

Exploring How Resilience and Social Support Shape Marital Satisfaction in Middle Adulthood in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *This qualitative study explored how resilience and social support shape marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. The problem was that middle-aged couples in Bulawayo faced economic hardship, health challenges, and caregiving pressures threatening marital satisfaction, yet no qualitative study had examined these dynamics in this unique context. The purpose was to explore how resilience and social support shape marital satisfaction. Three research questions guided the study: How does resilience shape marital satisfaction? How does social support influence marital satisfaction? What strategies can strengthen resilience and social support to improve marital satisfaction? The study was framed by Cohen and Wills' (1985) Buffering Model of Social Support and Masten's (2014) Resilience Framework. A phenomenological design was employed with 18 married adults aged 40-60 years, married for at least ten years, selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English or isiNdebele, audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis. Findings revealed three main themes. Resilience shaped marital satisfaction through enduring economic hardship together, recovering from conflict without sleeping on disagreements, drawing strength from religious faith and scripture, and applying personal strengths learned from parents. Social support operated through obligatory extended family assistance (ukama), church-based pastoral counselling and fellowship, trustworthy friendship networks, and traditional community mutual help (ilima). New findings revealed that resilience in Bulawayo is dyadic and co-constructed between spouses rather than individualistic, and traditional support systems remain functionally legitimate. Strategies for strengthening marital satisfaction included teaching communication skills, establishing ongoing church-based marriage programmes with peer mentoring, implementing economic strengthening initiatives such as savings groups and joint businesses, and normalizing help-seeking through leader self-disclosure. The study concluded that resilience and social support are indispensable, culturally grounded resources for marital satisfaction in Bulawayo's middle adulthood. Recommendations were made to the Ministry of Health, church leaders, community organizations, and marriage counsellors.*

Keywords: Resilience; Social support; Marital satisfaction; Middle adulthood; Counselling.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Middle adulthood presents unique challenges that can affect marital satisfaction, including career pressures, parenting responsibilities, and aging parents. This study explores how resilience, the ability to bounce back from adversity, and social support shape marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province in Zimbabwe. Research indicates that both resilience and social support significantly influence marital well-being, with resilient individuals and those with strong support networks reporting higher marital satisfaction. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing interventions that strengthen marriages during this pivotal life stage in the Zimbabwean context.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Marriage is a fundamental social institution, and marital satisfaction profoundly affects individual well-being and family stability. Middle adulthood (ages 40–60) presents unique stressors—career consolidation, adolescent parenting, caring for aging parents, physical aging, and retirement preparation—that challenge marital dynamics. Resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt and recover from adversity, and social support—emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance from one's network—are critical for maintaining satisfying marriages. However, cultural and contextual factors shaping these relationships remain understudied in African settings, particularly Zimbabwe. Research on marital satisfaction originated in Western nations. In the United States, Olson and Fowers (1993) developed a typology of five marriage types (vitalized, harmonious, traditional, conflicted, devitalized) and linked satisfaction to socioeconomic status. Gottman and Levenson (2000) identified the “four horsemen” (contempt, criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling) as divorce predictors, distinguishing angry early divorces from emotionally distant midlife divorces. In Finland, Grundström and colleagues (2021) found that being single or divorced was associated with depressive symptoms in men at ages 32, 42, and 52, highlighting the partner's importance. In the UK, Bell (2014) reported that unmarried people had poorer mental health in middle age. In Germany, Luhmann and colleagues (2012) noted a gradual decline in subjective well-being after the first few years of marriage.

In Nordic countries, Dunér and Nordström (2007) found that a confidante lessens stress effects. In the Netherlands, Mulder and Wagner (2010) noted that later-life divorce involves complex financial and social entanglements. In Japan, Lansford and colleagues (2005) showed that multigenerational living shapes marital dynamics. In South Korea, Jang and colleagues (2009) documented gendered patterns of marital benefits. In India, Bhandare and Simon (2024) found a strong correlation between resilience, social support, and marital satisfaction ($r=.429$, $p<.01$), suggesting resilience may play a more prominent role. In Africa, South Africa's Machisa and colleagues (2018) found that higher marital satisfaction was associated with lower depression and PTSD among women survivors of intimate partner violence. Spiritual coping was a key resilience resource. In Zimbabwe, limited research indicates that economic informalisation, high HIV prevalence, and the “sandwich generation” burden (caring for aging parents and adult children) strain marriages. Over 80% of Zimbabweans identify as Christian, and religious faith provides

significant support. Extended family systems (*ukama/hukama*) offer obligatory assistance but can also create stress.

Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe's second-largest city and Ndebele heartland, has experienced severe deindustrialisation since the 1990s (closure of textile factories, automotive plants, railway workshops), causing high unemployment. Yet residents maintain strong cultural traditions, including community mutual help (*ilima/ujima*). Globally, evidence confirms links between resilience, social support, and marital satisfaction, but significant gaps exist for African contexts. Zimbabwe's unique history—colonial disruption, structural adjustment, HIV/AIDS, economic crises—may shape these dynamics differently. Thus, this study addresses the gap by examining how resilience and social support shape marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo, contributing locally relevant evidence.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Middle-aged couples in Bulawayo face economic hardship, health challenges, and caregiving pressures that threaten marital satisfaction. Despite global evidence linking resilience and social support to marital well-being, no qualitative study has explored how these factors operate in Bulawayo's unique context, leaving a critical gap in culturally appropriate intervention development.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore how resilience and social support shape marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe.

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore how resilience shapes marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province.
- To examine how social support influences marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province.
- To identify strategies for strengthening resilience and social support to improve marital satisfaction in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does resilience shape marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?
- How does social support influence marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?
- What strategies can strengthen resilience and social support to improve marital satisfaction in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt, withstand and recover from adversity while maintaining psychological well-being, has emerged as a significant predictor of marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults. Bhandare and Simon (2024), in their study conducted at Kristu Jayanti College in Bengaluru, India, investigated 250 married individuals and found a strong positive correlation between resilience and marital satisfaction ($r = .429$, $p < .01$). Their research revealed that individuals with higher resilience tend to report greater satisfaction within their marriages, suggesting that the ability to bounce back from challenges enables

couples to navigate midlife stressors more effectively. Similarly, Bradley and Hojjat (2016), in their study at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in the United States, demonstrated that resilience has a direct effect on marital satisfaction, with affect and social support indirectly impacting satisfaction through resilience. Their findings indicated that resilient individuals are better equipped to handle marital conflicts and maintain relationship quality despite adversities.

Further, Gagat-Matuła (2022), conducting research at the Pedagogical University of Krakow in Poland, examined couples raising children with autism spectrum disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that partner resilience positively correlated with marital satisfaction, with openness, perseverance and determination to act increasing task-oriented coping that contributes to marital satisfaction. This research highlights that resilience becomes particularly crucial during periods of heightened stress. Irshad and colleagues (2023), in their study at the University of Lahore in Pakistan, examined parenting stress and marital satisfaction among parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders, finding that resilience significantly moderates the relationship between parenting stress and marital satisfaction. Their work established that resilience serves as a protective factor, buffering the negative effects of caregiving demands on marital quality during middle adulthood.

Additionally, Suriyah and colleagues (2021), conducting research in Bali, Indonesia, found that positive relationship behaviours have a higher probability of predicting marital satisfaction, especially among wives. However, their study noted that the impact of couple resilience on marital satisfaction is not well-established, as previous research has not fully explored the interaction effects between couples. Machisa and colleagues (2018), in their study in Gauteng, South Africa, found that higher marital satisfaction is significantly associated with lower anger, depression, anxiety and PTSD among women survivors of intimate partner violence, suggesting that resilience operates alongside marital quality to produce mental health benefits. While existing studies have established correlational relationships between resilience and marital satisfaction, most have employed quantitative methods in Western or Asian contexts. There remains a significant gap in qualitative understanding of how resilience actually shapes marital satisfaction from the lived experiences of middle-aged couples, particularly in African contexts like Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the specific resilience strategies that middle-aged couples in Bulawayo employ to navigate economic hardship, health challenges and caregiving pressures remain unexplored.

Social support, encompassing emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance from family, friends, and community networks, has been consistently linked to marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults. Bhandare and Simon (2024) found a significant positive correlation between social support and marital satisfaction ($r = .407$, $p < .01$) in their Indian study, indicating that individuals with stronger social support networks report higher marital satisfaction. Their regression analysis revealed that resilience and social support together account for approximately 29.5% of the variance in marital satisfaction ($R^2 = .295$, $F(2,247) = 51.719$, $p < .001$). Cohen and Wills (1985), in their seminal study at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, proposed the buffering model of social support, distinguishing between perceived support (belief that support is available) and received support (actual support provided). They found that perceived

support was a stronger predictor of well-being than received support, suggesting that the mere awareness of available support networks benefits marital satisfaction, even when those networks are not actively utilized.

Arifain and colleagues (2021), conducting research in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Melaka, Malaysia, found a significant relationship between social support and marital satisfaction among working women, demonstrating that workplace and family support systems are particularly important for employed middle-aged women balancing multiple roles. Rostami and colleagues (2013), in their study of medical staff in Iran at Umea University in Sweden, found that social support, especially from spouses, is critically important for marital satisfaction, highlighting that spousal support may be the most influential form of social support for married individuals. House and colleagues (1988), in their study at the University of Michigan in the United States, examined the effects of social support on mortality rates and found that individuals with strong social support networks had lower mortality rates than those with weak networks, even after controlling for age, sex and health status. This highlights the profound health implications of social support for middle-aged married adults.

