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Cogent Social Sciences

ISSN: 2331-1886 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/oass20

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To cite this article: Dorothy N. Ononokpono , Nebechukwu H. Ugwu & Clifford O. Odimegwu (2025) Household status and socio-economic determinants of divorce among married women in Nigeria: a pooled data analysis, Cogent Social Sciences, 11:1, 2536189, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2025.2536189

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2536189

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Published online: 23 Jul 2025.

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COGENT SOCIAL SCIENCES
2025, VOL. 11, NO. 1, 2536189
https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2536189

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Household status and socio-economic determinants of divorce among married women in Nigeria: a pooled data analysis

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ABSTRACT

Divorce cases among married women have increased substantially, particularly in developed countries. Despite the perceived benefits of being married, divorce among married women continues to rise in Nigeria. In this study, we aim to explore trends in divorce cases, household status, and their associated factors among married women aged 15–49 years in Nigeria. Data pooled from the 2008, 2013, and 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Surveys were used for this study. The survey was nationally representative and conducted among women nationwide. A total of 116,795 ever-married women were included in the analysis. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analysis was done to identify the household socioeconomic determinants of divorce among married women in Nigeria. *p*-value <0.05 was used to declare statistical significance. The results show a significant increase in divorce cases among married women from 17.0% in 2008 to 60.4% in 2018. About 16% of non-educated women and those in middle-income and poor households substantially experienced divorce. Only 9.4% of unemployed women from poor households and 6.9% of unemployed women from middle-income households had experienced divorce or separation. Women with experience of physical violence [aOR = 5.22, 95% CI: 4.65–5.87], who experienced sexual violence [aOR = 3.29, 95% CI: 2.85–1.80], were more likely to divorce or separate from their partners. Divorce among married women is increasing in Nigeria. Household socioeconomic factors were the key determinants of divorce cases. Addressing poverty and promoting education and employment opportunities may be important strategies for reducing divorce rates and strengthening families in Nigeria.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 July 2024
Revised 8 July 2025
Accepted 14 July 2025

KEYWORDS
Household status; socio-economic factors; divorce; married women; Nigeria

SUBJECTS
Gender Studies; Mental Health; Sociology of Education

Introduction

Globally, divorce cases have increased substantially, but are higher in developed countries than in developing countries, though becoming stable in some countries. Despite the benefits of being married, divorce rates continued to rise in sub-Saharan African countries (John & Nitsche, 2022). Within 20 years, one-third of the first marriages are thought to end in divorce, while more than 40% of marriages are dissolved within 25 years (Clark & Brauner-Otto, 2015; John & Nitsche, 2022). Literature has shown that divorce varies by age (Dagnew et al., 2020). For instance, in South Africa, which is one of the countries with the highest rate of divorce rate in the world, young women who marry between the ages of 18 and 35 are most likely to divorce (Adedini et al., 2020). In addition, among 25- to 29-year-olds, the divorce rate is more than twice as high as among people in older age groups (Adedini et al., 2020; Matemu, 2023).

Divorce has significant economic implications. Sometimes, couples pool their income together during marriage, but upon divorce, access to this income is lost (Amri et al., 2022; Gericke, 2022; Mulenga et al., 2023). Besides, the cost of living is solely borne by the resident parent (parent in custody of the children), which poses additional challenges for children. In a romantic relationship, divorce is associated

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with many economic factors such as unemployment, family monthly income, monthly expenditure, financial management, and sustainability (Gericke, 2022). For instance, Gericke found that inadequate sustainable income could cause tension in a romantic relationship and, consequently, divorce. In particular, the private costs of marital dissolution largely affect the psychological, social, economic, emotional, and physical health and well-being of millions of children, young people, and adults (Adedini et al., 2020; Effiong, 2020; Mubita, 2021).

