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When Endurance Becomes Erosion: Reconceptualizing Marital Persistence in the Context of Dysfunction

Dr. Arinaitwe Julius[1], Dr. Twinomujuni Rosebell[2], Asiimwe Isaac Kazaara[3]

1,2,3 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

Marital persistence in the face of chronic dysfunction has long been interpreted through cultural, religious, and socioeconomic lenses as an expression of commitment and moral fortitude. However, emerging psychological and sociological discourse challenges this normative framing by foregrounding the cumulative psychological toll that such persistence exacts on individuals—particularly women—in structurally unequal union contexts. This study examined the psychosocial, economic, and structural determinants of dysfunctional marital persistence among married adults in Uganda, operationalising a newly conceptualised construct termed the Marital Erosion Index (MEI) to capture the latent transition from voluntary commitment to involuntary endurance. Drawing on cross-sectional survey data from 400 purposively and systematically sampled respondents across urban and peri-urban settings in Kampala, the study employed univariate descriptive statistics, Pearson bivariate correlations, multiple linear regression, and structural equation modelling (SEM) to test hypothesised relationships among emotional exhaustion, fear of social stigma, financial dependency, perceived social support, and marital erosion. Findings revealed that emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .44$), fear of social stigma ($\beta = .31$), and financial dependency ($\beta = .26$) were the strongest positive predictors of marital erosion, while perceived social support ($\beta = -.22$) exerted a significant protective effect. The SEM model demonstrated excellent fit (CFI = 0.967; RMSEA = 0.048) and confirmed that the MEI mediated the relationship between psychosocial stressors and dysfunctional persistence ($\beta = .68$, $p < .001$). The study concludes that marital persistence in dysfunctional unions is not a unidimensional moral stance but a structurally compelled behavioural outcome. Recommendations are advanced for policy reform, counselling interventions, and social safety net programmes targeting women trapped in erosive marital arrangements.

Keywords: marital persistence, dysfunctional marriage, marital erosion, emotional exhaustion, structural equation modelling, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Marriage, as a social institution, has historically been valorised across cultures as a bond of enduring commitment—a covenant that draws its moral legitimacy from precisely the capacity of its members to persist through adversity. Yet the social sciences have increasingly documented a darker dimension of marital persistence: the phenomenon whereby individuals remain in profoundly dysfunctional unions not by free and informed volition but under the invisible coercion of structural, psychological, and normative forces (Batyra & Pesando, 2021; Choi, 2020; Mark & Moses, 2025). The concept of 'when endurance becomes erosion' speaks to a paradigmatic shift in how scholars and practitioners must conceptualise long-suffering within marriage. Rather than viewing persistent marital staying as an unambiguous indicator of relational health or cultural resilience, this study interrogates the conditions under which endurance becomes a vector of psychological destruction—a slow-acting corrosive force that dismantles identity, agency, and wellbeing over time (Njiru & Purkayastha, 2018; Shah et al., 2019; Zahra, 2020). Uganda presents a particularly compelling context for this inquiry: a society in which patriarchal marital norms are reinforced by legal ambiguities, religious prescriptions, deep-seated stigma around divorce, and structural economic inequalities that

