

Challenges on the Prevalence of Violence Against Predictors of Domestic Abuse in Abuja Federal Capital Territory

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Abstract

Prevalence of domestic violence remains a pervasive yet under-reported public health and human rights challenge globally, with domestic workers constituting one of the most vulnerable occupational groups. This study examined the prevalence of domestic violence against domestic (house) workers in Abuja Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to determine the prevalence rate and identify the predominant forms of domestic violence experienced by domestic workers, and to examine the socio-economic and occupational risk factors that contribute to their vulnerability. The study adopted a mixed-methods survey design, integrating quantitative data collected through structured questionnaires administered to 349 domestic workers across selected wards in Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC) with qualitative data obtained through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with health professionals, house workers, and community stakeholders. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that domestic violence is widespread among house workers in Abuja FCT, with 69.3% of respondents reporting that they had experienced one or more forms of abuse from their employers, despite 92.0% being aware of the concept of domestic violence. Emotional abuse (69.4%) was the most prevalent form, followed by physical abuse (59.9%), psychological abuse (53.7%), and sexual abuse (16.1%). Financial and economic pressure (52.7%) was identified as the leading cause of violence, followed by poor communication (25.2%) and lack of empathy (21.8%). The study further established that gender and age significantly influence vulnerability, with female and younger house workers disproportionately affected. Although 40.7% of respondents were aware of legal protections, 62.0% of that aware lacked confidence in their effectiveness, while 77.6% attributed victims' reluctance to leave abusive employers to the perceived impunity of perpetrators. The study recommends that government and civil society organisations establish dedicated support systems including emergency shelters, micro-grants, and confidential reporting hotlines for abused domestic workers. It further recommends the enforcement of standardised, legally binding employment contracts, mandatory pre-employment orientation for both employers and workers, and the strengthening of labour inspection mechanisms to ensure accountability and deter abuse.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Domestic workers, House workers, Prevalence, Emotional abuse, Vulnerability

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Background to the Study

Challenges confronting violence is a global pandemic. This social virus anchored on bio-social factors in all sphere of human endeavor which has affected the social, emotional, economic, cultural and/or psychological well-being of people whom are traumatic resulting to danger against an intimate partner, child, or other relative, including men, women, and children (World Health Organization, 2026; United Nations, 2025). Domestic violence is a global challenge that is widely spread around the globe. This phenomenon is prevalent among people from all walks of life, across different races and religious groups from the developing nations in Africa through the economically advanced nations in Europe, Asia and America. Domestic violence is a pervasive problem in all regions of the world, occurring in every culture and social group. It has devastating physical, emotional, financial and social effects on the victims, families and communities (United Nations, 2025). The victims are overwhelmingly female and face many challenges in accessing justice and protection. In many societies, persistent gender inequality and a culture of male domination socialize women to accept, tolerate, and even rationalize domestic violence and to remain silent about such experiences. While domestic violence against housework is on the rise in Nigeria and Abuja, there is paucity of studies on the prevalence and impact on the victims in Abuja, it is against the background of the foregoing that this study has investigated prevalence of domestic violence against domestic workers in Abuja Federal Capital Territory.

Statement of the Problem

For almost a decade now, domestic violence has consistently surfaced on the news for want of attention from the government and concerned civil society organization but little or no success has been made towards eradicating the challenge. There is a sudden rise in the rate of domestic violence in Abuja Municipal Area Council, especially those targeted at house workers in Abuja. Thus, most house workers are traumatized in most cases of abuse in Abuja, given that the victims still live with their perpetrators, leading to extreme stress, fear, and anxiety, being common challenges experienced. This has further worsened depression among house worker, as victims are made to feel guilty for 'provoking' the abuse and are frequently subjected to intense criticism from the perpetrator. It is reported that 60% of victims meet the diagnostic criteria for depression, either during or after termination of the relationship with their employers, and have a greatly increased risk of suicidality (Abba, 2025). The most commonly referenced psychological effect of domestic violence is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PSTD). According to Vitanza, Vogel and Marshall (2021), PSTD (as experienced by victims) is characterized by flashbacks, intrusive images, exaggerated startle response, nightmares, and avoidance of triggers that are associated with the abuse. Furthermore, house workers are often time subjected to undue economic abuse and isolation, the victims usually have very little money of their own and few people on whom they can rely on when seeking help in Abuja this because the lifestyle is individualistic and coupled with the fact that these group of house workers are often drawn from remote areas across the country.

