

# Navigating Law and Vulnerability: African Women, Legal Consciousness and Intimate Partner Violence in the UK

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**Abstract:** Feminist migratory research has highlighted the gendered dimensions of migration, drawing attention to the compounded challenges migrant women face due to both gender and exclusionism in the migration process. Drawing on research that conceptualises legal consciousness and understanding of the law as both cognitive and behavioural, this study examines the gendered relationship between UK immigration regulations and African migrant women's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the UK. Through qualitative interviews focusing on Nigerian migrant women on spouse visas, it explores survivors' informal understandings of their rights, duties, and justice in the face of violence and abuse. This paper identifies two key dynamics: first, the patriarchal inheritance of the law and its intersection with existing social contexts through its hegemonic and institutional power, shaping the women's experiences; and second, the ways survivors exercise agency and show resistance by using the law to reduce or mitigate their vulnerabilities. It is argued that the UK immigration law within this context operates simultaneously both as a tool of oppression and as a legal pathway to safety and empowerment, with the women's legal consciousness emerging at the intersection of these socio-legal structures.

**Keywords:** Intimate Partner Violence; Legal Consciousness; Nigerian Migrant Women; UK Immigration Law; UK Hostile Environment; Gender-based Violence.

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## 1. Introduction

Feminist research has extensively shown how immigration exacerbates migrant women's vulnerability to intimate partner violence (IPV) as they navigate the intersecting vulnerabilities related to both their gender and precarious immigration status, especially within diasporic communities from the Global South (Menjivar and Salcido 2013). While much of this research focuses on undocumented migrants, a critical question remains: what happens when migrant women hold documented status but continue to experience compounded vulnerabilities that intensify their risk of violence and oppression?

In the UK, while immigration laws may provide pathways to new opportunities, they also embed structural inequalities that, though seemingly neutral, increase migrant women's vulnerability to gendered violence and exploitation due to the precarious nature of restricted visas. In practice, these laws often reinforce values and inequalities that legitimise othering and sanction gendered forms of marginalisation both at the micro and macro levels. Within this context, the law's hegemony, institutional power and dominance function as a form of patriarchal inheritance that interacts with pre-existing social inequalities, shaping women's experiences (Porter 2020; Henderson et al. 1991).

This paper explores the nuanced and often overlooked ways in which immigration laws affect migrant women's experiences of IPV in the UK, with a particular focus on documented Nigerian women on Spouse Visas. It examines how survivors engage with and mobilise the law through informal understandings of their rights, responsibilities and justice in the face of violence and abuse. By framing their legal consciousness as both a cognitive and behavioural process, this paper highlights how their interactions with the law go beyond simplistic notions of compliance or resistance, revealing the law's dual role in their lives as both a tool of oppression and a source of empowerment.

### 1.1 Theorising Law, Legality and Intimate Partner Violence among Nigerian Migrant Women in the UK

Theoretical frameworks that help to conceptualise how immigration, gender and power intersect to shape the experiences of violence and oppression among Nigerian women in the UK diaspora are necessary to avoid falling into monolithic conceptualisations of IPV experiences. To this end, a legal consciousness framework and the theory of intersectionality has been adopted as both theoretical and methodological tools to examine the gendered impact of the UK immigration law on the lived experiences of IPV within this population.

Ewick and Silbey (1998) define legal consciousness as more than a mere state of mind about laws and regulations. It involves how ordinary citizens subjectively interpret and act on the law in their daily lives (Hertogh, 2009). Previous research on legal consciousness has shown that legal consciousness can be shaped by

