Geographies of Abuse in Intimate Relationships between African Women with European Men

Introduction

Delphine, a young Cameroonian woman, in the documentary "Delphine's Prayers" (2021) recounts emotionally her life of hardship, including abuse and a marriage to an older European man, which she hoped would bring a better life but ultimately perpetuated cycles of exploitation. Delphine reflects on the emotional abuse and domination of this relationship, noting how her partner's treatment often made her feel infantilized and revolted. Her narrative encapsulates the intersectional struggles of African women navigating patriarchal, racial, and cultural imbalances within such intimate relationships with European men.

Research on violence against migrant African women highlights the compounded vulnerabilities they face due to systemic discrimination, economic challenges, and restrictive societal norms. These women are often marginalized in their home countries, migration routes, and host countries, where their experiences of violence manifest across public and private domains (Adam-Vézina, 2020; Magidimisha, 2018). Intimate partner violence (IPV) emerges as a significant form of abuse, shaped by cultural expectations, economic dependency, and migratory pressures.

The gendered nature of IPV among African migrant women is also documented, and studies have shown how patriarchal systems, gender norms, and economic disparities exacerbate women's vulnerability to abuse (Oduaran and Chukwudeh, 2021). Additionally, the intersection of race, migration, and gender creates unique challenges for African women in cross-cultural relationships. These relationships are frequently marked by significant power imbalances, where the racialized and cultural identities of African women are weaponized to justify domination and control (Valente Cardoso, 2023).

Western perceptions of African women frequently perpetuate patronizing and essentializing narratives, portraying them as passive or subservient (Musingafi and Mokhothu, 2023). Such stereotypes intersect with colonial legacies and patriarchal norms to further marginalize African women in relationships with European men. At the same time, African feminist perspectives challenge these narratives, emphasizing the agency and resilience of African women within patriarchal systems (Thebe, 2023; Gatwiri, 2019).

This research explores the nature of IPV within relationships between African women and European men, focusing on two distinct geographical and social contexts: African migrant women residing in France, and Ivorian women in inter-continental relationships in Ivory Coast. By examining these experiences, the research seeks to illuminate how cultural, racial, and economic factors shape the power dynamics within these relationships, highlighting the intersectionality of abuse, race, gender, and migration.

The methodology, rooted in digital ethnography, employs online forums in SIDINL Newsletters facilitated by psychologists to gather nuanced, authentic narratives from female participants. These discussions reveal the complex nature of IPV conditions within these cross-cultural relationships, offering insights into the participants' coping strategies and the broader systemic forces at play.

This research contributes to the academic discourse on IPV by examining how intersecting identities and socio-cultural contexts influence the experiences of African women in cross-cultural relationships. It also emphasizes the importance of addressing the systemic inequalities that perpetuate these power imbalances, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of IPV in transnational settings.

Research Background

Violence affects the lives of migrant women from sub-Saharan Africa in their countries of origin, on migration routes, and in countries of immigration (Adam-Vézina, 2020). African women may face discrimination, xenophobia, and limited access to resources in host countries, leading to vulnerability and involvement in informal and illegal activities (Magidimisha, 2018; Pufaa and Apusigah, 2021). For example, violence experienced by female refugees in South Africa includes intimate partner and public violence, fear of using public space, and limited police protection (Memela and Maharaj, 2018). In addition, African women who migrate in Australia may experience domestic violence due to cultural differences and changed gender roles (Mesatywa, 2014). African irregular migrant women who arrive in Spain in small boats have also a history of violence, rape, prostitution, forced pregnancy, and human trafficking (Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al., 2020).

A systematic review analyzed empirical research on intimate partner violence (IPV) in the lives of African immigrant women, discussing prevalence rates, types of violence, risk factors, mental health problems, coping strategies, and help-seeking behavior (West, 2016). Gender norms, cultural norms, patriarchy, and economic challenges contribute to IPV among African migrant women (Oduaran and Chukwudeh, 2021). African immigrant women may face barriers in reporting IPV or seeking help due to language barriers, fear of deportation, social stigma, and cultural factors (Vieux and Bailey, 2021; Satyen et al., 2018; Condon, 2017).

Western perspectives on African women have often been patronizing and essentializing, depicting them as inferior, powerless, and lacking intelligence (Musingafi and Mokhothu, 2023). African feminism differs from Western feminism in that it sees men as partners in dismantling harmful aspects of patriarchy, rather than as enemies (Musingafi, 2023). African women argue that Western perceptions of women ignore their diverse wants and needs shaped by their environments (Thebe, 2023). African women navigate the intersection of traditional African masculinity and Western masculinity in their daily lives and relationships by negotiating expressions of masculinities that are more progressive while retaining certain traditional behaviors and practices (Dery and Apusigah, 2021). Colonialism, Christianity, and Western education have alienated women from social mobility, resulting in the masculinization of wealth in some African communities (Mbah, 2017). African societies have deeply entrenched patriarchy systems, which have contributed to the slow pace of women's emancipation (Simuziya, 2023). However, it should be acknowledged properly that African women have historically played significant roles in political, economic, and social structures, and their cultural functions are indispensable to African societies (Ntiwunka and Nwaodike, 2021).

