

## Pastoral Counselling as a Framework for Enhancing Women's Quality of Life in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Women play indispensable roles in family life, community development, and nation-building, yet their quality of life in Nigeria remains undermined by persistent challenges. Poverty, cultural restrictions, reproductive health burdens, limited access to education, and gender-based violence continue to affect women's well-being across physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. Because of the centrality of women to sustainable development, improving their quality of life requires holistic and contextually grounded interventions. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore pastoral counselling as a framework for enhancing women's quality of life in Nigeria. Unlike empirical studies, the paper adopts a conceptual research design, synthesising literature from psychology, theology, and counselling, alongside studies on women's wellness in Nigeria. The analysis involved clarifying the quality of life and pastoral counselling constructs, reviewing empirical findings on the barriers to women's wellness, and integrating insights to propose a holistic framework. Findings from the conceptual review highlight that socio-economic hardship, gender inequality, cultural norms, reproductive health issues, and psychological stressors shape women's quality of life. Pastoral counselling addresses these challenges through four domains of intervention: psychoeducation and empowerment, vocational and economic support, spiritual resilience, and psychotherapeutic care. By integrating psychological methods with spiritual resources, pastoral counselling emerges as a culturally sensitive and multidimensional approach to women's wellness. The result is that pastoral counselling should be recognised as more than a religious activity; it is a viable framework for policy, practice, and collaboration among counsellors, NGOs, faith communities, and government. Its conceptual contribution lies in reframing counselling as a holistic pathway for improving women's quality of life and advancing sustainable development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Pastoral Counselling, Quality of Life, Women's Wellness, Holistic Intervention



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## INTRODUCTION

The role of women in advancing society cannot be overstated. In Nigeria, where communal living, extended family systems, and cultural traditions shape everyday life, women are central in nurturing, caregiving, and sustaining the well-being of households and communities. Women contribute significantly to nation-building from early adulthood as mothers, professionals, entrepreneurs, politicians, and religious leaders (Shairgojri, 2022). Their influence cuts across social, economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, thereby making their quality of life a matter of private and public concern. Indeed, research indicates that including women in socio-economic development processes yields substantial dividends for growth and sustainable development (Bukar, 2020). Despite their indispensable roles, Nigerian women continue to face deep-rooted challenges that limit their opportunities for flourishing (Akanle et al., 2018; Obi et al., 2025). Patriarchal structures, cultural restrictions, and systemic inequalities create an environment where women are often marginalised in decision-

making and denied equal access to education, healthcare, and political participation. Common issues include early marriage, unemployment and underemployment, poverty, reproductive health difficulties, widowhood, single parenthood, domestic and gender-based violence, and discrimination in politics and governance (George & Onyekachi, 2013; Kundu et al., 2022). These challenges often translate into psychological distress, trauma, and diminished well-being, undermining women's ability to achieve self-actualisation and holistic life satisfaction. In many cases, women internalise these struggles, leading to long-term emotional, social, and even spiritual consequences.

Quality of life (QoL) is central to understanding women's wellness in this context. Quality of life is not limited to material conditions or physical health; it is a multidimensional construct encompassing psychological well-being, social relationships, spirituality, cultural values, and individual aspirations (Aliyu et al., 2025; Aderoju, 2025). For women in Nigeria, quality of life is shaped not only by economic and health-related factors but also by cultural

expectations, family dynamics, and religious worldviews (Imbur, 2024). Societal pressures—such as ageism, gender biases, and restrictive norms regarding women's roles—often constrain personal freedom and self-expression, thereby reducing life satisfaction. Conversely, access to supportive relationships, economic empowerment, and spiritual resources can enhance resilience and overall wellness. Given these complexities, exploring frameworks beyond medical and socio-economic interventions is necessary. One promising avenue is pastoral counselling, which integrates psychological principles with spirituality and theological insights. Pastoral counselling is rooted in the understanding that human wellness involves both the mind and the spirit, and that many individuals, particularly in highly religious contexts like Nigeria, seek meaning, strength, and comfort through faith. Scholars have observed that spirituality and religiosity can foster resilience, provide coping strategies in times of crisis, and contribute to enhanced well-being (Chukwudebelu, 2024; Onyemaechi et al., 2025). Pastoral counselling offers a unique approach by simultaneously addressing women's emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs, making it especially relevant in the Nigerian setting where faith plays a dominant role in everyday life.