various factors, including the unique social location of individuals (Abrego 2008; Nielson 2000; Merry 2003). For instance, Merry (2003), in examining the legal consciousness of women who had experienced violence, explored how their experiences influenced their perception of the law and its potential as a tool for escaping abuse. Guduk and Desmet (2022) argue that legal consciousness is dynamic and shaped by structures in the social environment that impact the everyday lives of individuals. Blackstone et al. (2009) similarly argued that legal consciousness is a fluid process involving what people make of the law and how they respond to it. This paper draws from these theoretical foundations to examine Nigerian women's legal consciousness through the lens of citizenship, conceptualising it both as a tool of exclusion and as a potential source of empowerment. It explores how citizenship becomes more than attaining a geographic marker or legal status but instead reflects a deeper struggle for identity, agency, and stability for Nigerian migrant women in an environment shaped by structural and social barriers. It aims to capture their subjective experiences of the UK's immigration policy and how it influences their willingness and capacity to engage with the law to address their needs, secure a more stable legal status and escape IPV. Additionally, it draws on Guduk and Desmet's (2022) argument that, for many diasporic women, their legal consciousness may be influenced by legal pluralism, where perceptions and actions are shaped by the laws of both the host country and their country of origin. In this context, the paper analyses the combined experiences of law, legality, decisions about compliance, and how these are negotiated within the indigenous and diasporic lives of Nigerian migrant women (Silbey 2005).

Drawing on an intersectional framework, alongside the legal consciousness framework, helps provide a more nuanced and critical understanding of how overlapping inequalities shape their lived experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Examining the multiple layers of oppression faced by Nigerian migrant women in the UK is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it provides a simple and obvious pointer to the heterogeneous nature of British society itself, comprising diverse political ideologies, cultures and ethnicities. Grouping the experiences of women from varied socio-cultural backgrounds under a single category would be a reductionist approach that fails to capture the variety within women's lived experiences. Secondly, while it can be argued that there are commonalities in women's experiences of IPV based on gender, other structural inequalities can intensify or add unique dimensions to these experiences (Mirza 2017; Gill and Sharma 2007). For instance, the specificities of Nigerian migrant women's experiences of IPV in the UK are, for example, different from the experiences of women from the native population or dominant culture who are not subject to immigration controls. Race, in particular, adds another layer of oppression for these women, leading to complex experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and racism that migrant women from Western European backgrounds typically may not face (Ogbemudia 2021). Recognising these multiple systems of power, privilege, and inequality is therefore vital to understanding their unique impact on the experiences of Nigerian women in the UK. Intersectionality, therefore, explores the wider framework within which violence against women occurs and acknowledges that broader social, political, and economic contexts play crucial roles in shaping their experiences. This includes how they navigate the law to find agency within multiple conditions of vulnerability.

## 2. Methodology

Mirza (2017) points out that without including women's own perspectives, policy documents often overlook the distinct forms of abuse faced by women from various migrant backgrounds. To access the subjective experiences of Nigerian women's engagement with the UK immigration law while experiencing IPV, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 Nigerian women resident in England on spouse visas who had experienced IPV from their resident spouses or former spouses. All participants were based in London, the UK's most ethnically diverse region in England (Office for National Statistics 2021). Data collection took place virtually, rather than face to face, between June and November 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview was recorded with the participants' explicit consent, and all participants signed an informed consent form before scheduling. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Essex Ethics Committee. The data was analysed using a comparative inductive approach, involving thoroughly reading the transcripts and labelling responses to uncover key themes and recurring concepts.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 posed challenges, and a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to reach eligible participants was adopted. WhatsApp video, text and audio messaging proved to be an effective tool for building trust, as it provided participants with a platform they were already familiar with before the pandemic (Sabri and Gielen 2020). Participants reported feeling more at ease and less inhibited, encouraging them to share their personal experiences more openly (Tremblay et al. 2021).

Due to ethical and safety concerns, particularly during the ongoing pandemic, all participants were required to no longer be in their abusive relationships before the interviews took place. This was to avoid the risk and harm

that could result from giving an interview for research purposes while trapped in the home with their abusers. The interviews, averaging one hour each, aimed to explore how participants perceived and interacted with the law in the context of the violence and abuse they experienced and how their precarious migrant status affected them from a gendered perspective.