Masculinity in interracial intimacy between Western men and African women is influenced by various factors, and interracial couples face unique challenges. Different racialized histories and experiences set interracial couples apart from other dyads, influencing the types of problems they encounter, such as managing societal disapproval and the effects of racial privilege (Leslie and Young, 2015). The intersection of gender and race in a cross-cultural context finally shapes constructions of masculinity as well (Zhang and Allen, 2019), while the impact of interracial intimate relationships is both gendered and classed (Bratter and Campbell, 2023). Racial ideologies, such as color-blind racial ideology and multiculturalism, influence interracial romantic attraction (Brooks and Neville, 2017). Black women in interracial relationships with white men often perceive experiencing varying treatment due to societal expectations, and attitudes towards interracial couples vary based on the societal prevalence of particular types of couples (Gonlin, 2023). Perceived competition for same-race partners predicts attitudes towards interracial couples, and black men are often perceived as more masculine than Asian men (Stragà et al., 2020; Chuang et al., 2021).

Research Methods

Studies have used surveys and interviews to understand the forms and meaning of violence in partner relationships among African women, highlighting physical, emotional, and economic abuse (Mesatywa, 2014). This kind of methodology is rooted in ethnographic principles, particularly focusing on informal social chats and everyday discourse, an approach seen as a reflection of societal norms and contradictions (Valente Cardoso, 2023).

The methodology for this research is rooted in digital ethnographic principles and is specifically designed to explore intimate partner violence (IPV) experienced by African women in various relational and geographical contexts, leveraging two distinct geographical and social contexts. Firstly, African migrant women currently residing in Paris, France share their experiences of IPV within their relationships with European men. Secondly, African women in their home country in Abidjan, Ivory Coast recount their IPV experiences within intercontinental relationships with European men.

This study utilizes two online forums as discussion groups hosted within the digital space of SIDINL Newsletters, forums that are facilitated by psychologists in each country. Firstly, there is the Paris-based Group with six African migrant women currently living in Paris. These participants have diverse migration histories from West African countries but share common experiences of IPV within relationships involving European, predominantly older, men. Secondly, there is the Abidjan-based Group with five Ivorian women residing in Abidjan, sharing their experiences with European men in intercontinental relationships. Facilitated by psychologists, these online discussions mimic informal social chats in order to elicit authentic narratives. The Paris-based and the Abidjan-based groups interact in combined or separate sessions, enabling comparative or separate analyses of experiences.

Discussions are structured around key themes such as types of IPV (physical, emotional, economic), cultural influences, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviors.

Psychologists also document non-verbal cues in audio sessions, group dynamics, and patterns in discourse, providing supplementary context to the verbal data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing data confidentiality and voluntary participation.

This method was chosen, since the online setting encourages participants to express themselves freely, particularly on sensitive topics like IPV (Holtz et al., 2012). In addition, the guided and private nature of these forums by psychologists ensures the reliability of the data, as discussions are guided and documented strictly and systematically (Babakov et al., 2024; Colby, 2021). This collection of rich, nuanced data is the basis of this research, employing qualitative techniques.

These transcripts, translated from French in original text to English, are coded to identify recurring themes, patterns, and unique narratives. Themes include power abuse in relationships, cultural and gender norms, migration-related stressors, and support strategies. Experiences of IPV are compared across the two groups to identify commonalities and differences. Findings are validated through member checking, where participants review and confirm the accuracy of interpreted data. For this research, pseudonyms are used for all participants, and psychologists are available to provide support during and after discussions for participants who may find the topics distressing. Participants are informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any repercussions.

The limitations of this method include the reliance on online forums that may exclude women without internet access or those unwilling to share experiences in a group setting (Carter et al., 2021), while findings are context-specific and may not represent the IPV experiences of all African women in similar circumstances (Femi-Ajao, 2018). In general, however, this method provides a robust framework for understanding IPV experiences for African women within different relational and cultural settings (Finfgeld-Connett, 2015).

Research Findings

The participant groups in these SIDINL newsletters demonstrate a diverse range of socio-demographic characteristics (Table 1). Participants span from 18 to 35 years, representing a broad spectrum of life stages and experiences, which allows for an understanding of IPV across different age cohorts.

