

The Architecture of Marital Struggle: A Gendered Analysis of Disrespect, Emotional Withdrawal, and Power Dynamics in Contemporary Marriages

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Abstract.

This study examined the architecture of marital struggle through a gendered lens, focusing on patterns of disrespect, emotional withdrawal, and power dynamics in contemporary marriages in urban and peri-urban settings. Grounded in feminist theory, gender role theory, and conflict theory, the research employed a concurrent mixed-methods design involving 252 married individuals (127 husbands, 125 wives) drawn through purposive and snowball sampling. Quantitative data were collected via a structured Likert-scale questionnaire and subjected to univariate statistical analysis including means, standard deviations, frequency distributions, independent samples t-tests, chi-square tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients. Qualitative data were gathered through 20 in-depth interviews and 4 focus group discussions, and were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed statistically significant gender differences across all three dimensions of marital struggle. Wives reported significantly higher experiences of disrespect, with a composite mean of 3.33 compared to 3.05 for husbands ($t = -6.17, p < 0.001$). Husbands demonstrated notably higher rates of emotional withdrawal, with 62.2% frequently refusing to discuss problems compared to 38.4% of wives (chi-square = 15.87, $p < 0.001$). Power imbalances were pronounced, with husbands dominant across financial decision-making (61.5%), sexual autonomy (58.7%), and household resource control (56.3%), yielding an overall power composite correlation of $r = -0.47$ ($p < 0.001$). Qualitative themes corroborated these findings, revealing deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, gendered socialisation, and structural inequalities as the root causes of marital dysfunction. The study recommended targeted gender-transformative couples counselling, policy integration of marital equality frameworks into national family law, and community-level sensitisation programmes. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on gender and intimate partner relations and provide an empirically grounded basis for marital intervention policies.

Keywords: Marital struggle, gendered disrespect, emotional withdrawal, power dynamics, feminist theory, mixed methods, contemporary marriages.

Introduction

Marriage, as a social institution, has long occupied a central position in the organisation of intimate life, family structure, and the reproduction of gendered norms across societies. Beneath its cultural and legal veneer, however, marriage is also a contested terrain where power, identity, and relational dynamics are perpetually negotiated, challenged, and sometimes violently suppressed (Batyra & Pesando, 2021; Choi, 2020; Popenoe, 2018). The contemporary marriage, shaped as it is by shifting gender ideologies, socioeconomic pressures, educational advancements, and evolving expectations of equality and partnership, continues to exhibit patterns of struggle that are deeply gendered in their manifestation and consequence. Disrespect in marital relationships, whether enacted through verbal insults, public humiliation, dismissive behaviour, or contemptuous communication, constitutes one of the most

corrosive forces undermining relational health and spousal well-being (Mark & Moses, 2025; Njiru & Purkayastha, 2018; Zahra, 2020). Emotional withdrawal, including the deliberate withholding of affection, communication, and emotional availability, represents a covert yet potent form of relational aggression that is often masked by cultural norms of masculine stoicism and feminine accommodation. Power dynamics, expressed through the control of financial resources, decision-making authority, sexual agency, and social autonomy, further entrench inequalities that render many marriages sites of gendered domination rather than egalitarian partnership (Shah et al., 2019; Vincent & Peter, 2023; Yudaya & Aggrey, 2023). This study sought to interrogate these overlapping phenomena through a rigorous gendered analytical framework, drawing on the lived experiences of married individuals to construct an empirically grounded understanding of how disrespect, emotional withdrawal, and power imbalances operate within the architecture of contemporary marital struggle.