The following section examines how participants informally interpreted the law, using it as both a legal pathway to safety and empowerment. It also explores how they complied with the law from a position of oppression, demonstrating how they navigate multiple layers of oppression in order to thrive.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Crim-migration and Legal Consciousness

The criminalisation of immigration rules and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in the UK profoundly influence the legal consciousness of migrant women experiencing IPV. For many, this creates a climate of fear that shapes their perspective, making strict adherence to immigration laws seem safer than facing the risks of undocumented status. Findings from this study revealed that the participants feared that leaving their abusive marriage might jeopardise their documented status, potentially rendering them undocumented. They feared that not only will this block their access to essential services but could worse, lead to deportation. Faced with a limited set of options, many felt compelled to choose what they saw as the safer path: staying in the abusive relationship until they gained citizenship rather than risking the repercussions of the law. The following sections examine how these fears impacted their decisions:

*I wanted to leave the marriage so badly, but I had to think about us. I mean me and my son. How would I have provided for him? My husband already said he would not look after us and that he could easily have another baby with another woman. Even with my papers, I was already feeling trapped with no money except what my husband provided for us. Imagine if I did not have my papers. No money from my husband and no money from the government to help us. My little boy is innocent in all this and did not ask for any of this drama...I cannot let him suffer like me. So, I decided to stay in the marriage, you know.... until I got my British passport. It was very important to me. (IV, 28)*

The participant's awareness of the structural limitations of her visa significantly influenced her engagement with the law, leading her to prioritise maintaining her documented status despite facing violence. She placed high importance on the legality of her visa, fearing that any breach of UK immigration rules could harm both her own well-being and that of her son. This finding aligns with Abrego's (2008) study on the legal consciousness of undocumented migrant students, where it was revealed that rather than being against the law, they adhered to the law as a form of resistance so that they could claim new rights to benefits that would enable them empower themselves. This dual perspective illustrates how the law served as both a tool of oppression, limiting migrant women's options for safety, and as a potential pathway to empowerment.

The participant's account below also reflected the belief that living illegally in the UK would double her oppression and exacerbate her already vulnerable position not only within the marriage but also within the British society:

*The Home Office is not playing you know...They are very strict...I see them as robots. You have your papers, tick. If you don't, you have to get out. You cannot hide because these days, it is not only immigration officers that check, but everyone can also now check your visa, even landlords. So, it will be very difficult for me if I leave without my papers... and I did not want to complicate my situation by being illegal...then it becomes two problems instead of one. The abuse and my visa. The abuse is enough. When I come out, I want to be free. So, to be a citizen was important to me. It is a better way of living in this country. (AD, 29)*

*Of course, I knew I was being abused, but I had to pick my battles. 'If I report this, what will come out of it?' This was the question I used to always ask myself at that time. To me, 'out there' was not attractive because of my spouse visa and the no access to the benefits thing. So, would it be better for me and my children if I delayed leaving a little bit? Just for a while until my papers changed. After the abuse, and I am free, what next? Can I manage on my own with two children? What about childcare? I had to think like this and manage the situation. It was like writing an exam and trying to figure out the right answer to the difficult questions. (EN, 34)*

The women understood the privileges of citizenship on the one hand and the over-policing of those without legal status on the other hand. As documented migrants, they also understood the immigration law as a structural form of social control that trapped them in their abusive marriages but also as a tool that they could use to feel safe and guarantee their independence from their abusive husbands (Namukasa 2017). Their legal consciousness was, therefore, shaped by weighing the liminal period between their current legal status and achieving citizenship, and the condition of illegality and deportability that come with being undocumented in the UK. This suggests that the women chose to remain within restrictive legal boundaries as a strategy to mitigate the effects of the law and to find a way to thrive (Abrego 2019; Menjivar and Salcido 2002). Such strategic decisions reflect a form of legal consciousness shaped by resistance, a theme that was common across all the participants' narratives. Despite their constrained autonomy, they valued maintaining a more legitimate platform from which to then resist the violence they faced and break free from the victimisation and dependency tied to their spouse visas. Therefore, they developed a "legal consciousness of resistance," where migrant women experiencing IPV are forced to *stay with the violence* and tolerate the exclusions and vulnerabilities imposed by their precarious legal status in order to change the disadvantaged space they occupied through attaining citizenship. Citizenship, therefore, becomes a form of gendered resistance that Nigerian migrant women use to guarantee their well-being and maximise their security and sense of belonging within the UK (Abrego's 2019, p 644; Chacón 2018; Abrams 2014).