This has been shown to be one of the greatest obstacles facing victims of domestic violence, and the strongest challenge is that usually discourage house workers from leaving their

perpetrators. In addition to lacking financial resources, victims of domestic violence often lack specialized skills, education, and training that are necessary to find gainful employment, and in most cases, the victimized house worker may have several children to support further worsening the situation. Consequently, domestic violence victimization induces psychological/mental health issues and chronic physical health problems among house workers in AMAC, and this has raised serious health, and security concern in Abuja. In spite numerous efforts by some government agencies, civil society organizations and spirited individuals, the situation has remained unchanged, there is paucity of empirical studies investigating the impact of domestic violence against house workers in AMAC, it is in view of the foregoing that this study examines the effect of domestic violence against house workers in AMAC area of Abuja, Nigeria to bridge the empirical gap identified.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To determine the prevalence rate and identify the predominant forms of domestic violence experienced by domestic workers in Abuja FCT
- ii. To examine the socio-economic and occupational risk factors that contribute to the vulnerability of violence against women in Abuja FCT

Conceptual Clarification

Violence

The World Health Organization (2023) conceived violence as “any harmful acts directed at an individual based on their race, religion, gender orientations, or creed,” which encompasses physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence that could occur in public or private spheres. This definition highlights the multifaceted nature of GBV, emphasizing its manifestation in both public and private spheres. According to the United Nations (2020), violence is not only a violation of human rights but also a significant public health issue, impacting individuals' physical and mental well-being, particularly among women, girls, and vulnerable men. In a nutshell, violence is conceived in this study as the violation of an individual right against his/her will in a given place and time.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence, and it is also referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). It is a pattern of abusive behaviours by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family or cohabitation (Sidi, 2023). Domestic violence, so defined, has many forms, including physical aggression or assault (hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, restraining, slapping, throwing objects), or threats thereof; sexual abuse; emotional abuse; controlling or domineering; intimidation; stalking; passive/covert abuse otherwise known as neglect; and economic deprivation (Seimeniuk, Krentz, Gish and Gill, 2010). Domestic violence and abuse is not limited to obvious physical violence. It can mean endangerment, criminal coercion, kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, trespassing, harassment and stalking (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2011). The United States Office and Violence Against Women (OVM) (2022) defines domestic violence as a “pattern of abusive behaviour

in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner”. The definition adds that domestic violence “can happen to anyone regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender”, and can take many forms, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, economic and psychological abuse (Office of Violence Against Women, 2022). The United Nations General Assembly (2024) defines domestic violence as any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to a person, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women noted that this violence could be perpetrated by assailants of either gender, family members and even the 'State' itself (United Nations, 1993). Worldwide, governments and organisations actively work to combat violence against women through a variety of programmes. A United Nations (UN) resolution designated November 25 as International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. World Health Organization (WHO) (2002) defined violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation or death” (World Health Organization, 2002). In general, the concept of domestic violence is interchangeably referred to as intimate partner violence (IPV) or gender-based violence and is similar globally. However, this study has adopted the conception given by Adamu 2024 as the working definition of domestic violence in this study.