In a study of divorcing parents, Clyde et al. (2020) discovered that growing apart, poor communication, and the way one partner handled money were the three main causes of divorce. Additionally, Turner et al. (2023) observed that the most often mentioned reasons for divorce, when asked open-ended questions about their reasons for divorcing, were adultery, incompatibility, and drinking or drug usage. According to a statewide poll conducted in Oklahoma, infidelity or extramarital affairs, excessive conflict or bickering, and a lack of commitment were the most often selected reasons for divorce (Scott et al., 2013). Getting married too young, having communication issues, being incompatible, abusing one's spouse, abusing drugs or alcohol, having different religious beliefs, not getting along, being unloved, being uncommitted, and being childless are some other reasons for divorce (Gharaibeh & Al Ali, 2022; Hawkins et al., 2012; Kirimi, 2019; Lowenstein, 2005) indicated that the husband's inability to meet sufficiently and adequately the financial and material needs of the family is associated with the partner's intention to divorce. In contrast, the findings of a study by Jan and Hyder (2018) showed that divorce cases were not related to the economic factors of the household.

Furthermore, a study in Nigeria found that higher levels of education and income were associated with lower rates of divorce (Ononokpono et al., 2022). Another study in Kaduna State found that factors such as low income and unemployment were associated with higher rates of divorce in Nigeria (Nmadu et al., 2022). The study surveyed couples and specifically found that financial stress and economic instability were major contributors to marital problems and divorce.

Notably, most studies on divorce and socioeconomic status have shown inconsistent results. Considering these inconsistencies in the findings on the relationship between divorce and household socioeconomic status, and the cultural differences that characterize marriage and divorce in Nigeria, further study is imperative. Understanding the current trend in the increased rate of divorce in Nigeria and the determinant factors is critical to possible interventions. To the best of our knowledge, there is limited research on the relationship between household socioeconomic status and divorce rate in Nigeria using pooled nationally representative data. Furthermore, some of the studies on divorce in Nigeria focused mainly on marital status, household size, poverty, and are limited in geographic scope (Anyanwu, 2014; Olaniyi, 2015; Olasehinde et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, the present study therefore examines household socio-economic status and divorce among married women in Nigeria with a focus on household wealth, education, and employment status.

Methods and data

Data source and sample

The study utilized the 2008–2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS) of three points of analysis conducted across Nigeria (Commission, N. P., 2019). The surveys were the fourth to sixth rounds of worldwide Measure Demographic and Health surveys which was carried out to ascertain the opinion of women and men both must be aged 15–49 or 15–59 years carried out across the entire locations in Nigeria. These surveys are nationally representative data that monitor the characteristics and health status of the population in developing countries. The survey samples for this study were drawn from the individual survey years as follows 25,363 from the 2008 survey year: 29,128 from the 2013 survey year and 62,304 from the 2018 survey year in Nigeria. The three surveys collected rich information about women's health, including information on those married, divorced, or separated from their male spousal partner. The women were asked to give substantive information about their marital status and the socioeconomic background of their household, which made the survey unique for this study. The Nigeria Demographic and Health surveys utilized certain methods and procedures in data collection for the three-point surveys can be found in the final reports (Commission, N. P., 2019). For this study, all the

women who were not selected for the questions on the marital status module and those who reported not being single or in any union were excluded from the analysis. The three datasets combined gave a total of 116,795 married and cohabiting childbearing women from nationally representative samples of 25,363 from 2008 NDHS; 29,128 from 2013; and 62,304 from 2018 NDHS (Imo et al., 2022).

Measurement of the study variables

Outcome variable – marital status

The outcome variable is marital status. There is a direct question on marital status (current union status) in DHS. Therefore, we used the variable on current union status (never married, currently married, living with partner, widowed, divorced, and separated) and the variable that measures several unions. In this study, we only included women who were married and later divorced or separated from their partners in our sample. A binary variable was created where women who had divorced or separated from their partner were coded '1' (experienced divorced or separated). Again, women who had not experienced divorce or separation were coded '0'. However, adopting this measure of divorce or separation may result in an underestimation of the divorce or separation rate among women in Nigeria.

Independent variables

Explanatory variables

Educational attainment, household wealth, and work status.