The criminalisation of migration also impacted the women's informal understanding of the UK criminal justice system. While women from the dominant culture may use the criminal justice system unreservedly to address IPV, the situation is more complicated for Nigerian migrant women:

*I desperately wanted to report him to the police... but I was afraid of them. I was hoping for a miracle where one of them could see the whole thing from my point of view, not my visa but as a woman and a mother in a very difficult situation in need of their help. To be honest, I was very sure they could help me... you know arrest my husband and all that. But they also have to obey the law, right? So, it is not personal if they can't help me. Everyone has to obey the law. (TP, 42)*

This highlights what Gill and Sharma (2007) described as the tension between the government's aim to address intimate violence among migrant women and its conflicting priority to be 'tough' on immigration. This tension shaped the actual or perceived structural barriers that the women in this study faced. As a result, many Nigerian migrant women may avoid accessing support mechanisms intended to aid them, fearing that revealing the abuse to the criminal justice system could ultimately harm their immigration status. Policies like the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition on UK spouse visas, coupled with mandatory data-sharing between statutory services and immigration authorities, understandably make many survivors hesitant to report the abuse they face, leaving them feeling powerless against both the abuse and the legal system. Consequently, their legal consciousness and engagement with the criminal justice system emerges from multiple precarious socio-legal structures.

### 3.2 The Intersection of Gender and Legal Consciousness

The hierarchical social context that structures gender inequality at both micro and macro levels also influenced the participants' experiences. The interview findings highlighted the shortcomings of the UK's immigration law's claim to neutrality. Instead, the women's narratives revealed that the law was far from gender-neutral in their experiences of IPV and was deeply entangled with the unequal power dynamics defining their social position. In the excerpt below, the participant describes her perception of the policy and explains how she believes it enabled her husband to exert control over her:

*Here, the law don't give me any power. It give all the power to my husband. The Home Office say I must depend on my husband because he bring me to the UK. They say I can leave, but how can I leave when I cannot do anything with the visa that they give me. Even to rent my own house, I cannot do so. I swear, in my heart, I believe both my husband and the law abuse me because every time I want to leave him, he laugh and tell me say I am his property and my visa is his property too. But this is true because it is not the same experience for a man who come to this country. So, just as I have to obey my husband because of our culture, I have to obey him too because of my visa. Is the same thing. Let us talk the truth as it is. It is the same experience. So, it is the law and my husband that abuse me... and I cannot separate them in my mind. (NK, 42)*

This illustrates how migration policies intersect with social and private contexts that contribute to violence against women. The participant's view of the law as a factor in her abuse underscores the disproportionate

impact UK migration policy has on Nigerian migrant women, particularly in how it reinforces power imbalances within marriages and upholds gendered norms that subordinate women. This suggests that the law's role in sustaining systemic domination and subordination influenced the participants' mobilisation of the law and their engagement with the criminal justice system. In this context, the law's patriarchal inheritance, expressed through its institutional power, becomes evident as it interacts with pre-existing social structures that shape women's lived experiences. (Porter 2020; Henderson et al. 1991). This interconnectedness between gender and the law was also highlighted below:

*My husband never helped me with the children. He says it is my job and would always criticise me for being a bad mother, but when the children cried, he would leave the house and sit in the car. He used to get very angry if I had not cooked dinner before he came back from work. He would call me a bad wife who did not know how to care for her husband. He told me that since I did not know my place as a woman and respect him as the head of the house, he would send me back to Nigeria. What baffles me is how can the Home Office not understand all this ... (sighs)... that it is not the same when you are a woman who is a migrant. The same law cannot apply to all of us because they call us properties as well as wives and mothers. Can they not be gentle with us? .... But the law is like a rock. When it is thrown at you, you can either dodge it or let it hit you. I chose not to let it hit me for my own good and for the sake of my children. (JY, 38)*

This narrative tells of the participant's frustration and perceived powerlessness in the face of the law despite its hegemony. She perceived the law as either ignorant or dismissive of its gendered impact on women's experiences of violence and oppression. Yet, she chose to identify with the same law and use it as a mechanism for resistance. This suggests that although Nigerian migrant women may perceive the law as rigid and impenetrable, they may still choose to mould it to suit their interests. Therefore, their legal consciousness was created by navigating the role of the law within the multiple and interconnected layers of disadvantage that marked their experiences. This suggests that their reverence for the law was not out of a moral obligation or duty but for its facilities to meet desired and specific goals (Porter 2020). In line with this analysis, Nielson (2000) described the law as porous and often utilised, manoeuvred and manipulated by social actors to serve their interests, and it is at the point where the law intersects with their everyday lives that their understanding and engagement with the law and legality is often created. This is again seen below where the participant's perception and understanding of the law involved what the law could do to save her:

*I realised that it was up to me to prove the abuse. My husband would never admit to anything. So, I started to gather evidence. I secretly recorded him whenever he was shouting at me and calling me all sorts of names. Whenever he grabbed me and left a bruise, I made sure I took pictures. I wrote down dates and times of incidents. It was therapeutic in a way because I was writing down my feelings. I hid the notebook outside our flat. And when it was time, I took everything I had to the police, the social workers, and all those that I knew could help me. (IV, 28)*

In this instance, the participant silently engaged with the law to her advantage by gathering evidence she anticipated would help her. She recognised that the very law that marginalised her could also be manoeuvred for her benefit, thus giving it a new meaning that created a sense of empowerment and resilience. Rather than avoiding the law, she navigated it to her advantage (De Hart and Besselsen 2020). This suggests that, by strategically engaging with the very legal system that marginalised them, the women were able to counteract or mitigate other intersecting forms of marginalisation that impacted their experiences of IPV. However, this by no means imply that Nigerian migrant women in the UK easily navigate the various oppressive structures that render them vulnerable. Rather, it highlights how their informal engagement with the law or their legal consciousness shape how they exercise agency under very restrictive conditions and limited options.

Findings from this study also revealed how negative encounters with the law or its institutions shaped the women's legal consciousness. These negative encounters or experiences were not always personal experiences but stories from other people who shared the same social identity:

*I know a lot of marriages like my own that have failed, and I hear all these stories about someone that was deported because her husband cancelled her visa or someone that left her home but could not survive on her own and things got really bad for her. I heard these stories even before I moved to this country, and I believe they are true, and I try to learn from their mistakes. I already know how our society treat women, so the key is to protect that visa. It is not a very good visa because it ties me to my husband, but at least it is something. When I let my visa go, the problem becomes double. If the visa is secure, then the problem is minus one. I looked into all these problems when I was trying to leave my husband.*

*A Black woman in a foreign country with no power at all? Ah! I had to be sharp oh! I had to hold on to something, at least. (ES, 38)*

*A migrant, and a black one at that... who is making too much noise? (sigh). It is like asking for trouble. That was how I saw it. As Black people, we say don't bother them, and they don't bother us. I hear all the stories, and I believe them. These days, racism is done gently, but it is still there. Look, I am not saying all white people are racist. I just did not want to meet the one who was, especially in the situation I was in and in my state of mind. I did not want to risk it because racism is painful, and what is the point anyway if you know that they may treat you differently? What is the point if you know that your visa will be an issue? I just felt it was better not to go there, abeg (please). (BP, 34)*