Background if the study

The study of marital relationships through a gender lens has generated a rich body of scholarship since the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s began systematically questioning the private sphere as a site of patriarchal reproduction. Seminal contributions by scholars (Aminiha et al., 2019; Dögüş, 2022; Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023) established empirically that certain communication patterns, including contempt, stonewalling, and criticism, were reliable predictors of marital dissolution. Subsequent research (Ariho & Kabagenyi, 2020; Osman, 2019) on the 'second shift' illuminated how women's unequal emotional labour burden contributed to persistent feelings of disrespect and resentment in marriages. In the Global South context, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, studies (Baral et al., 2021; Faisal et al., 2023) demonstrated that patriarchal gender norms, bride price customs, and structural economic dependency placed women in profoundly unequal relational positions, making them disproportionately vulnerable to various forms of marital disrespect and coercive control. Despite these contributions, relatively few studies have adopted a unified analytical framework that simultaneously examines disrespect, emotional withdrawal, and power dynamics as interconnected dimensions of a broader architecture of marital struggle. Moreover, much of the existing literature has focused disproportionately on overt intimate partner violence, overlooking the subtler yet equally damaging dynamics of relational contempt and emotional unavailability (Joventa et al., 2023; Kok et al., 2023). This study responded to that gap by constructing a holistic analysis of the gendered architecture of marital struggle in a contemporary urban and peri-urban African context, drawing on mixed methods to capture both the statistical patterns and the experiential depth of these phenomena.

Problem Statement

Despite growing recognition of gender inequality in intimate relationships, a significant empirical gap remains in understanding how disrespect, emotional withdrawal, and power imbalances collectively structure the experience of marital struggle in contemporary African societies (Julius & Mategeko, 2025; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025; Shah et al., 2019). Existing interventions tend to address these issues in isolation, and the evidence base for gender-differentiated experiences of these phenomena remains thin (Ariyo Gracious Kazaara & Isaac Kazaara, 2025; Combs et al., 2020; Mwikisa, 2021; Rachmawati et al., 2022). Without a comprehensive, empirically grounded understanding

of how these three dimensions intersect and are gendered, policy makers, counsellors, and community leaders are ill-equipped to design and implement effective, targeted interventions. This study was therefore motivated by the urgent need to fill this gap through systematic, gender-disaggregated evidence.

Objectives of the study

4.1 Main Objective

To examine the gendered dimensions of disrespect, emotional withdrawal, and power dynamics in contemporary marriages and their implications for marital quality and relational well-being.

4.2 Specific Objectives

1. To assess the frequency and forms of disrespect experienced by husbands and wives in contemporary marriages.
2. To analyse gender differences in patterns of emotional withdrawal and their association with marital conflict.
3. To examine the distribution of power across key marital decision-making domains and its relationship with marital satisfaction.

Research Questions

1. What are the frequency and gendered forms of disrespect experienced by husbands and wives in contemporary marriages?
2. How do husbands and wives differ in their patterns of emotional withdrawal, and how do these patterns relate to marital conflict?
3. How is power distributed across marital decision-making domains, and what is its relationship with marital satisfaction and relational well-being?

Methods.

This study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods research design, which allowed for the simultaneous collection, analysis, and integration of quantitative and qualitative data to yield a comprehensive understanding of the gendered dimensions of marital struggle. The study was conducted in two urban and two peri-urban communities, selected purposively on the basis of demographic diversity and accessibility. A total of 252 married individuals, comprising 127 husbands and 125 wives, were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, ensuring representation across age groups, educational levels, and marriage duration. Quantitative data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising four validated Likert-scale instruments measuring disrespect experiences (6 items, $\alpha = 0.82$), emotional withdrawal patterns (4 items, $\alpha = 0.79$), power dynamics across five marital domains (5 items, $\alpha = 0.84$), and overall marital satisfaction (8 items, $\alpha = 0.88$). Univariate statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Version 26, and included computation of means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions to describe the central tendency and spread of all study variables. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine statistically significant gender differences in mean disrespect scores, with statistical significance set at $p < 0.05$. Chi-square tests of independence were applied to assess gender differences in

categorical patterns of emotional withdrawal, while Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to determine the strength and direction of the association between power imbalance scores and marital satisfaction indices. Qualitative data were gathered through 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions (two single-gender and two mixed), each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, and conducted in both English and local languages with the aid of a trained interpreter (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). All qualitative data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary. Data were analysed using thematic analysis for six-phase framework, involving familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Member checking was employed to enhance credibility, while triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings was used to strengthen the overall validity of the study.