The explanatory variables comprised the three measures of household socio-economic status, derived from asking all the divorced or separated women if they are educated and reside in poor/middle/rich households, or work and reside in poor/middle/rich households. A 'yes' response to any of the questions constitutes evidence of divorce or separation in marriage based on the measures listed in Table 1.

Based on existing studies, we have identified some significant demographic and socio-economic predictors of divorce or separation in marriage. The co-variables included in the analysis were educational attainment, place of residence, region of residence, and the number of children. We also considered the use of the Internet and the type of cooking fuel. This is because research has found these variables to be a determinant of divorce or separation in marriage (Desalu et al., 2012). Other variables controlled for in this context are whether a woman experienced severe physical violence, as well as whether a woman experienced severe sexual violence. The documented significant association with marital status in the literature and its availability in the dataset guided the selection of all the variables. See Table 1.

Statistical analysis

Using Stata software (version 17.0), the datasets in this study were thoroughly examined for missing values prior to analysis. The missing values found were removed, and these were data that were Missing at Random (MAR), i.e. within groups defined by observed data in the dataset. The samples were then weighted in accordance with the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) sampling scheme. There were three levels of analysis used: univariate, bivariate, and multivariate. The percentage distribution of the sample characteristics and the degree of divorce or separation from 2008 to 2018 were found at the first level of analysis, which is descriptive.

Using the Pearson chi-square, unadjusted binary logistic regression analyses were adopted at the bivariate level to investigate the independent effects of each explanatory variable with the outcome variable. In order to calculate the adjusted odds ratio (aOR) of the relationship between divorce or separation and the explanatory variables at the multilevel, binary logistic regression models were employed. An explanatory variable with an OR larger than 1.00 suggested an increased risk of the outcome (divorce or separation), whereas it is the opposite when the OR is less than 1.00. The results were expressed as OR with 95% confidence intervals (CI) (Nmadu et al., 2022).

Ethical clearance

To obtain data for this study, a simple request was made on the DHS programme website on March 24, 2024, and approval was granted to download the data the next day. Therefore, there were no ethical

Table 1. The variables definition.

Variable type	Variable	Description
Outcome variables	Marital status	Categorized as "Divorced" and "Not divorced"
Key explanatory variable (women's socio-economic status)	i. Educated women residing in poor/middle/rich households.	i. This variable was generated by combining the education attainments and household wealth status of the respondents. This was categorized as "educated and poor" "educated and middle" and "educated and rich" if an educated woman resides in a poor/middle/rich household. The possible response was "Yes or No".
	ii. non-educated women residing in poor/middle/rich households.	ii. This variable was generated by combining the education attainments and wealth status of the respondents. This was categorized as "non-educated and poor" "non-educated and middle" and "non-educated and rich" if a non-educated woman resides in a poor/middle/rich household. The possible response was "Yes or No".
	iii. Employed women residing in a poor/middle/rich household.	iii. This variable was generated by combining the employment status and wealth status of the respondents. This was categorized as "employed and poor" "employed and middle" and "employed and rich" if an employed woman resides in a poor/middle/rich household. The possible response was "Yes or No".
	iv. Non-employed women residing in a poor/middle/rich household.	iv. This variable was generated by combining the employment and wealth status of the respondents. This was categorized as "unemployed and poor" "unemployed and middle" and "unemployed and rich" if the unemployed woman resides in a poor/middle/rich household. The possible response was "Yes or No".
	v. Educational attainment	v. This variable was categorized as educated or not educated.
Co-variables	Place of residence	Categorized as rural or urban residence
	Region of residence	Categorized as Southeast, South-south, Southwest, Northeast, Northwest, and North Central.
	Number of children	Categorized as no child, <5 children and >5 children.
	Use of Internet	Categorized as yes or no
	Type of cooking fuel	Categorized as electric/gas, wood, and others.
	Experience any severe physical violence	Categorized as yes or no
	Experience any severe sexual violence	Categorized as yes or no

issues of concern for this study. The data analysed in this study are available in the public domain at https://dhsprogram.com/. The data used did not contain any identifying information. As a result, all data-gathering techniques were carried out in compliance with all applicable ethical standards and laws. All individuals who were enrolled in the DHS and older than 18 years old were guaranteed to give their informed permission during enumeration, utilizing the DHS guidelines. Furthermore, prior to asking the legal minors for their consent, the parents or guardians of every participant between the ages of 15 and 17 provided informed consent.