This paper adopts a conceptual orientation to examine how pastoral counselling can serve as a framework for enhancing women's quality of life in Nigeria. Unlike empirical studies that rely on data collection and statistical testing, this paper synthesises theoretical perspectives, existing research, and contextual realities to provide insights into women's wellness challenges and the potential contributions of pastoral counselling. Specifically, the paper (1) reviews factors that impede quality of life among women, (2) explores pastoral counselling as a holistic intervention framework, and (3) outlines possible directions for practice and policy. By so doing, it positions pastoral counselling as a spiritual and psychological resource and a tool for fostering sustainable personal, familial, and societal development.

#### Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Framework

Quality of Life (QoL) is a broad and multidimensional construct that goes beyond the absence of disease to encompass physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and alignment with cultural and personal values (Pizzi & Amir, 2024). Vanleerberghe et al. (2017) define it as an individual's perception of their position in life within the context of cultural and value systems concerning their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. This definition underscores the subjective nature of QoL, as it reflects how individuals evaluate their own lives rather than relying solely on external indicators. Scholars have argued that QoL is shaped by both objective conditions, such as income, health status, and access to education, and subjective experiences, such as life satisfaction, meaning, and emotional well-being (Møller et al., 2021; Olapegba, 2020; Okoroafor et al., 2025). For women in Nigeria, these dimensions are particularly interconnected. Economic constraints, cultural expectations,

gender biases, and family responsibilities often influence how women perceive their quality of life. Furthermore, psychosocial factors such as body image, social support, reproductive health, and experiences of marginalisation contribute significantly to variations in women's QoL (Mbada et al., 2020; Chinweuba et al., 2018).

Thus, QoL should not be viewed in purely medical or economic terms but as a holistic construct that incorporates psychological and social functioning, spiritual orientation, and cultural realities. This perspective creates room for interventions—such as pastoral counselling—that address external needs and enhance inner resilience and existential satisfaction.

Pastoral counselling is a form of counselling that integrates psychological theories and practices with spiritual and theological insights to provide holistic care for individuals. Unlike traditional counselling, which may focus primarily on cognitive and behavioural interventions, pastoral counselling acknowledges the role of faith, values, and spirituality in human flourishing. Gardner (2017) noted that many clients prefer counselling approaches that recognise their spiritual beliefs, especially in contexts where religion dominates daily life. Kao et al. (2020) further emphasised that spirituality and religiosity are positively associated with resilience, emotional health, and social support. Pastoral counselling, therefore, harnesses these dimensions by combining professional counselling skills with spiritual guidance. According to Pedhu (2020), its primary aim is the convergence of theology and psychology to promote personal growth, healing, and well-being. Drawing on sacred texts, religious traditions, and psychological methods, pastoral counsellors help individuals make meaning out of suffering, strengthen their coping mechanisms, and restore balance in their lives.

The strength of pastoral counselling lies in its holistic perspective. Counted et al. (2018) observed that the approach enhances relational and spiritual dimensions of life by fostering trust, transcendence, and connectedness with oneself, others, and God. This makes it especially effective in addressing not only psychological issues such as trauma, depression, or anxiety but also spiritual struggles and existential crises that are often overlooked in mainstream counselling.

The Nigerian context provides a compelling rationale for adopting pastoral counselling as a framework for women's quality of life. Nigeria is a deeply religious country, with Christianity and Islam being dominant, and indigenous belief systems still influential. Religion permeates daily life, shaping identity, values, family structures, and social expectations. Women, in particular, often rely on faith-based practices such as prayer, religious gatherings, and spiritual mentorship as coping strategies during crises. Obi (2021) noted that pastoral care has effectively fostered social and mental wellness among Nigerian youth, with female youth especially receptive to such interventions. In a society where women are disproportionately affected by poverty, marginalisation, and

gender-based violence, pastoral counselling provides an avenue for addressing both external challenges and internal struggles. Its dual focus on psychological adjustment and spiritual resilience makes it contextually appropriate for Nigerian women who often interpret life experiences through spiritual lenses. Furthermore, pastoral counselling can bridge the gap between professional psychological support—which remains underutilised due to stigma or limited availability—and the widespread reliance on religious and community structures for emotional support.