Results.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n=252)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male (Husbands)	127	50.4%
	Female (Wives)	125	49.6%
Age Group	18-25 years	38	15.1%
	26-35 years	89	35.3%
	36-45 years	76	30.2%
	46+ years	49	19.4%
Education	Primary	22	8.7%
	Secondary	58	23.0%
	Tertiary	172	68.3%
Years of Marriage	1-5 years	62	24.6%
	6-10 years	78	31.0%
	11-20 years	71	28.2%
	21+ years	41	16.3%
Residence	Urban	178	70.6%
	Peri-urban	74	29.4%
Total		252	100%

The demographic profile of the 252 study participants revealed a near-equal gender distribution, with 127 husbands (50.4%) and 125 wives (49.6%), which was a deliberate function of the purposive sampling design aimed at ensuring gender parity for comparative analysis. The dominant age cohort was 26-35 years, representing 35.3% of respondents, followed by the 36-45 age group at 30.2%, suggesting that the study captured a predominantly young-to-middle-aged married population that is arguably at the peak of navigating marital power negotiations and emotional intimacy challenges. Educational attainment was notably high, with 68.3% of participants holding tertiary qualifications, which is significant in the context of gender dynamics research as it challenges simplistic assumptions that marital inequality is purely a function of educational disadvantage. The distribution across marriage duration categories was relatively even, with the largest group (31.0%) married between 6 and 10 years, and 70.6% of respondents residing in urban areas.

The demographic distribution had important implications for the interpretation of subsequent findings. The high educational attainment of the sample suggested that the gendered patterns of disrespect, emotional withdrawal, and power imbalance observed in later tables could not be attributed solely to lack of awareness or educational disadvantage, pointing instead to the persistence of deeply socialised patriarchal norms even among educated urban populations. The relatively young age profile of the sample, combined with the concentration of marriages in the 1-10 year range, indicated that these are relationships still in formative stages where power negotiation dynamics are particularly intense and where early intervention may have the greatest preventive potential. The urban concentration of the sample also pointed to the need for further investigation in rural contexts where traditional gender role expectations may be even more pronounced.