Results

Table 2 provides the distribution of the study samples of women (15–49) years who were married in Nigeria. For the place of residence, a greater majority reside in the rural area (65.5%) whereas, 34.5% reside in the urban area. The majority of the women are Muslims: 55.2% and 43.6% Christians and other religious practices were only 1.2%. There are more women in the Southwest compared with other regions. A higher percentage of the women had less <5 children. Overall, the married women who are educated and not residing in poor households are more than those educated married women in rich households. As high as 92.4% of married women residing in poor households are not educated, whereas those who are in rich households and are not educated have the highest proportion (95.5%). Meanwhile, married women who are employed were 4.5% poor and 27.8% rich. Among women not employed, some more married women were not employed in poor households compared to the women not employed in rich households. See Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of women (15–49) years who were married by selected background characteristics, SES, 2008–2018.

Background characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Place of residence		
Urban	39,652	34.5
Rural	75,288	65.5
Religion		
Christians	50,110	43.6
Muslims	63,482	55.2
Others	1,352	1.2
Region		
North Central	20,262	17.6
North East	22,689	19.7
North West	31,955	27.8
South East	11,815	10.3
South South	13,048	11.4
South West	15,175	13.2
Number of children		
No child	6,918	6.0
<5 children	85,443	74.1
>5 children	22,866	19.8
Educated/poor		
No	100,153	86.5
Yes	13,153	13.5
Educated/rich		
No	79,207	68.9
Yes	35,737	31.1
Not educated/poor		
No	101,791	92.4
Yes	13,153	7.6
Not educated/rich		
No	109,756	95.5
Yes	5,188	4.5
Employed/poor		
No	85,292	95.5
Yes	5,188	4.5
Employed/rich		
No	82,966	72.2
Yes	31,998	27.8
Not employed/poor		
No	95,763	83.3
Yes	19,181	16.7
Not employed/rich		
No	106,017	92.2
Yes	8,927	7.8
Total	**116,795**	**100**

Trends in marital status of women (15–49) years in Nigeria (2008–2018)

Figure 1 presents the trends in marital status of married women divorced or separated from their partner in Nigeria. The study shows there is an increase in the percentage of women who divorced or separated from their partner from 17.0% as captured in 2008 DHS to 60.4% in 2018 (Figure 1).

Table 3 shows the percentage of women who divorced by background characteristics. Bivariate analysis reveals that all the background characteristics factors were associated with divorce among women in Nigeria ($p < 0.001$). Women residing in urban areas had the highest percentage of those who divorced their partner, and those in rural areas had the lowest divorce rate. Findings also showed that there was a relationship between religion, number of children, and region of residence with divorce rate among women in Nigeria. Women with no children had a higher chance of being divorced compared with those who have five children and above. Also, women in the south south region of the country had the highest percentage of those who divorced their partner, and those in the north west region had the lowest divorce proportion. Results also reveal that there was a significant relationship between physical violence and sexual violence, with divorce among women in the country. For instance, 9.7% of the women indicated they divorced their husbands due to physical violence, while 7.2% revealed sexual violence as the reason why they divorced their husbands. Internet use and types of cooking fuel also contribute to an increase in divorce among married women in Nigeria. (See Table 3).

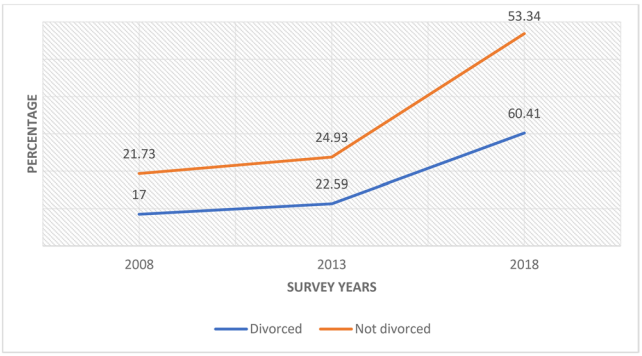


Figure 1. Trends in marital status of women (15–49) years in Nigeria (2008–2018).