Here, gendered narratives of failed marriages, racial oppression, and victimisation within a transnational social space shaped the way the women engaged with the law while in the UK. This highlights how Nigerian migrant women's experiences with the law and legality may also be negotiated within the contexts of both their indigenous and diasporic lives (Silbey 2005). For many, their understanding of the UK immigration law is framed by their lived experiences not only as migrant women but specifically as Black migrant women in Britain (De Hart and Besselsen 2020; Flores et al. 2019). This means that legal consciousness is not always developed in isolation but can be shaped by a wider social environment where race intersects with other oppressive structures, intensifying the experiences of Black ethnic minority groups. For the women, this involved a collective understanding of the legal and social challenges linked to the multiple identities they navigated in the UK as Black migrant women, leading them to informally develop strategies to mitigate the impact of racism in their lived experiences. This highlights the dual pluralism of the law, where both individual and shared experiences inform informal legal interpretations and engagement. Within this context, the women found the need to balance both the marginalisation tied to their identities and the privileges of their documented status as a form of resistance.

#### 4. Discussion

This study critically examined two key dynamics: first, the patriarchal foundations of the law and its intersection with multiple social contexts that structurally and systematically marginalise African migrant women; and second, how survivors demonstrate agency and resistance by leveraging the same legal framework to empower themselves and mitigate their vulnerabilities. The findings revealed a complex dynamic of dependency and vulnerability shaped by the intersection of law, social identities, and individual agency. The UK immigration law played a dual role in the women's lived experiences, providing legal recognition and privileges while enforcing legal dependency on resident spouses, thereby heightening the risk of experiencing IPV. Consequently, many Nigerian women in the UK diaspora navigate the privileges of documented status alongside the overlapping social inequalities that marginalise them on multiple fronts (Sedacca 2024).

Perpetrators often weaponise the UK immigration law to reinforce patriarchal control, using threats of deportation as a powerful tool to sustain abuse and oppression (Erez et al. 2009). The legal responsibility placed on sponsoring spouses to secure their partners' residency in Britain, reinforces gender inequality and sustains immigration-specific mechanisms of control (Stark 2019). One woman reflected:

*My immigration status showed up in everything and was everywhere like air.... but not in a good way. I could not do anything without his permission, first as a man and then as someone I had to depend on for my visa. I wanted to work, but he would not let me. I wanted to start a business... he would not let me. He was rude to any friend I tried to make. I could not also access any services without my ID, which was, by the way...with my husband. I felt like I was in a dark room, and two strong men blocked the door that was the only way out. (ES, 38)*

Such narratives illustrate how the compounded oppression of gendered power dynamics and state-imposed legal vulnerability, creates a complex web of structural inequalities sanctioned by immigration law (Bhabha, 1994). The women understood the precarity of their dependent legal status and how their legal privileges were transformed to tools of subjugation by their abusers. Through an intersectional lens, the ways these intersecting oppressions shaped their legal consciousness, characterised by fear, distrust, and adaptability was highlighted. In this context, compliance with immigration laws was not simply an act of submission but a deliberate strategy to navigate and resist the oppression embedded in their intersecting identities (Abrego, 2019). This study revealed how many migrant women in the UK view prioritising their legal status over safety as a strategic necessity and a form of patriarchal bargaining, to avoid further marginalisation from losing their documented

status if they left the abusive marriage (Kandiyotti 1988; Heron et al. 2022). This power imbalance was articulated starkly below:

*His favourite words were... 'All I need is a phone call to the Home Office, and it is all over for you'. The sad thing was that this was totally true. It would really be all over for me; I would not be able to get help to rent, eat and so on, and I would be deported. Even though what he was doing to me was wrong, it was still true that my visa gave my husband total control over me...and over my sanity too, and the worst part was that it felt like my visa made it legal in a way. It is a terrible way to live. I wanted to just go back home, but it is complicated when you have children. (EH, 33)*

The women also grappled with the societal stigma and disadvantages attached to being an immigrant in the UK, with one participant describing it as:

*This name that we have... immigrant...it is very shameful and very harsh. Before I was thinking it mean foreigner, but now I know that it mean another thing. It is very bad because it mark you everywhere you go. Is like saying... 'You are nothin' or 'we don't care'. Like another way to say, 'shoo or go away'. It give everybody power over you. Even strangers too. Landlord, bank, everybody ask for visa first before anything. So, no point reporting my husband to them. It is waste of time and will expose you even more as the person that have no power in their country. For a woman, this is very bad. (LT, 39)*

Such stigma and institutional exclusions further reinforced their vulnerability and reluctance to report IPV, highlighting the compounded marginalisation of being both a migrant and a woman in an abusive relationship. From this, it is evident that the law's hegemonic and institutional power force many survivors to adopt a subculture of tolerance as a coping mechanism until they find a safe and secure way to leave their abusive relationships. Compliance with immigration laws becomes more than a mere act of submission but a deliberate strategy to navigate and challenge the oppression embedded in their intersecting identities (Abrego 2019). In this study, the pursuit of citizenship emerged as a fluid, ongoing process and a delayed form of empowerment, representing a broader desire for belonging, safety, and freedom within a dynamic and multifaceted context (Jackson, 2015). This aligns with Liang et al.'s (2005) argument that the help-seeking behaviours of women experiencing IPV are shaped by a cognitive process of deciding whether or when to seek help. The women primarily adopted a problem-focused approach, actively working to confront and resolve the sources of their marginalisation rather than merely managing its impact (Schoenmakers et al., 2015). Therefore, their legal consciousness encompassed both cognition and behaviour, shaping how they interacted with the law (Chua and Engel, 2019).

International frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Istanbul Convention mandate states to actively prevent structural violence and provide adequate protection for survivors, particularly those in vulnerable groups such as migrant women (UN Women 2009; Council of Europe 2011). However, this study argues that the UK's immigration policy falls short of meeting these obligations, as structural conditions embedded in its visa policies exacerbate migrant women's vulnerability to IPV. This gap between policy and the lived realities of migrant women highlights the need for a critical examination of the broader systems that normalise and sanction harm against women, particularly from marginalised groups.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter explored legal consciousness as a fluid process in which legality is continuously shaped and re-interpreted through Nigerian migrant women's lived experiences of IPV in the UK. It draws attention to the need for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics shaping their helpseeking behaviours and engagement with the law under very structurally oppressive and marginalised circumstances. The interviews revealed that the women's relationship with UK immigration laws and the meanings they each attach to the legal process of escaping abusive situations played a significant role in shaping their experiences and responses to violence. The findings also highlighted the diversity in how they perceived and understood the law and used it to further their goals and interests. Intersectionality was used as an additional theoretical lens to discuss how their legal consciousness was deeply influenced by their encounters with discrimination, oppression, and marginalisation based on their gender, race, immigrant status and class, shaping their own informal interpretations of the UK immigration law. The relational aspect of legal consciousness was also examined, showing how it shapes the help-seeking behaviours of those experiencing IPV. Their perceptions of the law extended beyond individual factors to include its impact on their family, social networks and racial identities (Adjei 2018). This relational aspect is essential to understanding how legal consciousness impacts compliance, trust in the state, and

decision-making processes in the context of abuse (Chua and Engel 2019). This calls for urgent systemic reforms that adopt a gender-sensitive approach to UK immigration policies, addressing the risks associated with dependency-based visas that disproportionately impact migrant women. Such reforms must prioritise the creation of independent visa pathways and improve access to essential resources that ensure the safety for women experiencing IPV. Additionally, mandatory training for immigration officials and law enforcement should be implemented to help them recognise and respond to the unique vulnerabilities faced by migrant women. Feminist jurisprudence must continue to shed light on the structural inequalities embedded within immigration systems and the specificities in African migrant women's experiences, advocating for policies that empower them and uphold their rights to safety, autonomy, and justice.

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