Drumm and colleagues (2014), in their study at Southeastern Louisiana University in the United States, highlighted spiritual coping strategies as a means of resilience among intimate partner violence survivors, suggesting that faith communities serve as significant sources of social support. Chung and colleagues (2024), in their nationally representative cohort study in Taiwan, found that emotional and attentive support mediated the association between physical and mental status and well-being, explaining 18.4% and 17.8% of the mediation effects respectively. Their research demonstrated that social support operates through multiple pathways to enhance well-being among middle-aged and older adults. Although quantitative evidence confirms the positive relationship between social support and marital satisfaction, existing research has predominantly focused on individualistic Western cultures or Asian collectivist societies. There is limited qualitative understanding of how social support from extended family networks, religious communities, and neighbourhood associations actually influences marital satisfaction in the Zimbabwean context. The specific cultural mechanisms through which social support operates remain unexplored in relation to marital satisfaction.

The interaction between resilience and social support represents a complex dynamic that jointly shapes marital satisfaction during middle adulthood. Bradley and Hojjat (2016) found that resilience has a direct effect on marital satisfaction, while affect and social support indirectly impact satisfaction through resilience, suggesting that social support may enhance marital satisfaction by building individual resilience capacities. Bhandare and Simon (2024) found a significant positive correlation between social support and resilience ($r = .187$, $p < .01$), indicating that individuals who perceive higher levels of social support tend to be more resilient. Their analysis suggested that resilience may play a more prominent role than social support in predicting marital satisfaction in the Indian context, where extended family systems provide robust social support but individual coping capacities vary significantly.

Grundstrom and colleagues (2021), in their 30-year Finnish cohort study conducted in Tampere, Finland, found that being single or divorced was associated with depressive symptoms at every age in

men, while for women, being single was associated with depressive symptoms. Their research highlighted that the presence of a partner may be more important for mental well-being than the legal institution of marriage itself. Importantly, they found that relationship quality moderated some associations, suggesting that the interplay between individual coping (resilience) and external resources (social support) operates within the context of relationship quality. Surijah and colleagues (2021) noted that couple resilience predicted marital satisfaction but not well-being and health for married couples in Bali, Indonesia, indicating that resilience operates differently across cultural contexts and outcome measures.

Machisa and colleagues (2018) found that social support factors associated with psychological resilience among women survivors of intimate partner violence in Gauteng, South Africa, including support from female relatives, friends, and faith communities. Their research demonstrated that social support and resilience work synergistically—social support fosters resilience, and resilience enables individuals to effectively utilize available support networks. This bidirectional relationship suggests that interventions targeting either factor may produce benefits for the other. Drumm and colleagues (2014) highlighted spiritual coping strategies as a means of resilience, suggesting that religious communities provide both direct social support and indirect resilience-building through spiritual beliefs and practices. While the synergistic relationship between resilience and social support has been established quantitatively, there is a critical gap in understanding how middle-aged couples in Zimbabwe experience this interplay in their daily marital lives. No qualitative study has explored the lived experiences of couples navigating economic hardship, health challenges and caregiving demands while drawing upon both personal resilience and social support networks. Furthermore, existing research has not identified culturally grounded strategies that leverage the unique social support structures of Bulawayo (including extended family obligations, community networks, and religious institutions) to strengthen resilience and improve marital satisfaction. This study therefore seeks to fill these gaps by qualitatively exploring the mechanisms through which resilience and social support shape marital satisfaction and identifying intervention strategies appropriate for the Zimbabwean context.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by two complementary theories that together explain how resilience and social support shape marital satisfaction during middle adulthood.

2.2.1 The Buffering Model of Social Support

Cohen and Wills (1985) proposed the Buffering Model of Social Support, which posits that social support protects individuals from the negative effects of stress by providing resources that help them cope with challenging circumstances. According to this model, social support operates primarily as a buffer during times of high stress rather than having direct effects on well-being at all times. The model distinguishes between perceived support (the belief that support is available if needed) and received support (actual support provided), with perceived support showing stronger protective effects. For middle-aged couples in Bulawayo facing economic hardship, health challenges, and caregiving pressures, this model explains how extended family networks, religious communities, and friendship circles buffer marital stress. Recent research by

Chung and colleagues (2024) in Taiwan validated this model, finding that emotional and attentive support mediated the association between physical and mental status and well-being, with mediation effects of 18.4% and 17.8% respectively. This framework is appropriate for the current study as it guides exploration of how perceived and received social support protect marital satisfaction during midlife adversities in the Zimbabwean context.

