



Stressors in Modern West African Marriages: Economic, Cultural, and Health Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Modern West African marriages face numerous stressors, including economic, cultural, and health-related challenges. Economic stressors include high unemployment rates, financial instability, rising living expenses, and evolving gender roles. Cultural and traditional expectations, such as bride price and polygamy, also contribute to stress. Urbanization introduces challenges like economic opportunities, migration, dual careers, childcare, and the shift from extended to nuclear family structures. Health-related stressors include chronic illnesses, mental health issues, and inadequate healthcare access. The stigmatization of mental health problems and the financial burden of healthcare exacerbate stress. Effective communication and conflict resolution are crucial for maintaining healthy marriages. Infidelity, parenting, and childcare responsibilities also contribute to stress. Religion and spirituality provide coping mechanisms and support networks. The advent of social media and technology introduces privacy concerns and unrealistic expectations, straining marriages. Legal and policy frameworks are essential for ensuring marital stability, providing protection against domestic violence, and facilitating access to legal recourse and support services. This review examines the Stressors in Modern West African Marriages: Economic, Cultural, and Health Challenges. We utilised relevant published data (2004–2024) from diverse, reliable databases. Overall, addressing the stressors in modern West African marriages requires a multifaceted approach that includes economic support, cultural sensitivity, improved healthcare access, effective communication strategies, and robust legal and social support systems. By acknowledging and addressing these diverse challenges, couples can build more resilient and fulfilling marital relationships.

Keywords: Stressors, West Africa, Marriage, Economic, Cultural, Health.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is the body's response to any demand or challenge, and it can manifest as physical, emotional, or psychological strain. In the context of marriage, stress can be understood as the pressures and demands placed on individuals and couples that affect their emotional well-being and relationship dynamics. There are two primary types of stress relevant to modern marriages: acute stress, which is short-term and arises from specific events or situations, and chronic stress, which is persistent and occurs over an extended period and is often caused by ongoing issues such as prolonged financial difficulties, long-term health problems, or continuous marital conflict [1]. Modern marriages in West Africa are increasingly influenced by rapid societal changes, which introduce new stressors that impact marital relationships. Economic transformations, such as unemployment and financial instability, materialism, and economic expectations, have led to increased financial pressure on couples to meet financial obligations such as housing, education, and healthcare. Balancing tradition and modernity, extended family dynamics, urbanization, health and well-being, technological and social media influence, changing gender roles, and legal and policy changes have all contributed to the stress experienced by couples in modern marriages. Unemployment rates remain high, and many couples face financial instability due to the pressure to meet financial obligations, such as housing, education, and healthcare. The desire to attain a certain standard of living, influenced by media and societal norms, places additional financial pressure on couples, leading to stress and conflict. Cultural and traditional shifts, such as the role of extended families, have also been influenced by modernization, leading to stress for couples. Urbanization has led to housing challenges, with many couples living in overcrowded and inadequate conditions, exacerbating stress. Health issues, such as chronic illnesses or inadequate healthcare facilities, place a heavy burden on marriages, and mental health awareness is often stigmatized in West African societies. The rise of social media has introduced new dynamics into modern marriages, leading to unrealistic expectations and privacy concerns [2].

Economic Stressors in Modern Marriages in West Africa

Economic stressors are a significant factor affecting modern marriages in West Africa. These stressors include unemployment and financial instability, economic expectations and materialism, and evolving gender roles and financial responsibilities within marriages. High unemployment rates among youth pose a major challenge, as many young couples struggle to find stable employment, leading to financial uncertainty and strain on marriages. The job market in many West African countries is characterized by limited opportunities, especially in formal sectors, making it difficult for couples to plan for the future. Rising living expenses, including housing, food, education, and healthcare, add to financial pressures, leading to debt and financial strain. Economic volatility, influenced by fluctuating commodity prices and political instability, can lead to job losses and reduced incomes, adding significant stress to marital relationships. Rising economic expectations and materialism can be exacerbated by the influence of media, social comparisons, consumer culture, and debt accumulation. Traditional gender roles in West African societies include male breadwinner expectation, women's role in financial support, and the shift towards shared financial responsibilities. Evolving gender roles include women's economic participation, which is shifting traditional gender roles and contributing significantly to household incomes [3]. This shift requires effective communication and cooperation, as misunderstandings or imbalances in financial contributions can lead to stress and disputes. Financial decision-making in modern marriages is more likely to be joint, fostering a sense of partnership but also potentially leading to conflicts if there are differences in financial priorities or spending habits. Issues of financial autonomy and control can arise, with each partner having different views on how money should be managed. Ensuring a balance between joint decision-making and individual autonomy is crucial for reducing financial stress in marriages.