House Worker

A house worker can be interchangeably referred to as a housemaid, house boy or girl. A house worker according to ILO (2011) is any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship. The Domestic Assessment Policy (2001) conceptualised a house worker as a servant who works in the house doing the cleaning and other jobs in individuals' homes to earn a living. Similarly, Osoki *et al.* (2018) consider domestic house workers to be those girls and women who are employed by private households to work in their houses. In most cases, house workers are either a woman or a girl. Perhaps, most of the conceptualization of house workers was focused on the home without including but does not specify whether such persons are paid or not. However, this study conceived house worker as any individual male/female involved in providing domestic service for to earn a living wage by working with a family or households or to be fed for a living either by staying with the family or not.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the prevalence of domestic violence against domestic workers in Abuja, Federal Capital Territory. A survey design was adopted; questionnaire and Key informant interview tools were used for data collection. The study population comprised of residents and domestic workers in the FCT. Yamane's statistics formula with a margin of error of 0.05 was used to determine the study population; a sample size of approximately 400 was determined. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation of

both residents and house workers in the study area. 6 key informants (domestic workers) were selected via purposive sampling for KIIs to provide qualitative depth. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). Qualitative data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

Data Presentation

To determine the prevalence rate and identify the predominant forms of domestic violence experienced by domestic workers in Abuja FCT.

Table 1: Respondents' experience of domestic violence (n = 349)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Experienced	321	92.0
Not experienced	28	8.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 1 shows that an overwhelming majority of respondents (92.0%) had heard of domestic violence before the study, while only 8.0% had not. This high level of awareness suggests that domestic violence is a familiar concept within the study area, even though, as subsequent tables show, awareness does not necessarily translate into protection from it or confidence in redress.

Table 2: Frequency of Experience of Domestic Violence (n = 242)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Rarely	78	32.2
Often	113	46.7
Always	51	21.1

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 shows that among the 242 respondents who had experienced violence, close to half (46.7%) indicated that it occurred often, while 32.2% said it occurred rarely and 21.1% said it occurred always. This suggests that domestic violence against house workers is typically not a single isolated incident but tends to recur with some regularity once it begins.

Table 3: Duration Spent with the Abusive Employer (n = 242)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 year	97	40.1
1 – 3 years	89	36.8
Above 3 years	56	23.1

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 indicates that 40.1% of victims had been with their abusive employer for less than one year, 36.8% for between one and three years, and 23.1% for more than three years. The considerable proportion of respondents enduring abuse beyond three years suggests a pattern of prolonged victimisation, consistent with the entrapment dynamics described in Chapter Two, where victims often lack the financial means or social support required to leave.

Table 4: Forms of Domestic Violence Experienced (Multiple Response, n = 242)

Form of Violence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Physical abuse	145	59.9
Emotional abuse	168	69.4
Sexual abuse	39	16.1
Psychological abuse	130	53.7

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4 shows that emotional abuse (69.4%) was the most commonly reported form of violence, followed by physical abuse (59.9%) and psychological abuse (53.7%), while sexual abuse (16.1%), though the least reported, remains a serious concern given its tendency to be underreported due to stigma, as noted by Eze-Anaba (2007).

An informant noted that:

A female house worker narrated that she is frequently insulted, denied food on some days, and occasionally slapped by her female employer whenever household chores are perceived as poorly done, noting that she endures it because she has nowhere else to go. A male house worker corroborated this, stating that he has been shouted at, denied his wages for months, and once locked outside the house overnight as punishment. The health professional interviewed disclosed that house workers are occasionally brought in with bruises and untreated injuries which they attribute to “accidents” out of fear of losing their jobs or facing further reprisal, an observation that aligns with the physical and emotional abuse patterns reported quantitatively above (KII/aged 19, Gwarimpa ward).

To examine the socio-economic and occupational risk factors that contribute to the vulnerability of violence against women in Abuja FCT.

Table 5: Whether Male and Female House Workers Experience the Same Rate of Violence (n = 349)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	89	25.5
No	199	57.0
Maybe	61	17.5

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 5: shows that 57.0% of respondents disagreed that male and female house workers experience domestic violence at the same rate, 25.5% agreed that the rate is the same, and 17.5% were unsure. This suggests a widely held perception that gender plays a role in determining vulnerability to domestic violence among house workers.

