expectations, often encouraged endurance rather than separation, thereby limiting help-seeking and perpetuating cycles of harm. These outcomes resonate with the background context of patriarchal religious interpretations in African Catholic communities, where women's identities are strongly tied to marital stability and spiritual duty.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study underscores that religious teachings can be both protective, providing women with resilience and hope, and constraining, when they discourage recourse to professional support or safe exit strategies. The results point to an urgent need for context-sensitive pastoral approaches that balance respect for the sanctity of marriage with the imperative of safeguarding women's dignity, health, and safety. In conclusion, this research contributes to broader debates on religion, gender, and domestic violence in Africa and beyond. It offers practical implications for clergy, faith-based counselors, and policy-makers to foster compassionate, theologically grounded interventions that empower women without undermining their spiritual commitments. Future research should explore strategies for integrating church-based support with psychosocial and legal services, ensuring that religious belief becomes a source of healing rather than a barrier to safety.

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