Table 3. Demographic, and other determinants of divorce among women in Nigeria.

Background characteristics	Not experienced divorce/separation in marriage (*N*/%)	Experienced divorce/separation in marriage (*N*/%)	*p*-value
Place of residence			<0.000
Urban	37,993 (34.1)	1,663 (45.0)	
Rural	73,262 (65.8)	2,025 (54.9)	
Religion			<0.000
Christian	47,887 (43.0)	2,223 (60.3)	
Muslims	62,059 (55.8)	1,422 (38.6)	
Others	1,309 (1.2)	43 (1.2)	
Number of children			<0.000
No child	6,419 (5.8)	470 (12.7)	
<5 children	82,282 (74.0)	2,957 (80.2)	
>5 children	22,554 (20.3)	261 (7.8)	
Region			<0.000
North Central	19,689 (17.7)	573 (15.5)	
North East	21,971 (19.7)	718 (19.5)	
North West	31,295 (28.1)	659 (17.9)	
South East	11,415 (10.3)	400 (10.8)	
South South	12,261 (11.0)	787 (21.3)	
South West	14,624 (13.4)	551 (14.9)	
Experience physical violence			<0.000
No	53,008 (98.0)	1,090 (2.0)	
Yes	3,786 (90.3)	406 (9.7)	
Experience sexual violence			<0.000
No	53,742 (97.7)	1,260 (2.3)	
Yes	3,056 (92.8)	236 (7.2)	
Internet use			<0.000
Yes	5,962 (94.5)	344 (5.5)	
No	53,380 (96.6)	1,884 (3.4)	
Type of cooking fuel			<0.000
Elect/gas	20,619 (95.9)	875 (4.1)	
Wood	88,773 (97.0)	2,780 (3.0)	
Others	1,863 (98.3)	33 (1.7)	

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; ns = non-significant.

Table 4 shows the percentage of women who divorced by socioeconomic factors. Bivariate analysis reveals that some of the socioeconomic factors were associated with divorce or separation among married women in Nigeria ($p < 0.001$). The highest proportion (88.4%) of educated poor-income women did not experience any divorce from their husbands. Approximately, 21% of middle-income women and 36.4% of educated, rich-income women had experienced divorce or separation from their husbands. About 16% of non-educated low-income women and 6.7% of non-educated middle-income women experience divorce or separation from their husbands, although not associated with divorce. However, only 4.1% of non-educated, rich-income women experience any divorce from their partner. Women who are employed and poor were 22.4%. respondents within the rich income category and employed had the highest proportion (33.3%), and those in the middle had the lowest (20.8%), respectively. More so, it was observed that only 9.4% of unemployed poor women and 6.9% of unemployed middle-income women had experienced any divorce or separation from their husbands. Only 7.2% of the rich category of unemployed married women experience any divorce or separation from their husbands (see Table 4).

Table 4. Household status and socioeconomic determinants of divorce among married women (2008–2018).