Cultural and Traditional Expectations in Modern Marriages in West Africa

The dynamics of modern marriages in West Africa are shaped by cultural and traditional expectations, which often intertwine with evolving societal norms. Traditional practices include the bride price (dowry) and polygamy, which can cause stress if financial demands are high or disagreements arise between families. Gender roles, such as men being providers and women being caregivers, also have specific expectations and responsibilities that can create stress. Respect for elders and authority is deeply ingrained in West African cultures, and young couples often face pressure to conform to these expectations. Changing gender roles, such as women's empowerment and shared responsibilities, can create tension within marriages if not managed carefully. Modern marriages aim for more equitable distribution of responsibilities, both financially and domestically, which requires negotiation and mutual understanding. Education and exposure to global media and Western cultural values can also lead to changes in marital expectations, creating tension with traditional norms and expectations from families and communities. Adaptation and flexibility are essential for couples to successfully balance modernity and tradition. Open communication and willingness to negotiate roles and responsibilities are crucial, and building support systems that respect both traditional values and modern aspirations can help reduce stress. Extended family dynamics in West African cultures can also cause stress due to interference and expectations from extended family members, the role of in-laws, financial obligations, and cultural expectations. Adherence to customs and rituals can be demanding, and the expectation of hosting and hospitality can be taxing and stressful, especially for couples with limited resources or time [4].

Urbanization and Its Impact on Modern Marriages in West Africa

Urbanization, the increasing proportion of a population living in urban areas, has significant implications for family dynamics, particularly in modern marriages in West Africa. This phenomenon brings with it a range of challenges and changes that impact marital relationships. Economic opportunities and migration to urban centers can lead to job search and better living standards, but this transition can also be stressful and disruptive for marital relationships. Balancing dual careers can become a significant source of stress, as the demands of work, long hours, and commuting can reduce the time couples spend together, impacting their relationship quality. Childcare and education can be challenging without the support of extended family, as urban centers typically offer better educational opportunities but may require daycare services or nannies, which can be expensive and stressful to arrange. Family structure and interactions can also change, with urbanization often leading to a nuclear family focus, strengthening the bond within the immediate family but also leading to feelings of isolation and increased pressure on the couple to support each other without the traditional extended family safety net. Stress and adaptation to urban life, with its fast pace and high cost of living, can be stressful for couples as they navigate new social norms, economic pressures, and lifestyle changes, which can strain their relationship. Isolation from extended family support systems is another issue, as moving to urban areas often means losing this critical support network, which can increase stress on the marriage. Couples may feel socially isolated without the immediate presence of extended family, which can be particularly challenging for individuals used to a communal lifestyle. In addition to these challenges, housing shortages and high costs in urban centers can also pose significant stressors for couples. Finding affordable and adequate housing can be a significant stressor, especially for couples with limited financial resources [5]. Compromised living conditions can also affect physical health, mental well-being,

and overall relationship satisfaction. Overcrowding can lead to a lack of privacy, which is crucial for healthy marital relationships, and can exacerbate stress levels, negatively impacting communication and relationship quality. Lastly, poor housing conditions can impact children's development and well-being, adding further strain to the marriage. Ensuring children's well-being in such environments requires additional effort and resources, adding to the couple's burdens.

Health-Related Stressors in Modern Marriages in West Africa

Health-related stressors significantly impact modern marriages in West Africa, including physical health issues, mental health awareness and stigmatization, and access to healthcare. Chronic illnesses and long-term health conditions can lead to financial strain, lifestyle adjustments, and emotional strain, causing stress and potential burnout. Acute health issues, such as accidents or sudden illnesses, can create immediate and intense stress, disrupting family life and adding to financial and emotional burdens. Sexual and reproductive health problems, such as fertility issues and sexually transmitted infections, can also cause stress in marriages due to emotional toll, societal pressure, and potential disagreements about family planning. Mental health awareness and stigmatization are also significant factors contributing to marital stress. Limited knowledge and cultural misconceptions about mental health issues can prevent couples from recognizing and addressing mental health problems, leading to prolonged suffering and stress. Coping with mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, can severely impact marital relationships, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. Support and treatment for mental health problems can be challenging, requiring patience, understanding, and often financial resources. Access to healthcare is also affected by healthcare infrastructure, quality of care, and financial barriers [6]. Inadequate healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, can limit access to necessary medical care, leading to untreated health issues and chronic stress. The high cost of medical services and lack of comprehensive insurance coverage can further exacerbate health issues and stress. Family well-being is also affected by the health of each family member, as caring for an ill family member can strain relationships and affect the quality of life. Access to preventive care and health education is crucial for maintaining family well-being, but limited availability can result in undiagnosed and untreated health conditions, leading to long-term stress and health complications.