Most participants possess secondary or tertiary education, indicating their ability to engage with structured discussions and contribute nuanced perspectives. The Paris-based group, as migrants, provides insights into the intersection of IPV with migration-related challenges, whereas the Abidjan-based group reflects IPV dynamics in a domestic, intercontinental relational setting. All participants have been in relationships with European men, offering a focused lens on cultural and power dynamics influencing IPV in such contexts.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of Female Participants in SIDINL newsletters/groups.

Participant Group	Participant ID	Age	Education Level	Migration Status	Origin

Group		Age	Education	Residence	Origin
Paris-based Group	P1	35	Bachelor's Degree	10 years in France	Benin
	P2	29	High School Diploma	5 years in France	Ivory Coast
	P3	42	Master's Degree	15 years in France	Ivory Coast
	P4	38	Bachelor's Degree	12 years in France	Benin
	P5	33	Bachelor's Degree	7 years in France	Ivory Coast
	P6	40	High School Diploma	9 years in France	Benin
Abidjan-based Group	A1	28	High School Diploma	Home-Based	Ivory Coast
	A2	34	Bachelor's Degree	Home-Based	Ivory Coast
	A3	37	Bachelor's Degree	Home-Based	Ivory Coast
	A4	30	Bachelor's Degree	Home-Based	Ivory Coast
	A5	45	High School Diploma	Home-Based	Ivory Coast

Motivations of Cross-Cultural Relationships

Understanding how relationships between African women and White European men began provides crucial context for exploring the dynamics and challenges within these relationships. For both the Paris-based and Abidjan-based groups, relationships often emerged from a mix of motivations, reflecting the complexities of these cross-cultural unions.

For the Paris-based participants, relationships often began with the promise of stability, new opportunities, and migration prospects. Many women were drawn to their partners for the emotional connection or the perception of a secure future. P1 shared, "He seemed so different from men back home. He was caring, attentive, and promised to help me build a life here." This initial sense of emotional safety often played a significant role in fostering early trust and commitment.

Migration often played a pivotal role in these relationships. For several participants, their partners facilitated or promised to facilitate their move to France. P3 explained, "He told me he could help me start a new life in France, where I could have more opportunities. It felt like a chance I couldn't miss." The prospect of migration not only offered economic and social mobility but also created an inherent power imbalance, as participants' presence in France became tied to their relationships.

However, economic motivations were also apparent. P3 noted, "I was struggling when I first came to France. Meeting him felt like a blessing; he had a good job, and I thought we could build something together." For migrant women facing financial precarity, the stability offered by their European partners was a strong incentive to commit to the relationship.

The length of these relationships varied, with some lasting several years before issues of control and abuse emerged. P5 recounted, "We were together for almost six years. At first, it was like a dream. But as time went on, he started changing, becoming more controlling, especially when I tried to assert myself." This gradual shift from affection to dominance was a recurring theme among participants.

For the Abidjan-based group, relationships often began in contexts of intercontinental connection, with many participants meeting their partners through online platforms or during the men's visits to Africa. A1 shared, "We met on a dating site. He said he was looking for a serious relationship, and he seemed so genuine." These digital introductions often carried a romantic idealism that contrasted sharply with the realities participants later faced.

Economic motivations were even more pronounced in the Abidjan group. A3 remarked, "He offered to help with my family. My parents were struggling, and I thought this was a way to support them." For many women, the promise of financial security for themselves and their families was a significant factor in their decision to pursue these relationships.

The prospect of migration also surfaced in these relationships, though often as a distant or unfulfilled promise. A2 recounted, "He told me he wanted me to come to Europe to be with him, but it never happened. Instead, I stayed here while he sent money and visited occasionally." This dynamic often created a sense of limbo, where participants hoped for a future together but remained rooted in their local context.

The duration of relationships in this group also varied, with some ending relatively quickly due to cultural or relational conflicts, while others persisted despite evident challenges. A5 stated, "We were together for three years. He'd visit every few months, and at first, it was wonderful. But over time, I started feeling like I was just part of his vacation." This

sentiment of being treated as an accessory rather than a partner was echoed by other participants.

Both groups demonstrated overlapping motivations, particularly regarding the appeal of emotional security, financial stability, and the prospect of migration. However, there were notable differences in how these relationships began and evolved.

Paris-based participants often highlighted the emotional aspects of their relationships, with many initially believing in the possibility of love and partnership. P4 reflected, "I truly thought we could build a life together. He made me feel seen in a way I hadn't before." In contrast, while emotional connections were present in the Abidjan group, economic realities and the allure of migration played a more dominant role from the outset.

Economic precarity was a common thread but manifested differently. Paris-based participants viewed their relationships as a pathway to stability in a foreign country, while Abidjan-based participants often entered relationships with explicit financial agreements or expectations. A2 stated, "It was clear from the start that he wanted someone who could take care of the home while he supported us financially."