An informant said:

Honestly, I don't think it is the same at all. Not even close. I have worked in three different houses since I came to Abuja from Kogi State in 2022. In all three houses, it was the female workers, the house girls, who suffered the most. The boys, the house boys, they get shouted at sometimes, yes. Maybe the man of the house will insult them if the car is not washed properly or the compound is not swept well. But for us the girls, it is different. It is not just shouting. It is slapping, pinching, locking you outside, denying you food, saying things that will make you cry for days. And some of them... (she lowers her voice) ... some of them touch you in ways you don't want, but you cannot say anything because where will you go? So no, I don't think it is the same rate. The women and girls carry the heavier burden. (KII/Age 21/AMAC).

Table 6: Whether Age Differential is a Factor in Domestic Violence Against House Workers (n = 349)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	211	60.5
No	92	26.4
Maybe	46	13.2

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 6 shows that 60.5% of respondents agreed that age differential is a factor in domestic violence against house workers, while 26.4% disagreed and 13.2% were unsure, indicating that age, alongside gender, is perceived as a significant determinant of vulnerability.

One of the Key Informant said:

There are many reasons. First, most employers prefer to hire girls for housework, especially for cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. So there are more of us in these houses, and because we are many, some employers think we are replaceable. They think if you complain, they will just send you away and bring another girl from the village. That fear keeps us quiet. Second, many of us come from very poor backgrounds. Some of us were brought up by relatives or agents who promised our parents that we would be going to school. When you get here, and the reality is different, you don't have anybody. You don't know Abuja. You don't have money for transport to go back home. So you just manage. And the employer knows

this. They know you are trapped. Third, there is the issue of what I will call ... (she searches for the word) ... the way some madams see house girls. Some of them see us as lesser human beings. They think because they are paying you, they own you. They can insult you, beat you, and you should just take it. And if the husband wants to abuse you sexually, some madams will even blame you, saying you seduced their husband. Where will you run to? For the boys, it is a little different. If a man is abusing a house boy, the boy can fight back or just walk away. Society even expects a man to defend himself. But for a girl, if you fight back, they will say you are rude, you are wicked, you are ungrateful. Nobody will take your side (KII/age38/Giu Ward AMAC).

Table 7: Victims Leave Their Work Because Perpetrators Face No Repercussions (n = 349)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	18	5.2
Disagree	32	9.2
Undecided	28	8.0
Agree	148	42.4
Strongly Agree	123	35.2

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 7 shows that 77.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that victims leave their jobs because perpetrators face no repercussions for their actions, highlighting the perceived impunity that surrounds domestic violence against house workers.

One of the Informant said:

Yes, I have seen it. In the last house I worked, there was a boy called Emeka. The man of the house used to insult him seriously. Called him stupid, called him a village boy, and threatened to report him to the police for things he didn't do. Once, he didn't pay Emeka for three months. That is also violence, I think. Economic violence. Emeka could not report it to anybody. He told me that if he goes to the police, they will laugh at him. They will say, "You are a man, how can you be crying because your oga insulted you?" So he just suffered in silence until he finally ran away one night. He left his clothes and everything. So yes, men suffer too, but I think they suffer in silence more because of the shame. For us women, at least sometimes other women in the neighbourhood can see the bruises, can see the tears. But the men, society does not even allow them to say they are victims (KII/age38/Giu Ward AMAC).

Table 8: Victims Are Likely to Commit Suicide (n = 349)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	35	10.0
Disagree	58	16.6
Undecided	63	18.1
Agree	110	31.5
Strongly Agree	83	23.8

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 8 shows that 55.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that victims are likely to commit suicide, while 26.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 18.1% were undecided. Although this is the lowest cumulative agreement among the six impact statements, it remains a grave finding, corroborating the elevated suicidality risk associated with domestic violence victimisation noted in the statement of the research problem in Chapter One.