Communication and Conflict Resolution

Effective communication and conflict resolution are crucial for maintaining healthy and resilient marriages. In West Africa, cultural norms and expectations, such as gender roles, respect and hierarchy, language barriers, emotional expression, socioeconomic factors, time constraints, and technology, can hinder communication. Counseling services provide professional guidance, mental health support, and mediation services to help couples address issues and improve their relationship dynamics. Counseling services offer unbiased perspectives and help couples understand each other's viewpoints. They also address underlying mental health issues that might be affecting the marriage. Mediation involves a neutral third party who helps couples resolve conflicts, ensuring both partners are heard and the conversation remains productive. Mediators familiar with local cultures and customs can provide culturally sensitive solutions that respect traditional values while promoting effective conflict resolution. Community and religious support is essential in conflict resolution, with elders and community leaders playing a crucial role in helping couples feel supported in resolving their issues. Religious counseling can offer spiritual support and moral guidance aligning with the couple's faith and values. Strategies for conflict resolution within marriages include active listening, using I-statements, regular check-ins, positive reinforcement, conflict management skills, stress management techniques, seeking professional help from therapists or counselors, and participating in relationship workshops or seminars [7].

Prevalence and Impact of Infidelity on Marital Stress

Infidelity, or extramarital affairs, is a significant issue in many marriages and relationships, with approximately 20-25% of married men and 10-15% of married women having engaged in such activities. This can lead to significant marital stress, emotional distress, trust erosion, communication breakdown, decreased intimacy, and potential for divorce. Trust-building is essential in any relationship and involves open communication, consistency, mutual respect, and emotional support. Rebuilding trust after infidelity is a challenging and lengthy process that requires dedication from both partners. Key steps include acknowledging and accountability, transparency, counseling and therapy, patience and time, and consistent positive actions. Societal attitudes towards infidelity vary across different cultures and communities, with cultural differences influencing stigmatization, gender norms, and media portrayals [8]. Consequences of societal attitudes include stigma and shame, legal and financial consequences, and the impact on families. Individuals involved in extramarital affairs may experience significant shame and guilt, impacting their mental health and social standing. Legal and financial repercussions may arise if infidelity leads to divorce, and children may experience confusion, insecurity, and emotional distress due to their parents' infidelity and subsequent marital issues.

Parenting and Childcare Stressors

Many families in West Africa face significant financial challenges, including high poverty rates and limited access to stable jobs. These challenges can lead to difficulties in providing for children's basic needs, such as food,

clothing, and education. Education costs are often high, and healthcare expenses are particularly challenging, especially in rural areas. Cultural and social expectations also play a role in parenting, with extended family involvement often leading to conflicts due to differing opinions on parenting practices. Balancing tradition and modernity is another challenge, as traditional gender roles often place a heavier burden on women for childcare and household duties. Access to resources is limited, with limited childcare services and educational resources. Community support is also limited, leaving some families without adequate assistance. Balancing work and family responsibilities is also a challenge, with time constraints, job security, and workplace flexibility. Support systems include extended family support, community and social networks, and workplace policies. Parenting styles and expectations can lead to conflict and stress, especially when parents have different approaches to discipline and child-rearing [9]. Different expectations can cause conflict, and role overload can cause stress and misunderstandings. Poor communication about parenting expectations and responsibilities can exacerbate stress and lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Emotional and psychological impacts of parenting include increased stress and anxiety, decreased intimacy, and the need for effective conflict resolution skills. Without these skills, conflicts can escalate and further strain the relationship.

Role of Religion and Spirituality

Religious beliefs significantly influence marriage dynamics, shaping moral frameworks, roles, expectations, and community support. Values like commitment, fidelity, forgiveness, and compassion are often emphasized, while the sacredness of marriage is a significant aspect. Religious traditions prescribe specific roles and expectations for husbands and wives, guiding their interactions. Family and community support can strengthen marital bonds and help couples navigate challenges. Spiritual practices, such as prayer, meditation, seeking divine intervention, and participating in religious rituals and sacraments, can serve as effective coping mechanisms. Spiritual communities offer support groups, retreats, and counseling services to help couples navigate marital challenges. Religious leaders, such as priests, pastors, imams, or spiritual counselors, play a crucial role in marital counseling [10]. They provide guidance, facilitate spiritual growth, and help couples navigate conflicts in a constructive and compassionate manner. Pre-marital counseling is often required or encouraged to prepare couples for the challenges of marriage. Religious leaders may also refer couples to professional help for complex or deep-seated issues.