The Paris group's relationships were often deeply intertwined with migration, as participants' presence in France was directly facilitated or influenced by their partners. In contrast, the Abidjan group experienced migration as an aspirational but unfulfilled element, leading to a dynamic where women remained in Africa while their partners dictated the terms of the relationship from abroad.

The Paris group navigated relationships within the context of migration, where cultural differences and power dynamics became apparent over time. Meanwhile, the Abidjan group experienced these differences more immediately, particularly in long-distance relationships where the European partner's visits were seen as episodes of connection rather than sustained partnerships.

The beginnings of these relationships show the true complexities of cross-cultural unions between African women and White European men. For many participants, these relationships represented a mix of hope and pragmatism, where love, economic necessity, and migration opportunities often intertwined. However, the initial motivations frequently laid the groundwork for the power imbalances and conflicts that emerged later.

In the Paris group, the promise of love and stability often gave way to control and dependency, as participants' migrant status and limited networks made them increasingly vulnerable. The dynamic was often characterized by a gradual shift, where the relationship began on equal terms but evolved into a power struggle. P6 explained, "At first, it felt like we were partners, but over time, I realized he saw me as someone he could control, not as an equal."

In the Abidjan group, economic dependency was more immediate and explicit, shaping the relationship from the outset. Participants often found themselves negotiating their roles within these partnerships, balancing their needs and aspirations with the expectations

of their European partners. A4 shared, "He'd send money and expect everything to be perfect when he visited. It felt like I was performing for him, not living my life."

Migrant and Power Abuse

For the Paris-based group, a recurring and significant theme is the intersection of migrant status and power abuse within intimate partner violence (IPV), and how their immigration status and societal positioning as African women in Europe men exacerbate their vulnerabilities, shaping their experiences of IPV in unique and systemic ways.

Many participants reported that their partners exploited their precarious migrant status to exercise control and maintain power. P2 shared, "I couldn't go to the police because I was scared they'd find out about my visa situation. He knew this and used it against me, always threatening to report me if I didn't do what he wanted." This highlights how fear of deportation or legal repercussions created an environment where abuse could flourish unchecked. For some participants, the threat of deportation was not always explicit but implied through dependence on their partner for residency support. P5 noted, "He didn't say it outright, but he'd remind me that he was the reason I could stay here. It made me feel like I owed him my silence and obedience." This situation illustrates the subtle yet powerful ways in which legal dependence can be weaponized in relationships.

Economic abuse was a prominent experience for Paris-based participants, often intertwined with their migration-related vulnerabilities. P6 explained clearly, "He controlled all the money. Even when I earned something, he'd say it should go to our shared expenses, but he'd never tell me what he did with his earnings. It felt like I had no financial power in my own life."

Participants also noted that their employment opportunities were often limited due to academic barriers and legal restrictions, further increasing their financial dependency on their partners. P1 stated, "I wanted to work, but I couldn't find a job that matched my qualifications. He'd mock me, saying I was useless here and should be grateful he provided for me." This combination of financial dependency and belittlement reinforced the power imbalance in their relationships.

Isolation was a recurring pattern among Paris-based participants, exacerbated by cultural differences. P4 recounted, "I didn't know anyone here when I came, and he made sure it stayed that way. He'd discourage me from making friends or joining community groups, saying they'd lead me astray."

The inability to communicate fluently in native French was a significant barrier. P3 explained, "Whenever I tried to get help or talk to someone about my situation, the language barrier stopped me. He'd mock my "African French" and tell me no one would take me seriously because I couldn't speak properly." Language isolation not only restricted access to support systems but also reinforced participants' dependence on their abusive partners.

Participants frequently highlighted the role of racial and cultural stereotypes in their relationships. P3 described an instance where her partner justified his abusive behavior by

invoking stereotypes: "He'd say, 'You Africans are used to violence, so why are you complaining?' as if my background excused his actions."

Such stereotyping was not limited to direct interactions but also influenced how participants perceived their value within the relationship. P2 remarked, "He'd always talk about how he saved me from my life back in Africa, like being with him was my only chance at a better future. It made me feel small, like I wasn't worthy of respect or equal treatment." These narratives underline how racial hierarchies and prejudices were weaponized to perpetuate control and justify abuse.

Unfilled Dreams

For the Abidjan-based group, relationships with White European men often began with promises of economic stability and romantic idealism but were characterized by fragility and unmet expectations. The men frequently provided financial support but maintained an emotional and physical distance that weakened the connection. These relationships were often transient and uncertain, marked by the men's sporadic visits and a lack of commitment.

Economic support was a cornerstone of these relationships, with participants highlighting the men's role as financial providers. A3 shared, "He would send money every month for my rent and groceries, but that was it. He'd come to visit once or twice a year, and every time, it felt more like a business arrangement than a relationship." This financial dynamic often placed women in a position of dependency while limiting their ability to build equitable partnerships.