By situating pastoral counselling within Nigeria's cultural and religious fabric, this framework highlights its potential as a transformative tool for enhancing women's quality of life. It is not merely an adjunct to psychology but a culturally grounded, holistic approach that addresses the full spectrum of women's physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs.

## METHOD

This study adopts a conceptual research design, relying on synthesizing existing literature rather than collecting empirical data. Conceptual papers are valuable in fields where theoretical clarification and framework development are needed, as they integrate diverse perspectives to generate new insights. Relevant literature on women's quality of life, pastoral counselling, spirituality, and psychosocial interventions was reviewed and analysed. Sources were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, books, reports, and credible online databases, with particular attention to Nigerian studies and comparative insights from other cultural settings. The analysis involved three key steps: Conceptual Clarification – Identifying and defining the core constructs of quality of life and pastoral counselling within the Nigerian socio-cultural and religious landscape. Analytical Review – Examining empirical studies and theoretical discussions on the factors influencing women's quality of life and evaluating how spirituality and counselling interventions have been positioned in prior research. Framework Development-Synthesising insights from psychology, theology, and counselling literature to conceptualise pastoral counselling as a holistic framework for enhancing women's quality of life. This method ensures that the arguments presented are grounded in existing scholarship while also advancing new directions for theory, practice, and policy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, psychological, and health-related factors shapes women's quality of life in Nigeria. While women are central to family and community development, structural barriers and traditional expectations often undermine their ability to attain holistic wellness. This section highlights some of the major factors identified in the literature that impede women's quality of life in Nigeria.

### *Socio-Economic Challenges*

Economic disadvantage remains one of the strongest determinants of women's low quality of life in Nigeria. Adeyeye et al. (2019) reported that poverty, hunger, and limited access to healthcare and shelter are key challenges for rural women. Limited income opportunities and high dependency ratios further restrict women's capacity for economic independence. Adegoke et al. (2016) also observed that homemakers who are financially dependent on spouses experience greater economic hardship than women in formal employment. These financial strains often translate into poorer health outcomes and reduced well-being.

### *Educational Inequalities*

Education is a strong predictor of quality of life, yet many Nigerian women continue to face restricted access due to socio-cultural norms, early marriage, and economic constraints. Lack of education limits career opportunities and diminishes women's capacity to make informed decisions about health, family, and personal growth (Kundu et al., 2022). The gap between rural and urban women is particularly striking, with rural women more likely to be excluded from educational opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and low life satisfaction.

### *Cultural and Gender Norms*

The Nigerian society is largely patriarchal, and cultural expectations often prescribe women's roles in ways that restrict autonomy. Women are frequently excluded from decision-making in family and community life, and cultural practices such as early marriage, widowhood rites, and gender-based discrimination contribute to psychological distress (Kundu et al., 2022). Ageism and restrictive gender expectations also reduce women's sense of agency. For instance, older women may be stigmatised for remarrying after widowhood or criticised for being socially outgoing, reflecting entrenched cultural biases that limit personal freedom and expression.

### *Health and Reproductive Burdens*

Reproductive health concerns represent another major factor affecting women's quality of life. Studies indicate that Nigerian women face significant risks related to pregnancy, childbirth, and maternal mortality (Mbada et al., 2020). Additionally, menopause, infertility, and other reproductive health challenges often carry social stigma, further reducing psychological well-being. Women's body image disturbances, widely reported in literature, are also linked to reduced self-esteem and poorer quality of life (Osiki & Obi, 2017; Aggarwal et al., 2023).

### *Psychological and Emotional Stressors*

The cumulative impact of socio-economic hardship, cultural restrictions, and health burdens often undermines women's psychological well-being. Many women internalise these struggles, leading to stress, trauma, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Chinweuba et al. (2018) found that older women with lower socio-economic status and greater family responsibilities reported lower health-related quality of

life. Similarly, women facing domestic violence, single parenthood, and widowhood often experience long-term emotional distress that negatively affects their overall wellness (Tavoli et al., 2016).