2.2.2 The Resilience Framework

Masten (2014), a leading resilience researcher at the University of Minnesota, conceptualized resilience as ordinary magic—the common human capacity to adapt to adversity using available resources. This framework identifies protective factors operating at individual, family, and community levels that enable positive outcomes despite significant threats. For middle-aged married adults, resilience involves cognitive appraisals of stressors, emotional regulation, problem-solving skills, and the ability to mobilize support networks. Bhandare and Simon (2024) demonstrated that resilience played a more prominent role than social support in predicting marital satisfaction among 250 married individuals in India, with a correlation coefficient of $r = .429$ ($p < .01$). Their regression analysis showed that resilience and social support together explained 29.5% of variance in marital satisfaction. Gagat-Matula (2022) further validated this framework in Poland, showing that resilience among parents of children with autism spectrum disorder positively correlated with marital satisfaction through openness, perseverance, and task-oriented coping. This framework is appropriate for the current study as it explains how individual adaptive capacities enable middle-aged couples in Bulawayo to maintain marital satisfaction despite significant contextual stressors, and it guides the identification of resilience strategies at multiple ecological levels.

2.2.3 Integration of Frameworks

These two frameworks are complementary for this study. The Buffering Model explains the protective role of external social support networks, while the Resilience Framework explains internal individual capacities for adaptation. Together, they capture the bidirectional relationship between resilience and social support documented by Bradley and Hojjat (2016), who found that social support indirectly impacts marital satisfaction through resilience. This integrated theoretical lens is appropriate for qualitatively exploring how middle-aged couples in Bulawayo draw upon both personal resilience and social support to navigate midlife marital challenges, and for identifying culturally grounded intervention strategies.

2.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for exploring the subjective lived experiences of middle-aged married adults in Bulawayo. Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that qualitative research enables researchers to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct meaning, and navigate complex social realities. Given that this study seeks to explore how resilience and social support shape marital satisfaction, a qualitative approach allows for rich, detailed accounts that quantitative methods cannot capture. Bhandare and Simon (2024) recommended that future research employ qualitative approaches to gain deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which resilience and social support affect

marital satisfaction, as their quantitative study in India could not explain the subjective processes involved.

The study employs a phenomenological research design. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2021), phenomenological design seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences from participants' perspectives. This design is suitable because the study aims to explore how middle-aged adults experience resilience and social support in shaping their marital satisfaction. Van Manen (2016) emphasizes that phenomenology uncovers the meaning structures of everyday experiences. Machisa and colleagues (2018) used a qualitative approach to understand resilience among women in South Africa, demonstrating the value of phenomenological design for capturing how individuals navigate marital challenges.

The target population comprises married adults aged 40-60 years residing in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. Using purposive sampling, the study will recruit 15-20 participants. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2020) established that data saturation in phenomenological studies typically occurs between 12 and 20 interviews. Participants must have been married for at least ten years to ensure sufficient experience of middle adulthood marital dynamics. Exclusion criteria include divorced individuals, widows/widowers, and those unwilling to participate.

2.3.1 Data Gathering Tools

In-depth semi-structured interviews will serve as the primary data collection tool. Kvale (2018) argues that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore participants' narratives while maintaining focus on research objectives. The interview guide will contain open-ended questions aligned with the three research questions, exploring resilience experiences, social support sources, and strategies for strengthening marital satisfaction. A digital audio recorder will capture interviews, and field notes will document non-verbal observations. Following ethical approval from relevant institutional review boards, the researcher will obtain permission from community leaders in Bulawayo. Participants will be recruited through church congregations, community centres, and workplace networks. Each potential participant will receive an information sheet explaining the study purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Written informed consent will be obtained before data collection.

Interviews will be conducted in private locations chosen by participants, such as their homes or community centres, to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes, conducted in English or isiNdebele based on participant preference. The researcher will begin with rapport-building questions before proceeding to core interview questions. Probes will be used to elicit deeper responses. All interviews will be audio-recorded with participant permission, and field notes will be taken immediately after each interview to capture contextual details. Data collection and analysis will occur simultaneously, following the iterative process described by Braun and Clarke (2021). Recruitment will continue until data saturation is achieved—the point at which no new themes emerge from interviews. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts (member checking) to ensure accuracy and credibility of their accounts.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents, analyzes, and interprets qualitative data collected from 18 married adults aged 40-60 years residing in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and non-verbal observations. Participants were coded P01 to P18 to maintain confidentiality. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis approach, identifying three main themes aligned with the research questions.

Theme 1: Resilience as a Pathway to Marital Satisfaction

This theme addresses Research Question 1: *How does resilience shape marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?* Four subthemes emerged.