Background characteristics	Not experienced divorce or separation in marriage (N/%)	Experienced divorce/separation in marriage (N/%)	*p*-value
Educated poor-income women			<0.000
No	98,673 (88.4)	3,442 (3.2)	
Yes	12,582 (11.6)	571 (4.3)	
Educated middle-income women			<0.000
No	97,937 (88.0)	2,913 (79.0))	
Yes	13,318 (12.0)	775 (21.0))	
Educated rich-income women			<0.000
No	76,859 (69.0)	2,347 (63.4)	
Yes	34,396 (30.9)	1,341 (36.4)	
Non educated poor-income women			<0.000
No	74,180 (66.7)	3,084 (83.6)	
Yes	37,075 (33.3)	604 (16.4)	
Non-educated middle-income women			<0.005
No	102,408 (92.0)	3,442 (93.0)	
Yes	8,847 (8.0)	246 (6.7)	
Non-educated rich women			0.213
No	106,218 (95.5)	3,537 (95.9)	
Yes	5,037 (4.5)	151 (4.1)	
Employed poor women			<0.000
No	80,432 (72.3)	2,860 (77.6)	
Yes	30,823 (27.7)	828 (22.4)	
Employed middle-income women			<0.000
No	95,101 (85.5)	2,920 (79.2)	
Yes	16,154 (14.5)	1,227 (20.8)	
Employed rich women			<0.000
No	80,484 (72.3)	2,461 (66.7)	
Yes	30,771 (27.7)	1,227 (33.3)	
Unemployed poor women			<0.000
No	92,421 (83.0)	3,341 (90.6)	
Yes	18,834 (16.9)	347 (9.4)	
Unemployed middle-income women			<0.000
No	105,244 (94.6)	3,435 (93.1)	
Yes	6,011 (5.4)	253 (6.9)	
Unemployed rich women			0.180
No	102,593 (92.2)	3,423 (92.8)	
Yes	8,662 (7.8)	265 (7.2)	

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; ns: non-significant.

In Table 5, the study found significant associations between background and household socioeconomic factors of experiencing divorce or separation from a partner. Specifically, married women in rural areas (aOR = 0.63, 95% CI = 0.59–0.67) and Muslims religion (aOR = 0.49, 95% CI = 0.46–0.53) had lower odds of experiencing divorce or separation in marriage compared to other married women in the religion group. Further, results show that married women who are educated but from poor households (aOR = 0.45, 95% CI = 0.41–0.49) are less likely to experience divorce in marriage. However, women educated in middle-income households (aOR = 1.96, 95% CI = 1.18–2.12) and women educated in rich households (aOR = 1.28, 95% CI = 1.19–1.37) had higher odds of experiencing divorce in marriage. In addition, findings show that women who are not educated in poor-income households (aOR = 0.33, 95% CI = 0.03–0.90) or middle-income (aOR = 0.82, 95% CI = 0.73–0.94) and (aOR = 0.90, 95% CI = 0.76–1.06) had reduced odds of experiencing divorce or separated in marriage. Similarly, married women employed and residing in a middle-income household (aOR = 1.55, 95% CI = 1.43–1.68) and rich-income households (aOR = 1.30, 95% CI = 1.22–1.40) had increased odds of experiencing divorce in marriage. Furthermore, only women not employed and residing in middle-income households (aOR = 1.29, 95% CI = 1.13–1.14) were equally more likely to experience divorce in marriage compared to other groups.

Regarding the influence of the living children on the experience of divorce among married women, the findings indicate that ever-married women who had <5 (aOR = 0.49, 95% CI = 0.44–0.54) and 5+ (aOR = 0.16, 95% CI = 0.13–0.18) were less likely to experience divorce compared to women with no child. Region of residence was found to be associated with divorce. For instance, women residing in all other regions of the country had increased odds of experiencing divorce in marriage, except women in the north west region (aOR = 0.72, 95% CI = 0.65–0.81). Women in the south-south region of the country (aOR = 2.20, 95% CI = 1.98–2.46) were two times more likely to experience divorce in marriage than women in any other region. Additionally, women experiencing physical violence (aOR = 5.22, 95% = 4.63–5.87) and sexual

violence (aOR = 3.29, 95% = 2.85–3.80) were more likely to experience divorce or separation in marriage compared to women who had experienced physical or sexual violence from their partner. Conversely, women with the use of Internet (aOR = 0.61, 95% CI = 0.54–0.69) and wood as a cooking fuel (aOR = 0.74, 95% CI = 0.68–0.80) were less likely to experience divorce in marriage (Table 5).