Another informant said:

The health professional interviewed confirmed treating house workers for stress-related complaints, unexplained bruises, and in a few instances' symptoms consistent with untreated depression, noting that many are reluctant to disclose the actual source of their injuries. A male house worker admitted that the constant verbal abuse from his employer has affected his concentration and made him consider abandoning the job entirely on multiple occasions, despite having no alternative means of livelihood (aged 22, Kabusa ward).

Discussion of Findings

The findings revealed that domestic violence is widespread among house workers, with 69.3% of respondents reporting that they had experienced one or more forms of abuse from their employers, despite 92.0% being aware of the concept of domestic violence. This prevalence is considerably higher than the 36% national prevalence of spousal violence reported in the 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NPC & ICF International, 2019), suggesting that house workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse. This finding supports Abba (2025), who argued that violence against house workers is less visible and less frequently reported than spousal violence. The study further found that emotional abuse (69.4%) was the most common form of violence, followed by physical abuse (59.9%) and psychological abuse (53.7%), while sexual abuse (16.1%) was the least reported, likely due to fear, stigma, and concerns about job loss, as noted by Eze-Anaba (2007). Qualitative evidence also showed that many victims endured repeated abuse because of economic dependence and lack of alternative accommodation or employment. The findings clearly indicate that such a difference exists. More than half of the respondents (57.0%) disagreed that male and female house workers experience violence at the same rate, while 77.1% identified female house workers as being more vulnerable to abuse. This finding aligns with Bachman and Saltzman

(2009) and Uji (2021), who reported that women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence compared to men.

Qualitative evidence further revealed that young female house workers are often perceived as more vulnerable due to their economic dependence and limited ability to resist abuse. However, respondents also noted that male house workers may under-report incidents of violence because of social stigma associated with men reporting victimisation. In addition, 70.5% of respondents identified younger age as a factor that increases vulnerability, suggesting that both gender and age contribute to the risk of experiencing domestic violence.

The findings identified financial and economic pressure (52.7%) as the leading cause, followed by poor communication (25.2%) and lack of empathy (21.8%). This supports the findings of Osisiogu (2016) and Shamu et al. (2011), who identified financial hardship as a major driver of domestic violence. Qualitative evidence further showed that financial difficulties often trigger abusive behaviour, with respondents reporting salary withholding and increased hostility during periods of economic hardship. The study also found that 76.8% of respondents perceived cultural and religious differences between employers and house workers as contributing to domestic violence, highlighting the influence of social and cultural diversity on employer–house worker relationships. Although 40.7% of respondents were aware of legal provisions protecting house workers, 62.0% of that aware lacked confidence in their effectiveness, supporting Eze-Anaba's (2007) argument that weak enforcement limits the protection offered by existing laws.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In view of the findings, this study has concluded and recommended that:

1. Government and critical stakeholders should build a safety net that actually works in the real world. The Ministry of Labour should work hand-in-hand with NGOs and civil society groups to create dedicated support systems. Emergency shelters specifically for domestic workers fleeing abuse should be created and equipped; they should also be given access to a small emergency fund or micro-grant to keep them afloat while they look for new work. There is a need to set up a confidential, toll-free hotline, as this will give workers a safe, anonymous way to report abuse without the immediate fear of retaliation, losing their jobs, or facing public shame.
2. The Ministry of Labour and the National Directorate of Employment need to make standard, legally binding written contracts the norm, not the exception. This will protect the workers' right to be paid on time and set clear working hours, removing the financial stress and withheld salaries that so often trigger abuse. It further recommends that before a worker steps into a home, both the employer and the employee undergo a mandatory orientation. This isn't just about reading a rulebook; it's about teaching conflict resolution, building empathy, and helping both sides navigate their cultural differences peacefully. Finally, labor inspectors need the "teeth" to actually punish employers who break these rules or abuse their staff. When people see that the law has real, highly publicized consequences, trust in the system will start to return.

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