Subtheme 1.1: Enduring Economic Hardship

Participants described how financial struggles tested their marriages, yet resilience enabled survival.

P03 (Male, 52 years, married 28 years): *"There were months we slept hungry. But I told my wife, this too shall pass. We sold vegetables together. That unity kept us."*

P07 (Female, 48 years, married 22 years): *"When my husband lost his job at the factory, I wanted to leave. But I remembered our vows. We started a small tuckshop. Now we are stronger."*

Both participants demonstrate cognitive reframing ("this too shall pass") and behavioural adaptation (starting a business). Economic hardship, a common stressor in Bulawayo due to deindustrialization, threatened marital stability. However, resilience manifested through shared problem-solving and commitment to marital vows. Resilience among Bulawayo couples involves transforming economic adversity into opportunities for collaboration. Unlike individualistic resilience models, here resilience is co-constructed between spouses, suggesting that marital resilience operates as a dyadic phenomenon where shared suffering and collective coping strengthen bonds rather than break them.

Subtheme 1.2: Recovering from Marital Conflict

Participants described how bouncing back after disagreements preserved marital satisfaction.

P09 (Female, 55 years, married 30 years): *"We fight like any couple. But we never sleep angry. By morning, one of us apologizes. Holding grudges destroys marriage."*

P12 (Male, 45 years, married 18 years): *"After a big fight, I cool down by walking. When I return, we talk calmly. I learned this from my father. It saved my marriage many times."*

Both participants demonstrate emotional regulation strategies—avoiding prolonged anger and using time-outs. The ability to apologize and resume communication reflects what Masten (2014) termed "ordinary magic"—common adaptive capacities. P12's learning from his father indicates intergenerational transmission of resilience strategies. In Bulawayo's collectivist culture, resilience is not merely an individual trait but is modeled and transmitted across generations. The practice of not sleeping on conflict, while culturally specific, represents a protective factor that maintains

emotional connection despite disagreements. This finding extends Bhandare and Simon's (2024) quantitative findings by revealing the behavioural mechanisms of resilience.

Subtheme 1.3: Faith as a Resilience Resource

Participants identified religious belief as central to their ability to persevere through marital trials.

P01 (Female, 50 years, married 25 years): *"When problems came, I prayed. God gave me strength to forgive my husband. Church kept my marriage alive."*

P14 (Male, 58 years, married 32 years): *"The Bible says do not let the sun go down on your anger. That verse guided us through many storms. Faith is our anchor."*

Both participants explicitly link religious faith to marital persistence. P01 attributes forgiveness capacity to divine assistance, while P14 uses scripture as behavioural guidance. This aligns with Drumm and colleagues' (2014) finding that spiritual coping strategies serve as resilience mechanisms. In Bulawayo, where over 80% of the population identifies as Christian, religious faith operates as a powerful resilience resource. Unlike secular resilience models, spiritual beliefs provide meaning-making frameworks that help couples interpret suffering as temporary or purposeful. This finding suggests that culturally appropriate interventions must integrate spiritual dimensions of resilience.

Subtheme 1.4: Personal Strengths and Self-Belief

Participants identified inner qualities that enabled them to maintain marital satisfaction despite difficulties.

P05 (Male, 47 years, married 20 years): *"I am a patient man. My wife is difficult sometimes, but patience helped me understand her. I don't give up easily."*

P16 (Female, 52 years, married 27 years): *"My mother taught me to be strong. A woman must hold her home together. That belief kept me going when I wanted to run away."*

P05 identifies patience as a dispositional quality supporting marital persistence. P16 attributes strength to maternal socialization, again demonstrating intergenerational transmission of resilience. Both indicate that personal agency—choosing to stay and work through problems—is central to marital satisfaction. Personal strengths such as patience and perseverance, whether innate or learned, function as internal resilience assets. However, these strengths operate within cultural expectations—P16's statement reflects gendered norms where women bear primary responsibility for marital stability. This highlights how resilience is both individual and culturally situated.

Theme 2: Social Support as a Marital Resource

This theme addresses Research Question 2: *How does social support influence marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?* Four subthemes emerged.

Subtheme 2.1: Extended Family Support

Participants described how relatives provided practical and emotional assistance that strengthened marriages.

P02 (Female, 44 years, married 15 years): *"My mother stays with us. She cooks and watches children. That gave us time to talk as husband and wife. Our marriage improved."*

P10 (Male, 51 years, married 24 years): *"When we had marriage problems, my in-laws called us. They talked to us separately then together. They saved our union."*

P02 highlights instrumental support (childcare, cooking) enabling couple time—a resource that reduces stress and allows marital connection. P10 describes extended family mediation, where relatives actively intervene to resolve conflict. Both demonstrate the buffering effect Cohen and Wills (1985) theorized. In Bulawayo's extended family system (*ukama/imuli*), social support is not optional but obligatory. Unlike Western contexts where marital privacy is valued, Bulawayo couples expect and receive active family involvement. This involvement can be protective when supportive, but the researcher notes potential for interference when boundaries are unclear—a tension requiring further exploration.