#### *Limited Access to Information and Support Services*

Another critical factor is the lack of access to health information, counselling, and psychosocial support. Kugbey et al (2019) showed that women with limited health literacy and poor access to health information report lower quality of life, especially when coping with illnesses such as breast cancer. Since most rural women cannot read or have limited exposure to media, they often lack access to essential information on health, entrepreneurship, and self-care (Alhassan & Adam, 2021). This information gap perpetuates vulnerability and dependence.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that a single condition does not determine women's quality of life in Nigeria but is determined by overlapping dimensions of poverty, gender inequality, cultural restrictions, health challenges, and limited access to psychosocial support. Addressing these issues requires holistic interventions beyond economic empowerment or medical care. Because many Nigerian women interpret life through religious and spiritual frameworks, pastoral counselling is a relevant and culturally sensitive approach to improving women's quality of life.

### **Pastoral Counselling as a Framework for Enhancing Women's Quality of Life**

Pastoral counselling provides an integrated framework that combines psychological insight with spiritual care to address the complex realities of human life. Unlike purely clinical approaches, it recognises that for many individuals, particularly in religious societies such as Nigeria, faith and spirituality are inseparable from their emotional and social well-being. This uniquely positions pastoral counseling to respond to the multidimensional challenges affecting women's quality of life.

#### *Principles of Pastoral Counselling*

Pastoral counselling rests on several guiding principles. First, it embraces holism, viewing women not merely as individuals with problems but as whole persons with physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions (Gardner, 2017). Second, it is built on integration, blending psychological knowledge with theological and spiritual wisdom in ways that respect cultural and personal beliefs (Pedhu, 2020). Third, it emphasises contextual sensitivity, recognising that interventions must align with the lived realities of women within Nigerian families, communities, and faith traditions (Obi, 2021). Finally, it is grounded in empowerment and dignity, affirming women's agency and nurturing resilience rather than fostering dependency or pity.

#### *Techniques Used in Pastoral Counselling*

In practice, pastoral counselling makes use of both psychological and spiritual techniques. On the psychological side, counsellors may apply methods such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, mindfulness, trauma-focused approaches, or solution-focused techniques to help women cope with stress, trauma, or emotional difficulties (Murtagh, 2023). On the spiritual side, pastoral counsellors draw on scripture, prayer, meditation, guided reflection, and communal rituals to nurture meaning, hope, and spiritual strength (Kao et al., 2020). Importantly, these methods are not used in isolation but woven together in a way that honours each woman's unique background and needs. For example, a woman experiencing grief after widowhood may benefit from trauma-informed counselling to address emotional pain, while simultaneously finding comfort in faith-based practices such as prayer or communal support groups led by her church or mosque. Similarly, a young woman facing body image struggles might be supported with cognitive reframing techniques alongside spiritual mentoring that reinforces her sense of worth and identity.

#### *Relevance to Nigerian Women's Challenges*

Pastoral counselling is particularly relevant in Nigeria for several reasons. First, Nigeria is a deeply religious country where faith communities are central to daily life. Many women turn to religious leaders for support in times of crisis, which makes pastoral counselling a natural and accessible point of intervention (Obi, 2021). Second, it offers a culturally appropriate response to systemic challenges such as gender inequality, poverty, and health burdens by addressing external conditions and the inner resilience women need to navigate them. Socio-economic hardship: Pastoral counsellors can provide psychoeducation and empowerment programmes that build confidence, self-efficacy, and practical coping strategies, thereby reducing the psychological toll of poverty (Daodu & Abidogun, 2024).

Educational and informational gaps: Counselling sessions and community-based workshops can improve health literacy and promote awareness of rights, opportunities, and resources (Kugbey et al., 2019). Cultural and gender norms: By engaging families and communities, pastoral counselling can challenge harmful traditions and promote healthier, more equitable roles for women.

Health and reproductive burdens: Counselling interventions, combined with spiritual support, can help women manage the psychological distress associated with pregnancy, infertility, or menopause (Mbada et al., 2020). Psychological distress and trauma: Through trauma-informed pastoral counselling, women facing domestic violence, widowhood, or single parenthood can find emotional healing as well as spiritual encouragement (Tavoli et al., 2016).

In sum, pastoral counselling addresses women's challenges on two levels: the external, by equipping them with knowledge, coping strategies, and empowerment tools; and the internal, by nurturing resilience, meaning, and spiritual strength. This

dual approach makes it particularly effective in the Nigerian setting, where social inequities and cultural expectations are pervasive but faith remains a powerful source of hope and identity. By combining psychological techniques with spiritual care, pastoral counselling offers a holistic pathway for women to achieve an enhanced quality of life and contribute more fully to family, community, and national development.