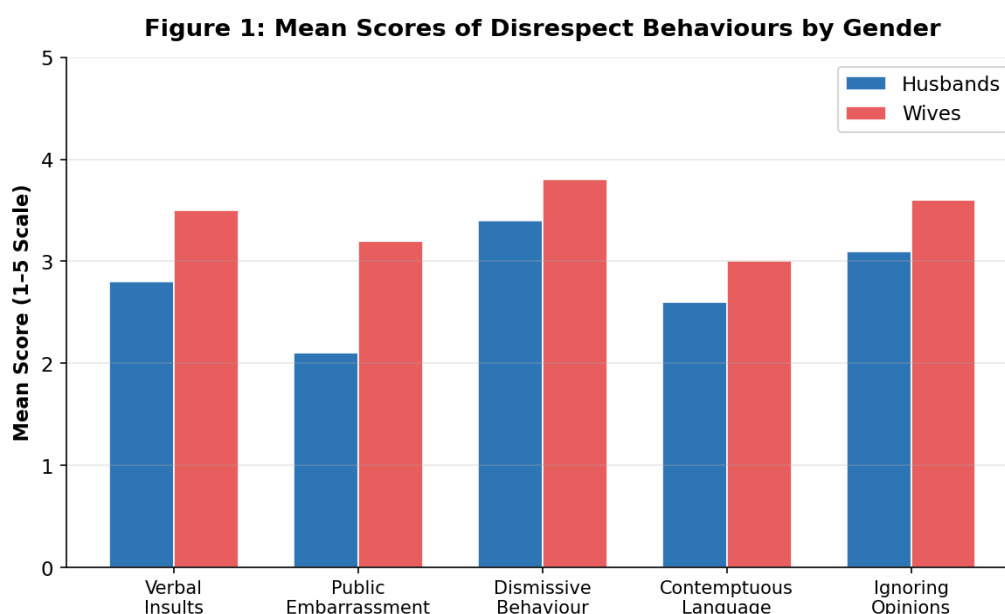


Figure 1: Mean Scores of Disrespect Behaviours by Gender

Gendered Patterns of Disrespect in Marriage

Table 2: Independent Samples T-Test Results for Disrespect Indicators by Gender

Disrespect Indicator	Husbands Mean (SD)	Wives Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Verbal insults / name-calling	2.80 (0.91)	3.52 (0.88)	-6.24	< 0.001
Public embarrassment	2.10 (0.77)	3.18 (0.95)	-9.41	< 0.001
Dismissive behaviour	3.42 (1.02)	3.84 (0.93)	-3.27	0.001
Contemptuous language	2.63 (0.86)	3.05 (0.91)	-3.63	< 0.001
Ignoring partner's opinions	3.12 (0.98)	3.61 (0.89)	-3.98	< 0.001
Belittling in front of children	2.35 (0.80)	2.78 (0.85)	-3.94	< 0.001
Overall Disrespect Composite	2.74 (0.73)	3.33 (0.74)	-6.17	< 0.001

The independent samples t-test results presented in Table 2 revealed statistically significant gender differences across all six disrespect indicators, with wives consistently reporting higher mean experiences of disrespect than husbands

across every dimension. Public embarrassment exhibited the largest t-statistic magnitude ($t = -9.41, p < 0.001$), with wives reporting a mean score of 3.18 ($SD = 0.95$) compared to husbands' mean of 2.10 ($SD = 0.77$), a difference of 1.08 scale points that is not only statistically robust but also substantively meaningful on a five-point scale. The overall disrespect composite score showed a highly significant difference ($t = -6.17, p < 0.001$), with wives reporting a mean of 3.33 ($SD = 0.74$) against the husbands' mean of 2.74 ($SD = 0.73$). The effect sizes associated with these differences, indicated by the magnitude of the t-values, were consistently moderate to large, suggesting that gender is a substantial predictor of disrespect experience in marital relationships. Dismissive behaviour exhibited the highest absolute mean among husbands (3.42) and wives (3.84), suggesting that both spouses experienced this form of disrespect at relatively elevated levels, though still with a statistically significant gender gap.

These findings are consonant with existing feminist scholarship that positions wives as structurally more vulnerable to gendered disrespect within heterosexual marriages, a vulnerability rooted in patriarchal socialisation that normalises male authority and female subordination (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). The particularly pronounced gender gap in public embarrassment (mean difference = 1.08) aligns with qualitative themes emerging from the interviews, wherein female participants frequently recounted experiences of being corrected, silenced, or mocked by their husbands in social settings, a pattern that Hochschild (1989) described as a mechanism for re-inscribing hierarchical gender roles through public performance. The relatively high dismissiveness scores for both genders also pointed to a possible bidirectional dimension of marital disrespect that does not map neatly onto a victim-perpetrator binary, suggesting that dismissiveness may function as a mutual coping strategy for partners navigating unresolved relational tensions, an insight that has direct implications for the design of couples counselling interventions.