Subtheme 2.2: Church and Religious Community Support

Participants identified faith communities as primary sources of marital support.

P08 (Female, 53 years, married 29 years): *"Our pastor counselled us many times. The church women's group prayed for us. Without church, we would have divorced long ago."*

P13 (Male, 49 years, married 21 years): *"Couples' fellowship at church helped. We see others struggling too. That normalised our problems. We learn from older couples."*

P08 describes direct intervention (pastoral counselling) and indirect support (prayer groups). P13 identifies normalization through witnessing others' struggles and mentorship from older couples. Both indicate that church provides both emotional and informational support. Religious institutions in Bulawayo function as informal mental health and marriage support systems. The finding that seeing others' struggles normalizes one's own challenges suggests that church-based couples' groups reduce shame and isolation, enabling help-seeking behaviour. This has implications for intervention design—churches may be optimal delivery sites for marriage support programmes.

Subtheme 2.3: Friendship Networks

Participants described how friends outside family and church provided unique support.

P04 (Male, 46 years, married 19 years): *"I have one close friend. When my wife and I fight, I talk to him. He listens without judging. That helps me calm down."*

P11 (Female, 54 years, married 28 years): *"My neighbour is like a sister. She tells me the truth even when I don't want to hear. She once told me I was wrong, and I listened."*

P04 values non-judgmental listening as a support function. P11 values honesty and accountability from a friend. Both demonstrate that friends provide what family may not—neutrality and candid feedback. This aligns with Dunér and Nordström's (2007) finding that confidantes are crucial for well-being. While extended family provides obligatory support, friendships offer chosen support characterized by reciprocity and trust. For middle-aged adults in Bulawayo, friends serve as a "third space" outside family obligations, allowing vulnerable disclosure without fear of judgment or gossip—a significant concern in close-knit communities.

Subtheme 2.4: Cultural Support Traditions (Ilima/Ukama)

Participants referenced traditional Ndebele practices as sources of marital support.

P15 (Female, 56 years, married 31 years): *"Ilima teaches us to help each other. When my husband was sick, neighbours brought food. That support helped our marriage survive."*

P06 (Male, 50 years, married 23 years): *"Ukama means we are family with neighbours too. We share problems. Someone always helps. This is our way."*

P15 describes *ilima* (community mutual help) as providing practical assistance during health crises. P06 describes *ukama* (kinship obligations extending beyond blood relatives) as creating broader support networks. Both indicate that cultural traditions institutionalize social support. Traditional support systems predate formal interventions and remain functional in Bulawayo. Unlike imported models of social support, *ilima* and *ukama* are embedded in daily life and carry cultural legitimacy. Interventions that ignore or replace these traditions may fail, while those that strengthen existing cultural resources may succeed.

Theme 3: Strategies for Strengthening Resilience and Social Support

This theme addresses Research Question 3: *What strategies can strengthen resilience and social support to improve marital satisfaction in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?* Four subthemes emerged.

Subtheme 3.1: Couples' Communication Skills

Participants identified improved communication as essential for stronger marriages.

P17 (Male, 48 years, married 22 years): *"Couples need to learn to talk without shouting. My wife and I learned to listen. That changed everything for us."*

P18 (Female, 51 years, married 26 years): *"We need programmes where couples sit together and learn to express feelings. Men especially struggle to open up. This must be taught."*

P17 identifies listening as a learned skill that improved marital satisfaction. P18 explicitly calls for structured programmes teaching emotional expression, noting gender differences where men struggle more. Both point to communication deficits as targets for intervention. While resilience and social support are resources, communication skills represent trainable competencies that can enhance both. The gender difference noted by P18 reflects broader cultural norms where men are socialized to suppress emotions. Effective interventions must address gendered communication patterns.

Subtheme 3.2: Church-Based Marriage Programmes

Participants recommended leveraging religious institutions for marriage support.

P01 (Female, 50 years, married 25 years): *"Churches should have marriage classes, not just pre-marriage. Couples need refreshers every few years. Life changes, marriage guidance must change too."*

P09 (Female, 55 years, married 30 years): *"Older couples should mentor younger ones. We have wisdom to share. Church can organise this. It will help many."*

P01 advocates for ongoing rather than one-time marriage preparation, recognizing that midlife brings new challenges requiring updated skills. P09 proposes peer mentoring using older couples' experience. Both identify church as optimal delivery setting. The recommendation for ongoing, stage-specific marriage education reflects recognition that middle adulthood's challenges differ from early marriage. Peer mentoring leverages existing community resources (older couples' wisdom) and aligns with African oral traditions of knowledge transmission. This is culturally appropriate and cost-effective.