The fragility of these relationships was further exacerbated by the men's involvement with other women, either back in Europe or within the local context. A5 recounted, "I found out he had a girlfriend back home. When I confronted him, he said, 'You knew what this was. I'm helping you; don't make this complicated.'" This revelation highlighted the transactional nature of many of these relationships, where the men's financial contributions were seen as justification for their lack of fidelity.

The men's absence also created a sense of limbo for the women, who often hoped for more stability and a future together. A2 explained, "He told me he wanted to bring me to Europe, but every time I asked about it, he'd say it's complicated. I waited for years, but nothing changed." This unfulfilled promise of migration left many participants feeling trapped between their aspirations and the reality of their circumstances.

The relationships were further complicated by the men's attitudes toward cultural differences. A1 described how her partner viewed her life in Abidjan as primitive: "He'd say things like, 'I'm giving you a better life,' as if I couldn't have a good life without him. It made me feel small, like I was just lucky to have his attention." These attitudes reinforced power imbalances and often left women questioning their self-worth. The financial support provided by the men created a veneer of stability but often masked deeper issues of inequality and exploitation. For many participants, these relationships were not partnerships but transactions where emotional and personal needs were secondary to economic considerations.

The lack of commitment from the men, coupled with their involvement in other relationships, undermined the women's sense of security and trust. The repeated cycle of promises and delays regarding migration further contributed to feelings of frustration and powerlessness. A4 summarized this sentiment, saying, "It felt like I was waiting for something that would never happen. He kept me hoping, but deep down, I knew I wasn't a priority for him." Cultural misunderstandings and the men's patronizing attitudes also played a significant role in shaping the women's experiences. The perception of being saved or rescued by their European partners often left participants feeling undervalued and alienated. A3 remarked, "He acted like he was doing me a favor by being with me, but all I wanted was to be treated with respect and equality."

Coping Strategies

Participants from both the Paris-based and Abidjan-based groups demonstrated a variety of coping mechanisms in response to the intimate partner violence they experienced. Many participants relied on emotional coping strategies to manage the psychological toll of IPV. A2 from the Abidjan group shared, "When things got tough, I'd pray. It gave me the strength to keep going, even when I felt alone." Faith and spirituality were recurring themes, providing participants with a sense of solace and resilience.

In the Paris group, P3 described how journaling became a critical outlet: "Writing down my feelings helped me make sense of what was happening. It reminded me that I wasn't crazy, even when he made me feel like I was." Such practices enabled participants to process their experiences and maintain a sense of agency.

Economic abuse was a pervasive issue, but many women sought ways to mitigate their financial dependency. P5 from Paris shared, "I started cleaning houses on the side, even though he didn't want me to work. It was my way of saving up and having something of my own."

In Abidjan, A3 emphasized the importance of community support: "My sisters helped me with small loans so I could start selling clothes. It wasn't much, but it gave me some control over my life." These examples illustrate how participants leveraged their networks and skills to regain a sense of autonomy.

Participants often had to navigate the cultural aspects of their relationships by finding ways to assert themselves while maintaining harmony. A4 from Abidjan shared, "I learned to pick my battles. If I pushed too hard, he'd withdraw support, so I had to be strategic." P1 from Paris described a similar approach: "I'd agree with him in the moment, but later, I'd do what I needed to for myself. It wasn't ideal, but it kept the peace." These strategies highlight the delicate balance participants maintained in managing their relationships.

Some participants eventually sought external support or took steps to establish boundaries within their relationships. P6 from Paris recounted, "I finally went to a women's shelter. It was the hardest decision, but it saved my life." Accessing such resources was often challenging due to language barriers or fear of stigma, but it marked a critical step toward safety and empowerment.

In Abidjan, A5 described setting boundaries with her partner: "I told him I wouldn't tolerate disrespect anymore. If he wanted to keep seeing me, he had to show me basic respect." While not all participants felt empowered to take such steps, those who did often experienced a significant shift in their sense of self-worth and own agency.

Impact on Future Choices

For the participants in both the Paris-based and Abidjan-based groups, the end of their relationships with European men marked a significant turning point in their personal lives. Notably, none of these relationships resulted in children, which influenced how participants navigated their post-relationship lives.

In the Paris-based group, relationships often ended due to the cumulative effect of emotional and psychological abuse, financial control, and isolation. For many participants, the gradual realization of their loss of agency and identity became the tipping point. P4 shared: "He controlled every aspect of my life. I thought it was because he cared, but I realized I couldn't even make small decisions for myself. Leaving wasn't easy, but I couldn't continue living like that." Her decision to leave was a culmination of years of enduring subtle and overt forms of control.