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render exit from marriage financially prohibitive for many women. Within this socio-cultural milieu, distinguishing between commitment-driven persistence and fear-driven or dependency-driven endurance becomes not merely an academic exercise but a moral and public health imperative (Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023; Vincent & Peter, 2023; Yudaya & Aggrey, 2023). By reconceptualising marital persistence through the lens of the Marital Erosion Index (MEI)—a composite measure capturing the psychosocial degradation accompanying dysfunctional union continuity—this study sought to illuminate the mechanisms through which societal expectations, economic entrapment, and emotional depletion converge to sustain marriages that have ceased to be emotionally or physically safe (Aminiha et al., 2019; Dögüş, 2022). The study anchors itself within a critical-feminist theoretical framework, informed by theories of learned helplessness, resource dependency theory, and the sociology of emotions, to provide both empirical depth and theoretical contribution to the growing body of scholarship on relational dysfunction in sub-Saharan Africa.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The global literature on marital dissolution and persistence reveals a consistent pattern: the decision to remain in a marriage—particularly a dysfunctional one—is rarely a simple binary choice driven solely by love or legal obligation, but rather a complex negotiation among personal values, social expectations, economic realities, and psychological states. Classic sociological works by Levinger (1965) using the barrier model, and later by Johnson (1999) on commitment types, established that marriages are sustained not only by attraction forces but also by barrier forces—factors that make leaving costly—and by what individuals feel morally obligated to do (Ariho & Kabagenyi, 2020; Osman, 2019). In the Global South, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, these barrier forces are amplified through structural gender inequalities, customary law provisions that penalise women who initiate separation, and deeply entrenched religious and cultural narratives that sacralise suffering within marriage as virtuous. In Uganda specifically, research has documented that the Divorce Act, cultural practices of bride price (locally termed 'kwanjula'), and community-level gossip networks collectively create an ecology of entrapment for married women experiencing abuse, neglect, or emotional abandonment (Baral et al., 2021; Faisal et al., 2023). Empirical studies from Uganda and neighbouring East African nations have found that between 40% and 55% of ever-married women reported staying in unhappy or abusive marriages primarily due to economic dependency, fear of social shame, or concern for children's welfare—demonstrating that persistence in such unions is structurally induced rather than freely chosen. Compounding this is the phenomenon of emotional exhaustion, documented in burnout literature (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) and increasingly applied to relational contexts, whereby prolonged exposure to marital conflict, emotional neglect, and role overload depletes psychological resources to the extent that individuals lose the cognitive and motivational capacity to exit harmful situations (Joventa et al., 2023; Kok et al., 2023). Despite this rich backdrop, a critical gap remained in the literature: the absence of an integrative analytical construct that captures the cumulative, multi-dimensional erosion process through which endurance transforms into dysfunction. The Marital Erosion Index (MEI) developed in this study addressed this gap by operationalising erosion as a latent variable measured by indicators of psychological depletion, loss of personal identity within the marriage, suppressed agency, and chronic emotional numbing (Torche & Rauf, 2021). By situating this construct within an SEM framework, the study was positioned to test not only the direct effects of individual psychosocial and structural variables but also their combined,

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indirect effects on the trajectory of dysfunctional marital persistence—thereby advancing the methodological frontier in East African family science research.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite growing recognition of intimate partner violence and marital dysfunction as public health concerns, the dominant discourse in Uganda and much of sub-Saharan Africa continues to conflate marital persistence with marital health—treating staying in a marriage as inherently normative and desirable, regardless of the conditions under which such persistence occurs (Julius, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). This conceptual conflation has profound consequences: it renders invisible the psychosocial harm experienced by individuals—predominantly women—who remain in chronically dysfunctional unions not by choice but by structural compulsion. There existed no validated, culturally adapted instrument within the Ugandan context that quantified the degree to which marital endurance had transitioned into psychologically erosive persistence, nor were there empirically tested models linking structural determinants (financial dependency, social stigma, support networks) to such erosion via psychosocial mediators (Julius & Henry, 2024; Julius & Nelson, 2024; Julius & Sula, n.d.; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025a). Furthermore, existing counselling, legal, and social welfare systems largely lacked the diagnostic frameworks necessary to distinguish between constructive marital perseverance and harmful marital entrapment (Julius & Geofrey, 2025; Julius & Mategeko, 2025; Julius & Sula, 2025). The result was a policy and practice vacuum that left structurally entrapped individuals without adequate protection, recognition, or recourse (Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025b, 2025c). This study directly addressed this problem by developing and testing an integrative empirical model of dysfunctional marital persistence, generating evidence-based insights to inform targeted interventions and policy reform in Uganda's family welfare architecture.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

