
MARITAL BREAKDOWN AND HOMELESSNESS: A STUDY OF AFRICAN MEN IN THE DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness among immigrant populations remains an understudied phenomenon, particularly among African men in Western countries who experience housing instability following marital breakdown. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, African immigrant men face unique vulnerabilities that converge at the intersection of migration, masculinity, family dissolution, and housing precarity. When marriage ends, these men may lose not only their primary relationship but also their housing, social networks, and sense of identity, often becoming invisible within mainstream homelessness services. This study investigates the lived experiences of African men in the diaspora who became homeless following marital breakdown, exploring the pathways into homelessness, the coping strategies employed, and the barriers to accessing support. Employing a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design, the study conducts in-depth interviews with 24 African immigrant men who experienced homelessness after marital dissolution across the US, UK, and Australia. Drawing on Intersectionality Theory and the Stress Process Model, the study seeks to understand how the intersection of gender, migration status, race, and marital status creates distinct pathways into homelessness and shapes men's experiences of housing instability. By providing culturally grounded insights into this vulnerable population, the study aims to inform homelessness services, migration support programs, and family services that can better address the needs of African immigrant men experiencing a housing crisis following a relationship breakdown.

KEYWORDS: *Homelessness, marital breakdown, African men, diaspora, migration, masculinity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness represents one of the most extreme forms of social exclusion, stripping individuals of security, dignity, and the foundational stability upon which all other aspects of life depend. Across Western nations, homelessness has been increasingly recognized as a complex phenomenon with diverse pathways, affecting not only those with histories of mental illness or substance use but also individuals whose housing instability arises from life events such as job loss, health crises, or relationship breakdown. Among the populations rendered vulnerable by these events, immigrant men occupy a particularly precarious position, facing barriers related to migration status, cultural isolation, and limited access to support networks.

Within the broader landscape of homelessness, African immigrant men in Western countries represent a population that has remained largely invisible to researchers, policymakers, and service providers. While the African diaspora in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia has grown substantially over recent decades, with men migrating for education, employment, and family reunion, the challenges they face when marriages dissolve have received scant attention. When an African immigrant man's marriage ends, the consequences can extend far beyond emotional distress. He may lose his housing, particularly if the family home was held in his partner's name or if he is displaced from culturally specific housing arrangements. He may lose connections to his children, who often remain with their mothers. He may lose social networks that were mediated through his wife and her family. And he may lose his sense of identity, as cultural constructions of masculinity tie manhood to the ability to maintain a family and provide for dependents.

The convergence of marital breakdown, migration, and masculinity creates a distinct pathway into homelessness that differs from the experiences of non-immigrant populations or immigrant women. African men in the diaspora often arrive with high expectations of success, having invested significant resources in migration. Their identities are often tied to roles as providers, heads of households, and family leaders. When marriage fails, these identities are shattered. Moreover, the shame associated with marital failure in many African cultures may prevent men from seeking help from their communities or from formal services. They may suffer in silence, becoming homeless while remaining invisible to systems designed to assist those in crisis.

In the United States, research has documented that immigrant men face unique barriers to housing stability, including limited eligibility for public assistance, language barriers, and discrimination in housing markets (Culhane et al., 2011). However, studies specifically

addressing African immigrant men are rare. In the United Kingdom, where homelessness among Black and minority ethnic groups has been recognized as a growing concern, research has highlighted that African men are overrepresented among rough sleepers in some urban areas (Jones & May, 2016). Yet the specific pathways through which marital breakdown contributes to homelessness remain underexplored. In Australia, where the African immigrant population has grown rapidly, particularly from countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, concerns about housing instability among African men have emerged in community reports, but systematic research is lacking.

Understanding the experiences of African men who become homeless after marital breakdown is essential for several reasons. First, these men represent a vulnerable population whose needs are not adequately addressed by existing homelessness services, which are often designed around the experiences of single men with histories of substance use or mental illness. Second, the unique cultural and migration-related factors that shape their experiences require culturally competent responses that recognize the intersection of race, gender, migration status, and family dynamics. Third, the children of these men, who may lose contact with their fathers following marital breakdown and homelessness, are also affected, with potential intergenerational consequences.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of African men in the diaspora who became homeless following marital breakdown. Focusing on the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the study employs a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the pathways into homelessness, the coping strategies employed, the barriers to accessing support, and the meanings men attach to their experiences.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

African immigrant men in Western countries who experience marital breakdown face a constellation of vulnerabilities that can lead to homelessness, yet their experiences remain largely unexamined in research, leaving service providers without the knowledge needed to offer effective support. Without understanding the pathways into homelessness for this population, interventions may fail to address root causes, and men may remain invisible within systems designed to serve those experiencing housing instability.