Discussion

This study examines household socio-economic status and divorce among married women in Nigeria with a focus on household wealth, education, and employment status. The study has established increasing trends in divorce among women of reproductive age 15–49 years across the three survey years with the highest proportion of divorce. The results showed that the proportion of married divorced or separated women over the study period increased consistently but sharply in the whole of Nigeria over the three-survey period. The observed increase in the proportion of married divorced or separated women could, to some extent, be explained by the household wealth status.

The findings further showed a significant association between household socioeconomic status and women's experience of divorce or separation with a partner. For instance, the odds of educated women in middle-income and rich households experiencing divorce or separation were higher compared to those who were uneducated and living in poor households. Similarly, married women who were employed and residing in middle-income and rich households had increased odds of experiencing divorce in marriage unlike employed women in poor households. Suggesting that being uneducated, unemployed, and resident in poor, middle-class income and rich households is protective against divorce or separation with a partner. This finding contrasts a study by Adedini et al. (2020), which established that education and living in rich households contributed to marital stability in East and Southern Africa. Evidence from previous studies indicated that an educated and employed woman has a higher likelihood of initiating a divorce than an unemployed woman (Odimegwu et al., 2018; Takyi & Broughton, 2006). Further, this finding may be attributed to the economic benefits associated with marriage and the desire to alleviate poverty and reduce hardships which in turn constrain women to remain in marriage (Ononokpono et al., 2022).

Furthermore, urban-rural residence, number of children, religion region of residence, experience of physical and sexual violence, and use of Internet and wood as a cooking fuel were associated with divorce among married women, aligning with another study (Odimegwu et al., 2017). Living in a rural area reduced the odds of divorce and separation. The plausible explanation could be that women who live in rural areas are often less educated and of lower socio-economic status. Thus, being less educated and or of poorer socioeconomic status erodes any urban advantage, making them less vulnerable to divorce. The lower likelihood of divorce among women with children found in this study is consistent with a study by Adedini et al. (2020). This result could suggest the value placed on children in some cultural contexts and also that motherhood is protective against divorce. 'Nulliparous women' in Nigeria are stigmatized and at higher risks of divorce (Alves et al., 2023). The decreased odds of divorce or separation among Muslim women compared to Christians is in tandem with a study (Adegoke & Danbagai, 2024). This finding could perhaps be attributed to the Muslim practice of '*khul*', (divorce for compensation), whereby a wife returns her dowery or pays some other sum to her husband to obtain a divorce (Qadri, 2017). Further, following the Quran's provision for spouses to reconcile their differences, through negotiated settlements or the use of arbitrators from their families, divorce becomes the last resort.

Interestingly, the findings indicated that women residing in all other regions of the country had increased odds of experiencing divorce in marriage except women in the north west. Northwest has a predominantly Muslim population and strict Islamic religious practices which allows women to only obtain divorce for cause. However, women in the south-south region of the country were two times more likely to experience divorce and separation in marriage than women in other regions. This result corroborates another study in Nigeria (Ntoimo et al., 2016); and the plausible explanation for this result, may be cultural differences and perhaps lower cost of marriage in terms of dowry in the south-south compared to other regions. A study in Malawi noted that divorce rates are higher in places where dowry or bride wealth is low (Molotsky, 2019). On the other hand, it may be because of increased employment opportunities and empowerment for women in the oil-rich region. Being empowered also means that these women can make their own decisions regarding divorce and separation from their partner (Clark et al., 2022).

Table 5. Multivariate logistic regression analysis examining household status, and socioeconomic determinants of divorce amongst married women, NDHS 2008–2018, Nigeria.