To examine the psychosocial, economic, and structural determinants of dysfunctional marital persistence among married adults in Kampala, Uganda, and to test the mediating role of marital erosion in the relationship between identified stressors and persistence outcomes.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the prevalence and distributional characteristics of the Dysfunctional Persistence Score (DPS), Marital Erosion Index (MEI), emotional exhaustion, fear of social stigma, and financial dependency among the study sample.
2. To determine the bivariate and multivariate relationships between psychosocial and structural factors (emotional exhaustion, fear of social stigma, financial dependency, perceived social support, marriage duration) and dysfunctional marital persistence.
3. To test a structural equation model specifying the direct and indirect pathways through which psychosocial stressors influence dysfunctional marital persistence, with marital erosion as the proposed mediating variable.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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4. What are the prevalence and distributional characteristics of dysfunctional marital persistence, marital erosion, emotional exhaustion, fear of social stigma, and financial dependency among married adults in Kampala, Uganda?
5. What are the bivariate and multivariate associations between psychosocial–structural factors and dysfunctional marital persistence among the study participants?
6. Does the Marital Erosion Index significantly mediate the relationship between psychosocial stressors and dysfunctional marital persistence as specified in the proposed structural equation model?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to investigate the psychosocial, economic, and structural determinants of dysfunctional marital persistence among married adults in Kampala, Uganda. A sample of 400 currently married respondents aged 18 years and above was selected using a combination of purposive and systematic random sampling across six divisions of Kampala, ensuring representation across urban and peri-urban settings, income strata, and marriage duration categories. Data were collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed and validated for the Ugandan context, comprising Likert-scale items measuring the Dysfunctional Persistence Score (DPS), the Marital Erosion Index (MEI), the Emotional Exhaustion Scale (adapted from the Maslach Burnout Inventory), the Fear of Social Stigma Scale, the Financial Dependency Scale, and the Perceived Social Support Scale, all of which demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.84 to 0.92. Demographic data including age, marriage duration, number of children, and household income were also collected. Data were entered, cleaned, and analysed using IBM SPSS Version 27 and Amos Version 24. At the univariate level, descriptive statistics—including means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values, and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients—were computed for all continuous variables to characterise the distributional profiles of the key constructs, enabling identification of central tendencies and variability within the sample. At the bivariate level, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the pairwise linear associations among the core psychosocial and structural constructs, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$ (two-tailed), and the magnitude of correlations interpreted using Cohen's (1988) benchmarks: small ($r = .10–.29$), medium ($r = .30–.49$), and large ($r \geq .50$). At the multivariate level, hierarchical multiple linear regression was performed with the Dysfunctional Persistence Score as the dependent variable, entering emotional exhaustion, fear of social stigma, financial dependency, perceived social support, marriage duration, number of children, and household income as predictors; standardised beta coefficients (β), standard errors, t-values, 95% confidence intervals, and model fit statistics (R^2, adjusted R^2, F-ratio) were reported to evaluate the relative and combined predictive power of the independent variables. Finally, structural equation modelling (SEM) using the maximum likelihood estimation method was employed to test the hypothesised mediation model in which the Marital Erosion Index was specified as the mediating variable between the psychosocial stressors and dysfunctional marital persistence; model fit was evaluated using a suite of fit indices including the chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), with thresholds following Hu and Bentler's

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(1999) recommendations (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection; confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Study Variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	α
Age (years)	38.4	11.2	19	74	0.87
Marriage duration (years)	12.6	8.9	1	52	0.91
Dysfunctional Persistence Score (DPS)	64.3	14.7	22	98	0.89
Marital Erosion Index (MEI)	57.8	16.3	18	95	0.92
Emotional Exhaustion Score	61.4	15.1	20	100	0.88
Fear of Social Stigma (FSS)	55.2	13.8	15	90	0.86
Financial Dependency Score	48.6	17.4	10	95	0.84
Perceived Social Support	42.3	14.9	8	88	0.87
Children in Household (count)	2.3	1.4	0	8	—
Monthly Household Income (UGX '000)	1,240	860	180	6,500	—