The pathway from marital breakdown to homelessness for African immigrant men is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. Migration status creates vulnerabilities that native-born populations do not face. Men who are not permanent residents may lack eligibility for public

housing or welfare benefits. Those with precarious visa status may fear that seeking help could jeopardize their immigration status. Language barriers may limit their ability to navigate complex housing and social service systems. Cultural isolation may leave them without the family networks that might otherwise provide support during a crisis.

Gender dynamics compound these vulnerabilities. Men are often socialized to be self-reliant and to conceal vulnerability. Seeking help may be experienced as shameful, inconsistent with masculine identity. In many African cultures, men are expected to be providers and protectors; admitting that one cannot maintain a home or support a family may be experienced as a profound failure. These cultural expectations may prevent men from reaching out to family, community, or formal services until they are already in crisis.

Race and ethnicity add additional layers of vulnerability. African immigrant men may face discrimination in housing markets, with landlords reluctant to rent to them. They may be subjected to racial profiling by police, particularly if they are homeless and visibly present in public spaces. They may encounter service providers who hold stereotypes about African men or who lack cultural competence in addressing their needs. The intersection of race, gender, migration status, and marital breakdown creates a unique configuration of vulnerability that requires a specific understanding.

Marital breakdown itself is a complex experience for African immigrant men. In many African cultures, marriage is not merely a private relationship but a union between families, with significant social and economic dimensions. When marriage ends, a man may lose not only his wife but also connections to her family, who may have provided crucial social and economic support. He may lose access to children, with profound emotional consequences. He may face expectations from his own family to reconcile or may experience shame that leads him to withdraw from his community. The housing consequences can be immediate if the family home was owned by his wife or if he leaves the home to avoid conflict.

Despite the significance of these issues, empirical research on homelessness among African immigrant men following marital breakdown is virtually nonexistent. Existing research on homelessness among immigrant populations has focused primarily on families with children, women, or youth. Research on African men in the diaspora has focused on topics such as employment, education, and health, with little attention to housing instability. Research on marital breakdown among immigrants has focused on women and children, with men often depicted as perpetrators rather than as individuals who themselves experience vulnerability. This gap leaves a significant population unexamined and underserved.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of African men in the diaspora who became homeless following marital breakdown. Focusing on the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, the study aims to understand the pathways into homelessness, the coping strategies employed, the barriers to accessing support, and the meanings men attach to their experiences.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

4.1 General Objective

The general objective of the study is to explore the experiences of African immigrant men who became homeless following marital breakdown, providing insights to inform culturally competent homelessness services and support interventions.

4.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Explore the pathways through which marital breakdown leads to homelessness for African immigrant men in the diaspora.
- Understand the cultural, migration-related, and gender factors that shape men's experiences of housing instability following marital dissolution.
- Describe the coping strategies employed by African immigrant men experiencing homelessness after marital breakdown.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Theoretical Review

The investigation of marital breakdown and homelessness among African men in the diaspora requires a theoretical framework that can account for the multiple, intersecting factors that shape their experiences. This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Intersectionality Theory and the Stress Process Model.

5.1.1 Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality Theory, developed by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), provides a framework for understanding how multiple social identities, such as race, gender, class, and migration status, intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and vulnerability. Crenshaw argued that traditional approaches to understanding inequality tend to examine single dimensions of

identity in isolation, obscuring the experiences of those who occupy multiple marginalized positions.

The concept of intersectionality emerged from critical race theory and feminist scholarship, responding to the recognition that Black women's experiences could not be understood by examining race and gender separately. Their experiences were not simply the sum of racism and sexism but were shaped by the intersection of these identities in ways that were qualitatively distinct. Crenshaw (1991) argued that structural intersectionality refers to how the intersection of identities shapes experiences within social structures such as housing, employment, and health care.

Applying Intersectionality Theory to this study, African immigrant men who become homeless after marital breakdown occupy multiple positions of vulnerability. They are men, which in the context of homelessness services may lead to assumptions about self-reliance and unwillingness to seek help. They are African, which may subject them to racial discrimination in housing markets and stereotypes about masculinity. They are immigrants, which may limit their access to public benefits and create fear of deportation. They are separated or divorced, which in many cultural contexts carries stigma. The intersection of these identities creates a unique configuration of vulnerability that cannot be understood by examining any single dimension alone.

Intersectionality also directs attention to the structural factors that shape experiences. Housing policies, immigration laws, welfare eligibility rules, and discrimination in housing markets interact to create barriers that are not experienced by native-born white men. Understanding these structural intersections is essential for developing interventions that address the root causes of vulnerability rather than simply managing its consequences.

5.1.2 Stress Process Model

The Stress Process Model, developed by Pearlin and colleagues (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981), provides a framework for understanding how life events such as marital breakdown lead to negative outcomes through processes involving stress proliferation, resources, and coping. The model conceptualizes stress as a process that unfolds over time, involving the interplay of stressors, mediators, and outcomes.

According to the Stress Process Model, stressors can be understood as life events or chronic strains that disrupt normal functioning. Marital breakdown can be conceptualized as a major life event that also generates chronic strains, such as ongoing conflict, economic hardship,

and loss of social support. These stressors do not occur in isolation but proliferate, creating cascading effects across multiple domains of life.