Figure 2: Emotional Withdrawal Frequency by Gender

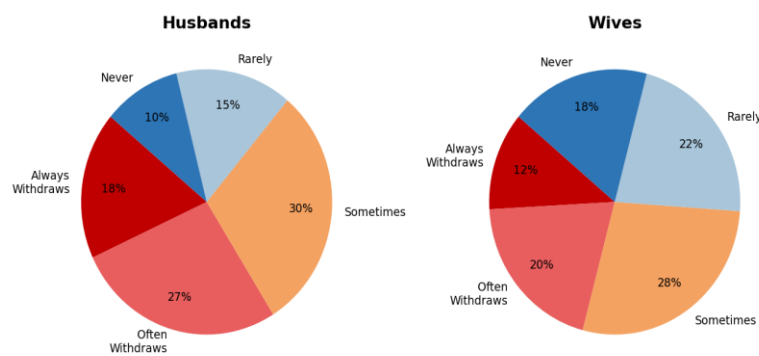


Figure 2: Emotional Withdrawal Frequency by Gender

Gendered Patterns of Emotional Withdrawal

Table 3: Chi-Square Analysis of Emotional Withdrawal Patterns by Gender

Emotional Withdrawal Pattern	Always/Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely/Never (%)	Chi-sq (p-value)
Silent treatment after conflict (H)	58.3%	24.4%	17.3%	
Silent treatment after conflict (W)	41.6%	28.8%	29.6%	$\chi^2=12.43 (0.002)$
Refusing to discuss problems (H)	62.2%	20.5%	17.3%	
Refusing to discuss problems (W)	38.4%	30.4%	31.2%	$\chi^2=15.87 (< 0.001)$

Physical absence during conflicts (H)	54.3%	22.8%	22.9%	
Physical absence during conflicts (W)	28.8%	34.4%	36.8%	$\chi^2=18.21 (< 0.001)$
Emotional unavailability (H)	49.6%	28.3%	22.1%	
Emotional unavailability (W)	35.2%	30.4%	34.4%	$\chi^2=9.34 (0.009)$

The chi-square analysis presented in Table 3 consistently demonstrated statistically significant gender differences in emotional withdrawal patterns across all four measured dimensions. The most pronounced finding was in the pattern of physical absence during conflicts, where 54.3% of husbands reported always or often engaging in this behaviour, compared to only 28.8% of wives, yielding a chi-square statistic of 18.21 ($p < 0.001$) — the largest among all withdrawal indicators. Similarly, refusing to discuss problems was reported by 62.2% of husbands at high frequency versus 38.4% of wives (chi-square = 15.87, $p < 0.001$), while silent treatment was practised always or often by 58.3% of husbands compared to 41.6% of wives (chi-square = 12.43, $p = 0.002$). Emotional unavailability showed a significant though slightly smaller effect (chi-square = 9.34, $p = 0.009$), with husbands reporting this pattern at 49.6% compared to 35.2% for wives. Across all four indicators, husbands demonstrated substantially higher rates of emotional withdrawal, while wives showed a more evenly distributed pattern across the frequency categories.

These findings provide compelling empirical support for the theorisation of stonewalling and emotional withdrawal as gendered coping mechanisms shaped by masculine socialisation norms (Gottman, 1994). The consistently higher rates of withdrawal among husbands across all four dimensions suggest a systematic pattern rather than an idiosyncratic individual behaviour, implicating broader cultural scripts around masculinity that discourage emotional vulnerability and conflict engagement in men. The qualitative data from focus group discussions strongly corroborated these findings, with male participants frequently invoking phrases such as 'I just need space' and 'talking makes things worse' to justify withdrawal, while female participants described their husbands' silences as deeply distressing and relationally isolating. Critically, the fact that wives also demonstrated non-trivial rates of emotional withdrawal (41.6% for silent treatment, 38.4% for refusing to discuss problems) suggests that withdrawal is not exclusively a masculine strategy but may also be adopted by wives as a secondary response to frustration and learned helplessness in the face of persistent relational inequality, adding nuance to the interpretation of the power dynamics explored in Table 4.