Table 1 presented the univariate descriptive characteristics of the ten key variables examined in this study, offering a comprehensive baseline profile of the study sample. The mean age of respondents was 38.4 years (SD = 11.2), reflecting a predominantly middle-adulthood sample with substantial marital experience, given that the average marriage duration was 12.6 years (SD = 8.9). Of particular analytical significance were the scores on the two central constructs: the Dysfunctional Persistence Score (DPS) recorded a mean of 64.3 out of 100 (SD = 14.7), and the Marital Erosion Index (MEI) yielded a mean of 57.8 (SD = 16.3). Both distributions demonstrated considerable variability, as evidenced by their ranges—the DPS spanning from 22 to 98 and the MEI from 18 to 95—indicating that dysfunctional persistence and marital erosion were experienced along a continuum rather than as a categorical phenomenon. The Emotional Exhaustion Score was notably elevated at a mean of 61.4 (SD = 15.1), suggesting that a substantial proportion of the sample was experiencing clinically significant levels of relational burnout, a finding consistent with literature documenting high rates of emotional depletion in populations embedded within high-conflict or neglectful marriages. The reliability coefficients for all scaled constructs ranged from $\alpha = 0.84$ to $\alpha = 0.92$, confirming satisfactory to excellent internal consistency and lending confidence to the psychometric integrity of the measurement instruments used in this study.

The descriptive profile further revealed that the Fear of Social Stigma Scale recorded a mean of 55.2 (SD = 13.8), while the Financial Dependency Score averaged 48.6 (SD = 17.4)—both occupying the moderate-to-high range of

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their respective scales and underscoring the salience of socio-structural barriers in anchoring respondents within their marital arrangements. Perceived Social Support, by contrast, was comparatively low at a mean of 42.3 (SD = 14.9), an observation with critical implications for understanding the protective resource landscape available to individuals in this sample: where support is thin, exit pathways from dysfunctional marriages are correspondingly narrowed. The average of 2.3 children per household further contextualised the entrapment narrative, as children are frequently cited in qualitative African family literature as both an emotional anchor and a barrier to marital exit. The substantial variability in household income (mean = 1,240,000 UGX; SD = 860,000 UGX; range = 180,000–6,500,000 UGX) reflected the socioeconomic heterogeneity of the sample, creating conditions for income to emerge as a moderating variable in subsequent multivariate analyses. Taken together, these univariate findings established that the study sample was characterised by a confluence of high psychosocial distress, moderate structural entrapment, and limited social support—a profile theoretically conducive to the erosion trajectory that the study sought to model.

Table 2: Pearson Bivariate Correlation Matrix of Core Psychosocial and Structural Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. DPS	—					
2. MEI	.71**	—				
3. Emo. Exhaust.	.68**	.74**	—			
4. FSS	.52**	.49**	.44**	—		
5. Fin. Dep.	.61**	.58**	.53**	.39**	—	
6. Soc. Support	-.48**	-.52**	-.57**	-.31**	-.29**	—

*** p < .001 (two-tailed). DPS = Dysfunctional Persistence Score; MEI = Marital Erosion Index; Emo. Exhaust. = Emotional Exhaustion Score; FSS = Fear of Social Stigma; Fin. Dep. = Financial Dependency Score; Soc. Support = Perceived Social Support.*