Another participant, P6, recounted: "When I finally started working secretly, it gave me the courage to leave. He found out and was furious, but by then, I'd saved enough to move out. That was my way of taking back my life." The ability to regain some financial independence played a crucial role in ending the relationship for several participants.

For the Abidjan-based participants, the transient nature of the relationships often led to their dissolution. The sporadic presence of the European partners and their perceived lack of genuine commitment were significant factors. A5, a now married woman, explained: "He came and went as he pleased. After a while, I realized he wasn't serious about building a life together. I couldn't keep waiting for someone who didn't see me as an equal partner." For many participants, the imbalance in effort and commitment became increasingly untenable.

Additionally, the transactional nature of some relationships exacerbated feelings of exploitation. A3 remarked: "He sent money, but it wasn't enough to make up for the disrespect. He treated me like I was replaceable. When I ended it, it felt like I was reclaiming my dignity." This sentiment was echoed by others who felt objectified or undervalued in their relationships.

Participants across both groups reflected on their experiences with a mix of relief, regret, and renewed self-awareness. While the end of these relationships often brought challenges, such as financial instability or social stigma, they also enabled personal growth and introspection.

In Paris, P1 described the end of her relationship as a transformative moment: "I was scared to leave because I thought I couldn't survive on my own. But once I did, I realized how much strength I had. It taught me to never let anyone take away my independence again." For her, the process of leaving became a catalyst for reclaiming her identity and

autonomy. P3, who had been married for over a decade, noted: "It took years to understand that love shouldn't feel like servitude. Ending it was painful, but it was also liberating. I learned to value myself more." The theme of self-worth emerged strongly among participants who had endured years of subtle devaluation and control.

In the Abidjan group, participants often expressed a sense of disillusionment with the promises of stability and love that initially drew them to these relationships. A4 reflected: "I thought being with him would give me a better future, but it became clear that he didn't see me as an equal. Ending it was hard, but it was necessary." Others emphasized the importance of regaining self-respect. A2 shared: "Walking away was about more than just leaving him; it was about choosing myself. I realized I didn't need to settle for someone who didn't value me." For many, ending the relationship was a statement of self-empowerment and a rejection of unequal conditions.

The experiences participants had in these relationships significantly shaped their attitudes toward future partnerships. For most, the end of these relationships marked a shift in their priorities and expectations.

Among the Paris-based participants, there was a notable hesitation to pursue relationships with European men again. P5 explained: "It's not that I'm against dating European men, but I'll be more cautious. I've learned to recognize red flags and won't ignore them anymore." Others expressed a desire to reconnect with their cultural roots. P2 shared: "I think I'd prefer to date someone from my own culture next time. It's not about race but about understanding. I want someone who knows where I come from and respects it." This sentiment underscored the importance of shared cultural values and mutual respect.

In the Abidjan group, participants expressed mixed feelings about future relationships. A1 stated: "I don't regret the relationship because it taught me a lot, but I'm not sure I'd date a European man again. The cultural differences were too much to navigate." Others remained more open to the possibility of intercultural relationships, albeit with greater caution. A3 noted: "If I meet someone who truly respects me and values what I bring to the table, I'd consider it. But I'll never ignore the warning signs again."

In Paris, some participants expressed a renewed interest in African men, citing shared cultural values and experiences as a key factor. P4 remarked: "Being with someone who understands my culture feels important now. I want a partnership, not a power struggle." Others, however, remained open to diverse possibilities but stressed the need for equality. P6 explained: "It's not about where he comes from but how he treats me. I'll never compromise on respect and partnership again."

In Abidjan, participants were similarly divided. A2 expressed a preference for African men: "I feel like they'd understand me better. There wouldn't be this constant cultural clash." Conversely, A5 shared a more nuanced perspective: "It's not about African or European; it's about character. I'm more focused on who he is as a person than where he's from."

Discussion

Femininity and Subordination

The experiences of African women in relationships with White European men are deeply influenced by intersecting notions of abuse and femininity. These illuminate the societal and relational expectations placed on women, particularly those navigating cross-cultural and intercontinental relationships. The concept of femininity, as shaped by cultural, racial, and migratory contexts, emerges as both a tool of empowerment and a mechanism of subjugation in the narratives of abuse shared by the participants.

Femininity in these intimate relationships was frequently tied to expectations of subordination and compliance. The social construction of femininity often positions women as subservient caregivers within heterosexual relationships (Greenburg, 2023). African women's roles as partners were shaped by an intersection of racial and cultural expectations, reinforcing their vulnerability to control and abuse. Economic dependency, particularly in the Abidjan-based group, heightened these expectations, as financial support from male partners was often conflated with the women's perceived "duty" to be obedient and grateful. This aligns with findings that economic abuse is a prevalent form of intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa, where financial control is used to maintain dominance over women (Nduka et al., 2023). These power relationships rendered femininity an exploitative framework, where women's roles were narrowly defined to uphold patriarchal control, limiting women's autonomy and reinforcing subservient roles within relationships (Akurugu et al., 2022).