#### *Implications for Practice and Policy*

The analysis of women's quality of life in Nigeria underscores that no single actor can address the challenges in isolation. Improving women's well-being requires collaboration between pastoral counsellors, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government institutions, and policymakers. Each of these stakeholders brings unique strengths that, when combined, can create a holistic and sustainable support system for women.

#### *Role of Pastoral Counsellors*

Pastoral counsellors are often the first point of contact for many women seeking help, particularly in times of crisis. Their role extends beyond spiritual guidance to practical psychoeducation, emotional support, and therapeutic interventions. In practice, counsellors can: Develop community-based programmes on women's health, family life, and emotional resilience. Incorporate evidence-based psychological methods into their counselling while remaining sensitive to spiritual needs. Build referral networks with health professionals and social services to ensure that women requiring specialised care are not left unattended. By positioning themselves as bridges between faith, psychology, and social support, pastoral counsellors can respond more effectively to the multidimensional realities of women's lives.

#### *Collaboration with Religious Bodies*

Churches, mosques, and other faith communities play an influential role in Nigerian society. They serve as trusted spaces where women seek comfort, advice, and solidarity. Religious institutions can therefore: Provide platforms for psychoeducation and awareness campaigns on issues such as domestic violence, maternal health, and mental wellness. Establish women's support groups within congregations where members can share experiences and receive counselling. Mobilise resources to support vulnerable women, including widows, single mothers, and survivors of abuse. When faith communities integrate pastoral counselling into their outreach, they create culturally trusted avenues for improving quality of life.

#### *Engagement with NGOs and Civil Society*

NGOs are critical in extending services that pastoral counsellors or religious bodies alone cannot provide. They can: Partner with pastoral counsellors to deliver vocational training and empowerment programmes. Offer technical support in trauma counselling, reproductive health, and human rights advocacy. Provide funding and logistical support for outreach in rural communities where women are most vulnerable. Such collaboration ensures that interventions are spiritually sensitive, professionally grounded, and sustainable.

#### *Policy and Governmental Support*

Sustainable change requires enabling policies and structural reforms. Policymakers and government agencies can: Recognise pastoral counselling as a complementary resource in public health and social welfare. Integrate pastoral counsellors into community health initiatives, particularly in maternal and mental health programmes. Provide funding for training pastoral counsellors in psychological techniques, trauma care, and gender-sensitive counselling. Support nationwide campaigns that challenge harmful cultural practices and promote women's rights and inclusion. When policy frameworks legitimise and fund such collaborative work, pastoral counselling can move from an isolated practice to a recognised component of national development.

Collaboration across these sectors creates a multi-layered safety net for women. Pastoral counsellors provide personal and spiritual guidance; religious bodies offer community-based support; NGOs bring technical expertise and resources; and policymakers ensure structural backing and long-term sustainability. Together, they can shift the narrative from merely coping with hardship to women thriving and contributing fully to the growth of families, communities, and the nation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has examined pastoral counselling as a framework for enhancing women's quality of life in Nigeria. The discussion established that women play indispensable roles in family life, community well-being, and national development. Yet, persistent socio-economic hardship, cultural restrictions, health burdens, and psychological distress undermine their quality of life. Quality of life, understood as a multidimensional construct that includes physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, must therefore be approached in ways that address both external conditions and internal resilience. The conceptual analysis presented in this paper highlights pastoral counselling as a holistic and culturally relevant intervention. Rooted in the integration of psychological knowledge and spiritual insight, pastoral counselling offers principles and techniques that can address women's challenges on multiple fronts—from poverty and gender-based inequality to trauma, health struggles, and existential crises. By situating counselling within Nigeria's religious and cultural context, the framework shows how spiritual resources can be combined with evidence-based psychotherapies and community advocacy to promote holistic wellness. The central contribution of this paper lies in reframing pastoral counselling not as a purely religious activity, but as a conceptual framework for advancing women's quality of life. It provides a pathway for collaboration between pastoral counsellors, faith institutions, NGOs, and policymakers to support women's empowerment and resilience. While empirical testing remains necessary, the conceptual framework offers a valuable starting point for

theory, practice, and policy to converge in pursuit of sustainable personal, familial, and national development.

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