The bivariate correlation matrix presented in Table 2 revealed a comprehensive pattern of interrelationships among the six core constructs that was theoretically coherent and statistically robust. The strongest bivariate association observed was between Emotional Exhaustion and the Marital Erosion Index ($r = .74$, $p < .001$), a large-magnitude correlation that situated emotional depletion as the proximal psychosocial precursor of marital erosion, consistent with the theoretical proposition that erosion is fundamentally a product of chronic affective depletion experienced within the relational context. The DPS was most strongly correlated with the MEI ($r = .71$, $p < .001$), providing preliminary bivariate support for the mediation hypothesis that erosion serves as the primary psychological mechanism linking stressor accumulation to persistent dysfunction. The correlations between DPS and its hypothesised predictors—Emotional Exhaustion ($r = .68$), Financial Dependency ($r = .61$), and Fear of Social Stigma ($r = .52$)—were all statistically significant at $p < .001$ and fell within the large-effect range ($r \geq .50$), confirming the construct validity of these variables as meaningful predictors of dysfunctional persistence within the Ugandan marital context.

Perceived Social Support demonstrated consistently negative correlations with all other constructs in the matrix, with the largest inverse associations observed with Emotional Exhaustion ($r = -.57$) and the MEI ($r = -.52$), both statistically

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significant at $p < .001$. These patterns were diagnostically important: they indicated that respondents with stronger social support networks reported substantially lower levels of both marital erosion and emotional exhaustion, suggesting that social support functioned as a protective buffer against the erosion trajectory—a finding theoretically grounded in the stress-buffering model of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The correlation between Financial Dependency and Emotional Exhaustion ($r = .53$) was particularly noteworthy, as it implied that economic entrapment and psychological depletion were not independent conditions but mutually reinforcing states that compounded each other's erosive effects. Importantly, none of the correlations among the predictor variables exceeded $r = .75$, indicating that while multicollinearity was present to a moderate degree—as expected given the theoretical interrelatedness of these constructs—it did not reach problematic levels (VIF < 3.0 in subsequent regression diagnostics) that would threaten the stability of the multivariate estimates. The overall pattern of bivariate associations thus provided strong empirical justification for proceeding to multivariate and SEM analyses.

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression — Predictors of Dysfunctional Persistence Score (DPS)

Predictor	β	SE	t	95% CI	p-value
Constant	—	—	—	—	< .001
Emotional Exhaustion Score	.38	.04	9.21	.34–.42	< .001
Fear of Social Stigma (FSS)	.27	.05	5.43	.17–.37	< .001
Financial Dependency Score	.22	.05	4.84	.12–.32	< .001
Perceived Social Support	-.19	.05	-3.87	-.29–-.09	< .001
Marriage Duration (years)	.14	.03	4.20	.08–.20	< .001
Number of Children	.09	.04	2.51	.01–.17	.012
Monthly Household Income	-.07	.03	-2.34	-.13–-.01	.019
$R^2 = 0.61$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.59$, $F(7, 392) = 87.4$, $p < .001$					

Table 3 presented the results of the multiple linear regression model in which the Dysfunctional Persistence Score served as the criterion variable and seven psychosocial and structural predictors were entered simultaneously. The overall model was statistically significant and demonstrated strong explanatory power, accounting for 61% of the variance in dysfunctional marital persistence ($R^2 = 0.61$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.59$, $F(7, 392) = 87.4$, $p < .001$). This effect size, by Cohen's (1988) benchmarks for R^2, was large, indicating that the selected predictors collectively provided a substantively meaningful explanation of the variability in persistence outcomes within the sample. Emotional Exhaustion emerged as the single strongest predictor of dysfunctional persistence ($\beta = .38$, SE = .04, $t = 9.21$, 95% CI [.34, .42], $p < .001$), followed by Fear of Social Stigma ($\beta = .27$, SE = .05, $t = 5.43$, $p < .001$) and Financial Dependency ($\beta = .22$, SE = .05, $t = 4.84$, $p < .001$). These three predictors together delineated a three-pronged architecture of entrapment: psychological depletion, normative coercion, and economic dependency collectively and independently predicated the likelihood and degree of dysfunctional persistence, even when the influence of all other predictors in the model was statistically controlled.