Cultural narratives surrounding femininity also influenced participants' responses to abuse. In many African contexts, traditional gender roles valorize endurance and resilience as markers of a "good" woman (Graness, 2022). This cultural conditioning made it difficult for women to identify and resist abusive behavior, as leaving a relationship could be seen as a failure to fulfill societal expectations. Such narratives align with broader literature on gender and relational endurance, which suggests that women often internalize social pressures to maintain relationships, even at great personal cost.

For the Paris-based group, cultural conditioning intersected with the challenges of migration. The women's efforts to adapt to a new cultural environment while maintaining their identities created unique vulnerabilities. The perception that African women were inherently resilient or "used to hardship" was often used by their partners to minimize or justify abusive behavior. Such stereotypes, as rooted in historical narratives, perpetuate gendered expectations and justify exploitation in contemporary relationships (Waldron, 2019). This essentialization of African femininity as inherently accommodating and enduring reflects colonial tropes that continue to influence cross-cultural interactions.

Another dimension of femininity that emerged from the findings was the significant emotional labor performed by the participants. Feminist literature has long highlighted how women are socialized to prioritize the emotional well-being of their partners, often at the expense of their own needs. In these relationships, emotional labor was both a tool of connection and a mechanism of control. Women's efforts to manage their partners'

emotions and maintain relational harmony often masked the underlying inequalities and allowed abusive dynamics to persist unchecked (Anderson, 2023).

This expectation was particularly pronounced in the Abidjan-based group, where participants felt pressured to project an image of happiness and gratitude during their partners' visits. Such behaviors align with studies on performative emotional labor in transnational relationships, where women navigate complex power imbalances through carefully managed self-presentation (Alshakhi and Le Ha, 2020). The inability to express dissatisfaction or assert boundaries further entrenched their dependency and limited their agency.

While femininity was often a framework for control, the findings also revealed how participants leveraged traditional gender roles to assert agency and navigate abusive relationships. The literature on gender and resilience suggests that women often reinterpret and redefine femininity to empower themselves within oppressive systems (Juncos and Bourbeau, 2022). For example, participants in the Paris-based group used the time afforded by restrictive gender roles, such as being expected to stay at home, to develop skills or plan for independence. These acts of resistance, though subtle, illustrate how women actively challenge and subvert the expectations placed upon them.

Community support also played a critical role in fostering resilience, particularly in the Abidjan-based group. Scholars have emphasized the importance of social networks in enabling women to cope with and resist abuse (Anggaunitakiranantika and Hamidi, 2020). By relying on familial and informal communal connections, participants were able to counteract the isolating effects of their relationships and reclaim a sense of agency. This resilience shows the adaptability of femininity as a tool for survival and resistance in contexts of abuse.

The cross-cultural nature of these relationships further complicated the participants' experiences of femininity. The women were often caught between conflicting expectations—those of their African cultural backgrounds and those of their European partners. This dual burden aligns with intersectionality theories, which highlight how overlapping social identities create unique experiences of oppression and gender privilege (Gatwiri, 2019). For the Paris-based group, these conflicting expectations exacerbated feelings of inadequacy and isolation, as they struggled to meet the ideals of both cultures. Such tensions underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of how femininity operates within transnational relationships.

Masculinity and Abusive Power

These findings reveal also how masculinity operated as a mechanism of power and control within cross-cultural relationships, and, by examining the behaviors and attitudes of White European men, masculinity influenced the perpetuation of abuse.

The White European men's behaviors equate masculinity with control and the assertion of power in intimate relationships. For instance, financial provision was frequently used as a tool to justify abusive behaviors. Men's economic superiority, particularly in the Abidjan-based group, allowed them to wield control over their partners. This aligns with findings

that financial dominance in relationships often reinforces gendered hierarchies (Johnson et al., 2022).

The Paris-based group revealed additional layers of complexity. Many of the men viewed their partners' migrant status as a vulnerability they could exploit. This parallels the example of romantic relationships of European men with Angolan women, by reinforcing their sense of masculinity, by exploiting racial and cultural privileges, and by leveraging their societal advantages to maintain control (Valente Cardoso, 2023). Such behaviors reflect colonial and patriarchal tropes that frame African women as dependent and malleable, reinforcing subordinate positions of women within these relationships (Agbaje, 2021).