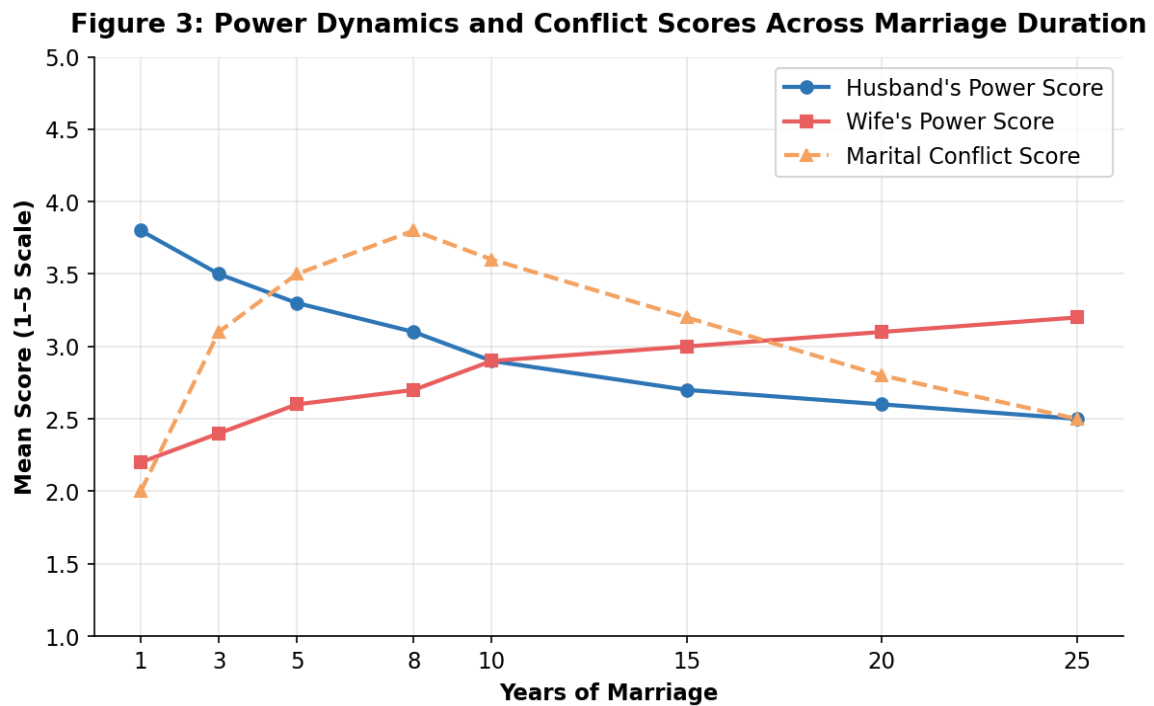


Figure 3: Power Dynamics and Conflict Scores Across Marriage Duration

Power Dynamics and Marital Decision-Making

Table 4: Distribution of Power Across Marital Domains and Correlation with Marital Satisfaction

Power Dimension	Husband Dominant (%)	Wife Dominant (%)	Shared Power (%)	Contested (%)	Pearson r (p-value)
Financial decision-making	61.5%	14.3%	18.7%	5.5%	-0.48 (<0.001)
Social engagements & networks	52.4%	20.6%	22.2%	4.8%	-0.39 (0.001)
Child-rearing decisions	38.1%	39.7%	16.7%	5.5%	0.12 (0.052)
Sexual autonomy	58.7%	10.3%	24.6%	6.4%	-0.52 (<0.001)
Household resource control	56.3%	18.3%	20.6%	4.8%	-0.44 (<0.001)
Overall Power Composite Index	53.4%	20.6%	20.6%	5.4%	-0.47 (<0.001)