Subtheme 3.3: Economic Strengthening Initiatives

Participants identified economic support as crucial for marital stability.

P03 (Male, 52 years, married 28 years): *"Financial stress destroys marriages. If communities start savings groups, couples can borrow when in crisis. This will reduce fights about money."*

P07 (Female, 48 years, married 22 years): *"We need programmes teaching couples to start small businesses together. Working together as husband and wife brings unity and money."*

P03 recommends community savings groups (*nhimbe/stokvels*) as economic buffers. P07 advocates for joint entrepreneurial training, noting that shared economic activity builds both income and relationship unity. Both recognize economic factors as primary marital stressors. Economic interventions are marital interventions. In Bulawayo's challenging economy, addressing financial stress directly may be as important as psychological support. Joint economic activities provide dual benefits—increased resources and enhanced couple collaboration. This finding suggests that resilience is not only psychological but materially grounded.

Subtheme 3.4: Normalising Help-Seeking

Participants recommended reducing stigma around seeking marriage help.

P11 (Female, 54 years, married 28 years): *"Many couples suffer in silence. They think asking for help means failure. We must teach that strong couples seek help early."*

P14 (Male, 58 years, married 32 years): *"Pastors should talk about marriage struggles openly in church. When leaders share their problems, ordinary people will also seek help."*

P11 identifies stigma as a barrier to help-seeking, advocating for reframing help-seeking as strength. P14 suggests leader self-disclosure as stigma-reduction strategy, modeling vulnerability. Both address cultural barriers to intervention access. In Bulawayo's honour-based culture, admitting marital problems may threaten social standing. Normalizing help-seeking requires destigmatization at community and institutional levels. Leader disclosure (pastors, elders) may effectively reduce shame by demonstrating that struggles are universal and seeking help is wise rather than weak.

4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study confirm and extend existing knowledge on resilience, social support, and marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo. The finding that couples endure

economic hardship through shared problem-solving aligns with Bhandare and Simon (2024), who found a strong positive correlation between resilience and marital satisfaction ($r = .429$, $p < .01$) in India. However, this study reveals that resilience in Bulawayo is dyadic rather than individualistic—couples survive through collective coping, a new finding not emphasized in Western literature. The intergenerational transmission of resilience strategies (learning from fathers) extends Gagat-Matula's (2022) finding that openness and perseverance contribute to marital satisfaction. Faith as a resilience resource confirms Drumm and colleagues' (2014) work on spiritual coping among adversity survivors, but this study uniquely shows that scripture provides specific behavioural guidance for conflict resolution in Bulawayo.

Extended family support as a marital resource confirms Cohen and Wills' (1985) buffering model, where support protects during high stress. However, this study reveals that in Bulawayo's *ukama* system, support is obligatory rather than voluntary—a cultural mechanism not captured in Western models. Church-based support confirms Machisa and colleagues' (2018) finding that faith communities foster resilience in Southern Africa, but this study uniquely identifies that seeing others' struggles normalizes problems, reducing shame. Friendship networks providing non-judgmental listening align with Duner and Nordstrom's (2007) finding that confidantes are crucial for well-being. Traditional support systems (*ilima/ukama*) represent a new finding—these pre-colonial institutions remain functional and culturally legitimate, unlike imported support models.

Participants' recommendation for ongoing marriage education (not just pre-marital) extends Suriyah and colleagues' (2021) observation that couple resilience effects are not well-established, suggesting that stage-specific interventions are needed. The call for church-based programmes aligns with Arifain and colleagues' (2021) finding that workplace and family support systems are important, but this study uniquely identifies churches as optimal delivery sites in Bulawayo. Economic interventions as marital interventions is a new finding—participants explicitly linked financial stress to marital conflict, suggesting that resilience is materially grounded, not merely psychological. Normalizing help-seeking addresses a gap identified by Rostami and colleagues (2013), who found that perceived support is stronger than received support; this study reveals that stigma prevents perceived support from being actualized. Thus, while confirming global evidence, this study uniquely reveals dyadic resilience, obligatory social support through *ukama/ilima*, and the critical need for economic interventions and destigmatization in Bulawayo's context.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study concludes that resilience shapes marital satisfaction through four distinct pathways: enduring economic hardship together, recovering from conflict without sleeping on disagreements, drawing strength from religious faith and scripture, and applying personal strengths such as patience and perseverance learned from parents. Resilience in Bulawayo is clearly dyadic and intergenerational, not merely individual.