Impact of Social Media and Technology

Social media platforms can significantly impact marital expectations and comparisons by creating unrealistic portrayals of lives and marriages, pressure to conform to certain norms, and creating a comparison trap. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy or dissatisfaction within one's own marriage, straining marital satisfaction and contributing to feelings of resentment or disillusionment. Social media also influences communication styles, with some couples relying more on digital communication than face-to-face interaction. Privacy issues and digital infidelity are increasingly common issues affecting marriages. Privacy concerns arise from blurring boundaries between personal and public life, leading to emotional infidelity. Digital platforms facilitate opportunities for engaging in affairs through dating apps, messaging, or online forums. Violating privacy through digital means can erode trust within marriages and lead to significant emotional distress. Technology plays a dual role in communication and relationship maintenance. It enhances communication through instant messaging, video calls, and social media platforms, facilitating frequent communication despite physical distance. For couples in long-distance relationships, technology provides essential tools for maintaining emotional intimacy and connection. Online communities and support groups can offer valuable resources and advice on relationship issues, strengthening marriages [5]. However, over-reliance on digital communication can sometimes hinder authentic, face-to-face communication and emotional expression, as misunderstandings may arise due to the lack of non-verbal cues and context in digital interactions.

Legal and Policy Frameworks

Marriage laws play a crucial role in determining marital stability. Legal requirements, such as age restrictions and consent, can influence the quality and stability of marriages. Clear and enforceable laws ensure informed consent and appropriate conditions. Divorce laws, such as fair processes for dissolution, can contribute to healthier transitions out of unhappy marriages. Property and inheritance rights within marriages impact financial stability and the division of assets during and after marriage. Protection against domestic violence is essential for ensuring the safety and well-being of spouses and children [8]. Access to legal recourse for marital issues is essential for resolving disputes and safeguarding rights. Government-funded or NGO-provided legal aid services offer assistance to individuals who cannot afford legal representation. Specialized family courts handle marital issues, such as divorce, child custody, alimony, and property disputes. Legal frameworks may encourage mediation or counseling as alternatives to litigation, promoting amicable resolutions and supporting marital reconciliation. Protection orders in cases of domestic violence or abuse ensure swift intervention and safeguarding the safety of spouses and children in distressed marriages. Governments and NGOs play a crucial role in promoting marital

health through education, counseling, legal awareness campaigns, support services, policy advocacy, and research and data collection.

Impact of Domestic Violence on Marital Stability and Support Systems

Domestic violence, encompassing physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse, has profound effects on marriages. It is prevalent worldwide, affecting individuals of all genders, with women being disproportionately affected. Victims experience physical injuries, emotional trauma, and psychological distress, leading to long-term effects such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The cycle of violence often follows a cycle of tension-building, violent incident, and reconciliation, perpetuating the cycle of abuse within the marriage. Support systems for victims include shelters, safe houses, counseling and therapy, legal aid and advocacy, hotlines and helplines, and community support groups. Legal protections and societal attitudes play critical roles in addressing domestic violence, including criminalizing domestic violence, providing protection orders, and ensuring access to justice. Societal attitudes also influence victims' willingness to seek help and the community's response to survivors [2]. Extended family and community support play significant roles in coping with marital stress. Family members offer empathy, understanding, and validation, while extended family may assist with childcare, household chores, or financial support during difficult periods. Cultural contexts also play a role in resolving marital conflicts and supporting reconciliation efforts. Peer support and social networks offer valuable resources for coping with marital stress, such as shared experiences, validation, and community resources. Access to professional support services is essential for individuals experiencing marital stress. Marriage counselors and therapists provide evidence-based interventions, while collaboration between healthcare providers, social workers, and community organizations facilitates holistic care for individuals and families experiencing marital stress.

CONCLUSION

Modern West African marriages face numerous stressors that significantly impact their stability and well-being. Economic pressures, such as unemployment, financial instability, and evolving gender roles, create strain on couples, while societal expectations and materialism exacerbate financial stress. Cultural and traditional expectations, including extended families and adherence to customs, also contribute to marital stress, often leading to tension and misunderstandings. Urbanization, housing shortages, high living costs, and urban life demands further strain marital relationships, reducing meaningful interaction and financial pressures. Health-related stressors, such as chronic illnesses, mental health issues, and inadequate healthcare access, further compound the difficulties faced by modern West African marriages. Effective communication and conflict resolution are crucial for maintaining healthy marriages amidst these stressors. Cultural norms and expectations often hinder open communication, making counseling services and community support essential. Infidelity, driven by societal attitudes and media portrayals, adds another layer of stress, requiring trust-building efforts and professional support. Parenting and childcare responsibilities, influenced by financial challenges and cultural expectations, also contribute to marital stress. Religion and spirituality play a significant role in shaping marital dynamics and providing coping mechanisms for stress. Social media and technology introduce privacy concerns and unrealistic expectations, straining marriages. Legal and policy frameworks are critical in ensuring marital stability, providing protection against domestic violence, and facilitating access to legal recourse and support services. In conclusion, addressing stressors in modern West African marriages requires a multifaceted approach that includes economic support, cultural sensitivity, improved healthcare access, effective communication strategies, and robust legal and social support systems. By acknowledging and addressing these diverse challenges, couples can build more resilient and fulfilling marital relationships.

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