Background characteristics	Experienced divorce/separation in marriage		
	Adjusted odds ratio (AOR)	*p*-value	99% CI
Place of residence			
Urban	1		
rural	0.63	0.000	(0.59–0.67)
Religion			
Christians	1		
Muslims	0.49	0.000	(0.46–0.53)
Others	0.70	0.025	(0.52–0.96)
Educated poor women			
No	1		
Yes	0.45	0.000	(0.41–0.49)
Educated middle-income women			
No	1		
Yes	1.96	0.000	(1.80–2.12)
Educated rich women			
No	1		
Yes	1.28	0.000	(1.19–1.37)
Not educated poor-income women			
No	1		
Yes	0.33	0.000	(0.03–0.03)
Not-educated middle-income women			
No	1		
Yes	0.82	0.008	(0.73–0.94)
Not-educated rich women			
No	1		
Yes	0.90	0.196	(0.76–1.06)
Employed poor women			
No	1		
Yes	0.75	0.000	(0.69–0.82)
Employed middle-income women			
No	1		
Yes	1.55	0.000	(1.43–1.68)
Employed rich women			
No	1		
Yes	1.30	0.000	(1.22–1.40)
Not employed poor women			
No	1		
Yes	0.50	0.000	(0.45–0.57)
Not employed middle-income women			
No	1		
Yes	1.29	0.000	(1.13–1.47)
Not employed rich women			
No	1		
Yes	0.92	0.178	(0.80–1.04)
Living children			
No child	1		
<5 children	0.49	0.000	(0.44–0.54)
>5 children	0.16	0.000	(0.13–0.18)
Region			
North Central	1		
North East	1.12	0.046	(1.32–1.26)
North West	0.72	0.000	(0.65–0.81)
South East	1.20	0.004	(1.06–1.37)
South South	2.20	0.000	(1.98–2.46)
South West	1.29	0.000	(1.15–1.45)
Experienced any physical violence			
No	1		
Yes	5.22	0.000	(4.63–5.87)
Experienced any sexual violence			
No	1		
Yes	3.29	0.000	(2.85–3.80)
Internet use			
Yes	1		
No	0.61	0.000	(0.54–0.69)
Type of cooking fuel			
Elect/gas	1		
Wood	0.74	0.000	(0.68–0.80)
Others	0.42	0.000	(0.29–0.59)

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

The increased likelihood of divorce among women who experienced physical and sexual abuse from their partner is expected. In Nigeria, domestic violence is a criminal offense under the legal system and has been domesticated by various states of the country. Besides, the Matrimonial Causes Act (MCA) LFN 1990 and Matrimonial Causes Rules which are the major laws guiding the divorce process in Nigeria permit marriage dissolution under stipulated grounds. For instance, under the Matrimonial Act, divorce is allowed if a partner has behaved in such a manner (which could include domestic violence) that the spouse can no longer reasonably be expected to live with such a partner (Oluwayemisi & Chindah, 2024). Regarding the result of the use Internet and wood for cooking, the low odds of divorce may be attributed to a lack of awareness on the issues of divorce and low socio-economic status respectively (Adeyemi & Adereleye, 2016; Liu et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2019).

Limitations of the study

This study uses pooled data from nationally representative surveys, and results can be generalized, and compared with other studies across countries. However, there are some notable limitations. The use of cross-sectional data cannot establish the cause and effects of variables. Further, the assets-based wealth index used in the DHS and the measure of socioeconomic status used in this study are only a proxy indicator of household economic status. They may not produce results similar to those obtained from direct measures of income. These limitations notwithstanding, the study findings represent a further step toward an improved understanding of the contribution of socio-economic status in divorce.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study indicated increasing trends in divorce among married women in Nigeria. Socio-economic status such as education, wealth, and employment were key determinants. Other factors contributing to divorce or separation from a partner include place and region of residence, religion, number of children, use of the Internet, and cooking fuel. Further studies are required using qualitative data collection methods such as in-depth interviews, focused discussions, etc. The results of this study suggest the importance of addressing the needs of women who are prone to divorce, particularly by addressing poverty and promoting education and employment opportunities may be important strategies for reducing divorce rates and strengthening families in Nigeria.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the National Population Commission (NPC), and National Health Research Ethical Committee (NHREC) for making Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) datasets publicly available that made this study possible.

Authors contributions

CRediT: **Dorothy N. Ononokpono**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Nebechukwu H. Ugwu**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing; **Clifford O. Odimegwu**: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

We received no funding for this research.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [Ugwu, N.H], upon reasonable request. The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are also, available in the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (2008, 2013, and 2018) repository, freely available at https://dhsprogram.com/data/available-datasets.cfm.

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