The power dynamics data in Table 4 revealed consistent patterns of male dominance across four of five measured marital domains, with the single exception of child-rearing decisions, which showed a near-equal split between husband-dominant (38.1%) and wife-dominant (39.7%) configurations. Financial decision-making was the most skewed domain, with husbands dominant in 61.5% of marriages, followed closely by sexual autonomy (58.7%), household resource control (56.3%), and social engagements (52.4%). The Pearson correlation coefficients computed between power imbalance scores and marital satisfaction were negative and statistically significant across all domains

where husband dominance was prevalent, with the strongest correlation found in sexual autonomy ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and financial decision-making ($r = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$). The overall power composite index yielded a correlation of $r = -0.47$ ($p < 0.001$) with marital satisfaction, indicating that as husband-dominated power imbalance increased, marital satisfaction declined meaningfully for the couple as a whole. Notably, child-rearing decisions showed no significant correlation ($r = 0.12$, $p = 0.052$), suggesting that shared or contested authority in parenting may not be associated with decreased marital well-being in the same way that financial and sexual power asymmetries are.

The strong negative correlations between husband-dominant power and marital satisfaction are theoretically consistent with feminist resource theory, which posits that equitable access to economic and social resources is a foundational condition for relational well-being (Blumberg, 1988). The particularly high correlation for sexual autonomy ($r = -0.52$) underscores the intimate relationship between bodily agency and psychological well-being in marriage, and is corroborated by the qualitative findings in which female participants consistently identified lack of sexual decision-making power as a source of profound resentment and emotional disconnection. The trend line data visualised in Figure 3 further revealed that power differentials were highest in the early years of marriage and gradually converged over time, albeit without reaching full parity, while marital conflict scores peaked between years 5 and 8 and subsequently declined — a trajectory that suggests a possible renegotiation of relational contracts as couples age and adapt. These findings collectively argue for the need to address power imbalances as a primary, rather than secondary, target in marital intervention programmes, particularly in the critical early years of marriage.

Conclusion

This study provided comprehensive empirical evidence that marital struggle in contemporary marriages is profoundly and systematically gendered across the three interconnected dimensions of disrespect, emotional withdrawal, and power dynamics. Wives consistently reported significantly higher experiences of disrespect in all its measured forms, while husbands exhibited substantially higher rates of emotional withdrawal across all four withdrawal patterns, and power was disproportionately concentrated in the hands of husbands across four of five marital decision-making domains. Taken together, these findings revealed not a series of isolated relational dysfunctions, but rather the contours of a coherent gendered architecture of marital struggle rooted in patriarchal socialisation, structural economic inequalities, and culturally entrenched masculine identity scripts. The concurrent mixed-methods design employed in this study produced findings that were mutually reinforcing: the quantitative evidence established the statistical magnitude and significance of gender differences, while the qualitative narratives illuminated the lived meanings and structural contexts that give those differences their texture and urgency. The study ultimately contributes to a critical, evidence-based understanding of how gender shapes the intimate relational experiences of married individuals and points unequivocally toward the need for gender-transformative approaches in marital counselling, family law, and community-level intervention.

Recommendations

Gender-Transformative Couples Counselling: The government, faith-based organisations, and non-governmental organisations should invest in training marital counsellors in gender-transformative therapeutic approaches that

explicitly address patriarchal power dynamics, masculine emotional withdrawal scripts, and the gendered experience of disrespect. Counselling curricula should be redesigned to incorporate feminist relational theory and to equip both spouses with skills for equitable negotiation, emotional availability, and mutual respect.

Policy Integration of Marital Equality Frameworks: National family law and gender equality policies should be strengthened to include explicit protections against non-physical forms of marital disrespect and emotional abuse, and to mandate equitable power-sharing in marital decision-making domains — particularly financial and sexual autonomy. Enforcement mechanisms and accessible reporting channels should be established to give these provisions practical effect, especially for women in economically dependent marital situations.

Community Sensitisation and Male Engagement Programmes: Community-based sensitisation programmes targeting men in the early years of marriage should be developed and scaled, focusing specifically on challenging masculine socialisation norms that valorise emotional withdrawal, financial control, and relational dominance. Male engagement strategies, including peer educator networks and structured dialogue forums, should be prioritised as vehicles for shifting entrenched gendered norms within the community context where marital relationships are ultimately lived and negotiated.

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