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Perceived Social Support exerted a significant and negative influence on dysfunctional persistence (β = -.19, SE = .05, t = -3.87, p < .001), confirming its protective role and indicating that individuals embedded in stronger support networks were less likely to remain in erosive marital arrangements. Marriage duration was also a significant positive predictor (β = .14, SE = .03, t = 4.20, p < .001), suggesting that the length of the marital bond independently contributed to persistence beyond the psychosocial dynamics measured, perhaps reflecting sunk-cost reasoning or habituation effects documented in prior relational psychology literature. The number of children in the household (β = .09, p = .012) and household income (β = -.07, p = .019) were both statistically significant predictors, although their effect sizes were small; income's negative coefficient confirmed that greater financial independence was associated with lower persistence in dysfunctional unions, while the children variable reinforced the role of parenthood as a structural barrier to exit. These regression findings collectively demonstrated that dysfunctional marital persistence was not a unidimensionally motivated behaviour but a structurally overdetermined outcome driven by the simultaneous operation of multiple psychosocial and economic forces—a finding that carried direct implications for the design of multi-pronged counselling and social protection interventions.

Table 4: Structural Equation Model — Fit Indices and Standardised Path Coefficients

Parameter / Path	**Criterion**	**β**	**Value/Estimate**	**Interpretation**
Panel A: Model Fit Indices				
χ^2/df	< 3.0	—	2.14	Acceptable
CFI	≥ 0.95	—	0.967	Good Fit
TLI	≥ 0.95	—	0.961	Good Fit
RMSEA	< 0.08	—	0.048	Good Fit
SRMR	< 0.08	—	0.052	Good Fit
AIC	Lower better	—	4,318.2	—
Panel B: Standardised Path Coefficients				
Path	**β**	**SE**	**t**	**p-value**
Emo. Exhaust. → MEI	.44	.05	8.80	< .001
FSS → MEI	.31	.06	5.17	< .001
Fin. Dependency → MEI	.26	.06	4.33	< .001
Soc. Support → MEI	-.22	.06	-3.67	< .001
MEI → Dysfunctional Persistence	.68	.04	17.0	< .001
Marriage Duration → Persistence	.18	.04	4.50	< .001

Table 4 presented the model fit indices and standardised path coefficients from the structural equation model tested to examine the mediating role of the Marital Erosion Index (MEI) in the relationship between psychosocial stressors and dysfunctional marital persistence. The overall model demonstrated good-to-excellent fit across all evaluated indices:

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$\chi^2/df = 2.14$ (within the acceptable < 3.0 threshold), CFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.961 (both exceeding the ≥ .95 benchmark for good fit), RMSEA = 0.048 (well below the < .08 criterion), and SRMR = 0.052, collectively confirming that the hypothesised model structure was a well-fitting representation of the underlying covariance structure in the data. These fit statistics jointly attested to the parsimony and empirical adequacy of the specified theoretical model, lending confidence that the structural pathways estimated reflected genuine population-level relationships rather than artefacts of sampling or model misspecification. Among the structural paths to the MEI, Emotional Exhaustion registered the largest standardised coefficient ($\beta = .44$, SE = .05, t = 8.80, $p < .001$), indicating that it was the dominant proximal driver of marital erosion, a finding that converged with the burnout literature's characterisation of emotional exhaustion as the core dimension of relational depletion. Fear of Social Stigma ($\beta = .31$) and Financial Dependency ($\beta = .26$) also demonstrated statistically significant positive paths to the MEI, while Perceived Social Support exerted a significant negative path ($\beta = -.22$), replicating the directional patterns observed in the regression analysis but now within a more rigorous latent variable framework that accounted for measurement error.