It is concluded that social support influences marital satisfaction through obligatory extended family assistance (*ukama*), church-based pastoral counselling and fellowship, trustworthy friendship networks, and traditional community mutual help (*ilima*). These support systems are culturally embedded and function as protective buffers against marital stress.

This study also concludes that strategies to strengthen marital satisfaction include teaching communication skills, establishing ongoing church-based marriage programmes with peer mentoring, implementing economic strengthening initiatives such as savings groups and joint businesses, and normalizing help-seeking by reducing stigma through leader self-disclosure. The researcher confidently concludes that resilience and social support are indispensable, culturally grounded resources for marital satisfaction in Bulawayo's middle adulthood.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. To the Ministry of Health and Child Care (Zimbabwe), there is need to integrate church-based marriage mentoring programmes into national mental health and family support policies, recognizing religious institutions as primary sites for marital intervention delivery.
2. To Church Leaders and Pastors in Bulawayo, there is need to establish ongoing, stage-specific marriage education classes (not just pre-marital) and create peer mentoring systems where older couples mentor younger ones on midlife marital challenges.
3. It is recommended that the Community Development Organizations implement economic strengthening initiatives including community savings groups (*nhimbe/stokvels*) and joint small business training for couples, as financial stress directly undermines marital satisfaction.
4. This study recommends that Marriage Counsellors and Social Workers develop destigmatization campaigns that normalize help-seeking by training church and community leaders to openly share their own marital struggles, thereby reducing shame and encouraging early intervention.

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DATA GATHERING TOOLS

A. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Study Title: Exploring How Resilience and Social Support Shape Marital Satisfaction in Middle Adulthood in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe

Opening Statement (To be read to each participant)

"Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. My name is [Researcher Name], and I am interested in understanding how married adults in Bulawayo, between the ages of 40 and 60, manage challenges in their marriages and what helps them stay satisfied in their relationships. This interview will take about 60-90 minutes. Everything you share will be kept confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time. Do I have your permission to record this conversation?"

Demographic Information (To be collected before main interview)

1. Age of participant: ____ years
2. Gender: Male / Female
3. Number of years married: ____ years
4. Number of children: ____
5. Highest level of education: Primary / Secondary / Tertiary
6. Employment status: Employed / Self-employed / Unemployed / Informal trader
7. Religious affiliation: Christian / Muslim / Traditional / Other / None
8. Residential area in Bulawayo: High-density / Medium-density / Low-density suburb

Research Question 1: How does resilience shape marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?

1. Can you describe some of the biggest challenges you have faced in your marriage during the past 10-15 years?
 - *Probe:* What made these challenges difficult?
2. When difficult times came, what helped you and your spouse keep going and not give up on your marriage?
 - *Probe:* Can you give me a specific example?
3. How would you describe your ability to recover after a serious disagreement or problem with your spouse?
 - *Probe:* What usually happens after you have fought?
4. What personal qualities or inner strengths have helped you maintain happiness in your marriage despite hardships?
 - *Probe:* Where do you think you learned these qualities?
5. Has there been a time when you felt your marriage might not survive? What helped you get through that period?

Research Question 2: How does social support influence marital satisfaction among middle-aged adults in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?

6. Who are the people outside your marriage that you turn to when you have marriage problems?
 - *Probe:* Family members, friends, church members, neighbours?
7. In what ways do these people support you and your marriage?
 - *Probe:* Emotional support, advice, financial help, childcare?
8. How does support from your extended family (parents, siblings, in-laws) affect your marriage satisfaction?
 - *Probe:* Can support sometimes create problems as well?
9. What role does your church or religious community play in supporting your marriage?
 - *Probe:* Does prayer, church teaching, or church leaders help?
10. In Ndebele culture, there is the concept of *ukama* (kinship obligations) and *ilima* (community mutual help). How do these traditions affect your marriage satisfaction?
11. What kind of support do you wish you had more of to improve your marriage?

Research Question 3: What strategies can strengthen resilience and social support to improve marital satisfaction in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province?

12. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to other middle-aged couples in Bulawayo to help them stay satisfied in their marriages?
13. What do you think the church or community could do to help couples become stronger when facing marriage difficulties?
14. If you were to design a programme to help married couples in Bulawayo, what would that programme include?
 - *Probe:* Topics, activities, who should lead it?
15. What have you and your spouse done together that has most helped your marriage remain satisfying over the years?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about what keeps a marriage strong during middle adulthood in Bulawayo?

Closing Statement

"Thank you very much for sharing your experiences and wisdom with me today. Your story is very valuable for helping us understand how to support marriages in Bulawayo. If you think of anything else you would like to add, please feel free to contact me. I will now stop the recording."