Racialized perceptions of masculinity also played a significant role in shaping abusive relationships. The White European men's attitudes reflected a sense of superiority rooted in racial hierarchies. These men positioned themselves mostly as saviors or benefactors, perpetuating a narrative where their African partners were seen as "lucky" to be with them. This aligns with literature on racialized relationships and how racial hierarchies reinforce power dependency (Valente Cardoso, 2023; Hearn et al., 2023).

Such racialized masculinity also informed how the men justified their behaviors. For example, abusive actions were often framed as necessary measures to "guide" or "discipline" their partners, drawing on stereotypes that depict African women as needing control or "taming" (Adjei, 2016). This effect of essentialization of African femininity as passive or subservient enabled the men to perpetuate abuse without acknowledging their own culpability (Jackson, 1991; Smith, 2008).

Another critical dimension of masculinity in these relationships was the emotional detachment exhibited by the men. Traditional notions of masculinity often discourage emotional vulnerability, emphasizing stoicism and control. In this study, men's emotional distance was a recurring theme, which served to both reinforce their authority and limit their partners' ability to challenge abusive behaviors (Kiesling, 2005; Umberson et al., 2017).

For instance, participants from the Abidjan-based group frequently described how their partners withheld emotional support or dismissed their feelings. This emotional unavailability created an imbalance in the relationship, where women were expected to perform emotional labor without reciprocation. Such dynamics align with research on gendered emotional labor, which highlights how men's avoidance of emotional engagement can perpetuate power imbalances in relationships (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Unkel et al., 2018). In the Paris-based group, emotional detachment intersected with cultural differences, further complicating the dynamics. Participants described how their partners often used their cultural unfamiliarity as a means to dismiss or invalidate their emotions. This behavior not only reinforced the men's authority but also deepened the women's sense of isolation.

Economic abuse emerged as a prominent theme in both groups, reflecting the intersection of masculinity with financial control. In many cases, men's role as financial providers was

used to justify restrictive behaviors, such as limiting their partners' access to money or making unilateral financial decisions. This aligns with research that links economic abuse to broader patterns of coercive control in intimate relationships (Postmus et al., 2020; Barzilay, 2017).

In the Abidjan-based group, economic abuse was particularly pronounced, as the men's financial support often came with explicit or implicit conditions. For example, participants described how their partners used financial contributions to dictate their daily lives, from their social interactions to their personal choices. This dynamic reflects how economic dependency can be weaponized to reinforce patriarchal control and limit women's autonomy (Johnson et al., 2022).

For the Paris-based group, economic abuse intersected with migration-related vulnerabilities. Participants described how their partners controlled their access to resources, often citing their migrant status as a justification. This behavior reinforced the men's authority but also heightened the women's dependence, making it difficult for them to leave abusive relationships, while migrant women often have very limited access to support systems (Jupîneanţ et al., 2024).

The findings also reveal how masculinity was used to reinforce traditional gender roles within these relationships. The men's expectations of their partners often reflected deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, where women were expected to prioritize caregiving and domestic responsibilities. These expectations were particularly evident in the Abidjan-based group, where participants described how their partners viewed their roles as "homemakers" as a natural extension of their femininity (Yueping et al., 2021).

In the Paris-based group, traditional gender roles were often used to justify restrictions on women's independence. For instance, participants described how their partners discouraged them from pursuing work, framing such pursuits as merely unnecessary or inappropriate. These behaviors reflect broader patterns of gendered control, where traditional norms are used to limit women's agency and maintain male dominance (Alessi et al., 2021).

Conclusion

By analyzing the experiences of women in Paris and Abidjan, it is evident that intimate partner violence (IPV) in these relationships is shaped by intersecting systems of inequality and gender privilege. These findings reveal how European masculinity is leveraged to maintain deeply personal control, with economic dominance, emotional detachment, and extensive cultural misunderstandings perpetuating power imbalances. These features are compounded by strong racial hierarchies, which reinforce the subjugation of African women while masking the underlying systemic abuses.

Despite these challenges, the narratives of the participants show their resilience and agency in navigating oppressive structures. African women employed various strategies to assert their independence and resist abuse, from leveraging community support to reinterpreting traditional gender roles to their advantage. However, the systemic barriers faced by African women, including migration-related vulnerabilities and cultural stigmas, highlight the

urgent need for policy interventions that prioritize their safety and autonomy. Addressing IPV in cross-cultural relationships requires an approach that tackles immediate protection needs and the broader societal inequalities that enable abuse.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on IPV by centering the voices of African women and shedding light on the stories of abuse, especially in transnational contexts. Future research should continue to explore the depth of intersectionality of these experiences, with a focus on understanding how global systems of power influence these intimate relationships. Scholars, social workers, policymakers, and health practitioners can work toward dismantling the structures that perpetuate IPV, ultimately fostering healthier and more equitable partnerships across cultural and national boundaries.

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