The path from the MEI to dysfunctional marital persistence was the strongest in the entire model ($\beta = .68$, SE = .04, t = 17.0, $p < .001$), indicating that marital erosion was a powerful proximal predictor of dysfunctional persistence and confirming its theoretical status as the central mediating mechanism. This finding was of substantial theoretical significance: it established that the effect of psychosocial stressors on dysfunctional persistence was not merely additive or direct but was substantially channelled through the erosion process, suggesting that interventions targeting the antecedents of erosion—particularly emotional exhaustion and stigma-related barriers—would have cascading downstream effects on reducing persistence in dysfunctional unions. The independent path from marriage duration to dysfunctional persistence ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$) confirmed that temporal embeddedness in the marital bond contributed to persistence over and above the erosion-mediated pathways, implying that chronicity itself—independent of the current emotional state—exerted a locking-in effect on persistence behaviour. Indirect effects computed via bootstrapped mediation analysis (1,000 bootstrap samples) confirmed significant full mediation of emotional exhaustion's effect on persistence through the MEI (indirect $\beta = .30$, 95% Boot CI [.23, .37]), with similar patterns for FSS and financial dependency, thereby empirically substantiating the theoretical proposition that marital erosion is the primary psychological bridge between structural entrapment and dysfunctional persistence. The SEM findings thus provided the most methodologically rigorous layer of evidence in this study, establishing an evidence-based theoretical architecture for understanding the marital erosion-persistence nexus in the Ugandan context.

CONCLUSION

This study provided compelling empirical evidence that dysfunctional marital persistence among adults in Kampala, Uganda, was not a freely chosen expression of commitment but a structurally compelled behavioural outcome shaped by the convergent operation of emotional exhaustion, fear of social stigma, financial dependency, and inadequate social support, all mediated through the process of marital erosion as operationalised by the newly developed Marital Erosion Index. The structural equation model demonstrated excellent empirical fit and confirmed that the MEI served as the primary psychological bridge through which psychosocial stressors translated into sustained dysfunctional persistence, with emotional exhaustion emerging as the single strongest driver of this erosion trajectory. By

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reconceptualising marital persistence not as a binary moral stance but as a psychosocially graded continuum—one that transitions, under conditions of structural entrapment and resource depletion, from constructive endurance to corrosive erosion—this study made both a theoretical and methodological contribution to the family science literature in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings challenged dominant cultural narratives that uncritically valorise marital staying, and instead called for a paradigm shift in how families, counsellors, legal systems, and policymakers interpret and respond to persistent marriage in contexts of chronic dysfunction. The Marital Erosion Index, validated in this study with strong psychometric properties, offered a promising screening tool for identifying individuals at high risk of severe marital erosion, with implications for early clinical intervention and targeted social protection programming. Ultimately, this research affirmed that addressing dysfunctional marital persistence requires not merely individual-level therapeutic solutions but structural reforms that dismantle the economic, normative, and institutional barriers that sustain it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, in collaboration with mental health practitioners, should develop and mainstream a Marital Erosion Screening Protocol—anchored in the validated MEI instrument—into existing family counselling services, health facility outreach programmes, and community development centres, enabling the early identification of individuals experiencing dysfunctional marital persistence driven by emotional exhaustion, stigma, and financial dependency, and ensuring timely referral to appropriate therapeutic and legal support services.

Government and non-governmental organisations should prioritise the design and implementation of gender-responsive economic empowerment programmes—including micro-credit access, vocational skills training, and income diversification initiatives—specifically targeting women in rural and peri-urban Kampala who are financially dependent on their spouses, thereby reducing the structural economic barriers that lock individuals into erosive marital arrangements and expanding the real-world feasibility of voluntary exit from dysfunctional unions.

Community-based social norm change campaigns, co-facilitated by religious leaders, local council officials, and peer educators, should be strategically deployed to challenge and reframe the cultural and religious narratives that stigmatise marital exit and pathologise divorce, replacing them with discourse that affirms the dignity, mental health, and safety of individuals who choose to leave chronically dysfunctional and erosive unions, thereby reducing the fear of social stigma that this study identified as a significant independent determinant of dysfunctional marital persistence.

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