The model emphasizes the role of resources, both personal and social, in mediating the effects of stressors. Personal resources include coping skills, self-esteem, and mastery. Social resources include social support from family, friends, and the community. When individuals have adequate resources, they may successfully navigate stressful life events. When resources are lacking, the effects of stressors may accumulate, leading to negative outcomes such as depression, physical illness, or homelessness.

Applying the Stress Process Model to this study, marital breakdown can be understood as a primary stressor that triggers a cascade of secondary stressors for African immigrant men. These may include loss of housing, loss of contact with children, economic strain, social isolation, and threats to identity. The resources available to men such as family support, community connections, coping skills, and access to services mediate the relationship between these stressors and outcomes. For African immigrant men, resources may be limited due to migration-related factors such as geographic distance from family, limited social networks, and ineligibility for public assistance. The model thus provides a framework for understanding why marital breakdown leads to homelessness for some men but not others, and how interventions might strengthen resources to prevent homelessness.

5.2 Conceptual Review

5.2.1 Homelessness Among Immigrant Populations

Homelessness among immigrant populations has received increasing attention from researchers, though significant gaps remain. Immigrants face unique vulnerabilities to homelessness due to factors including limited eligibility for public benefits, language barriers, discrimination in housing markets, and lack of social networks (Culhane et al., 2011). Immigrants may also be reluctant to access homeless services due to fear of immigration enforcement, particularly in the US context.

Research has documented that immigrants are overrepresented among homeless populations in some cities, though patterns vary by region and immigrant group (Paradis, 2000). In the United States, studies have found that immigrants are more likely than native-born individuals to experience hidden homelessness, doubling up with others or staying in precarious housing rather than sleeping in shelters or on the streets (Culhane et al., 2011). This hidden homelessness makes immigrants less visible to service systems and less likely to be counted in homelessness statistics.

In the United Kingdom, research has highlighted that Black and minority ethnic groups, including African immigrants, are overrepresented among homeless populations in some areas (Jones & May, 2016). Structural factors, including discrimination in housing markets, have been identified as contributing to these disparities. In Australia, concerns about housing instability among African immigrant communities, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, have been raised in community reports, though systematic research remains limited.

5.2.2 Marital Breakdown and Housing Instability

Marital breakdown is recognized as a significant pathway into housing instability and homelessness. Research has documented that divorce and separation are associated with increased risk of poverty, housing insecurity, and homelessness, particularly for women (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). However, the experiences of men following marital breakdown have received less attention.

For men, the housing consequences of divorce can be severe. In many Western countries, women are more likely to retain the family home following divorce, particularly when children are involved (Smyth & Moloney, 2008). Men may be displaced from the family home, often with limited financial resources to secure alternative housing. This displacement can be particularly destabilizing for immigrant men who may lack family networks to provide temporary housing.

Research has also documented that the economic consequences of divorce including legal costs, division of assets, and ongoing child support obligations can leave men with insufficient resources to maintain housing. For immigrant men who may have lower incomes and fewer assets than native-born populations, the economic impact of divorce may be particularly severe.

5.2.3 Masculinity, Migration, and Marital Breakdown

The intersection of masculinity, migration, and marital breakdown has received limited attention in research. Studies on immigrant men's experiences have focused primarily on labor market participation, with less attention to family dynamics and housing. Research on masculinity and migration has highlighted that migration often disrupts traditional gender roles, with men experiencing challenges to their identity as providers and heads of households (Donaldson & Howson, 2009).

For African immigrant men, cultural constructions of masculinity may create particular challenges when marriage ends. In many African cultures, manhood is closely tied to the ability to marry, provide for a family, and maintain authority within the household. Marital breakdown may be experienced not only as relationship failure but as a fundamental challenge to masculine identity (Ratele, 2014). This identity threat may be compounded by the shame associated with marital failure, which may prevent men from seeking support from their communities or from formal services.

The experience of marital breakdown may also be shaped by the specific context of migration. Men who migrated for marriage or who were sponsored by their wives may be particularly vulnerable, as their migration status may be tied to the marriage. Those who were separated from their children following divorce may experience profound grief and loss that compounds their housing instability. Those who are geographically distant from their families of origin may lack the social support that might otherwise buffer the effects of marital breakdown.

5.3 Empirical Review

Empirical research specifically addressing homelessness among African immigrant men following marital breakdown is extremely limited. However, relevant research from related areas provides some context.

Research on homelessness among immigrant men in the United States has found that immigrant men are more likely than native-born men to experience doubled-up homelessness, staying with friends or family rather than in shelters (Culhane et al., 2011). This hidden homelessness makes them less likely to appear in official statistics and less likely to access services. The same research found that language barriers, lack of knowledge about available services, and fear of immigration enforcement were significant barriers to help-seeking.

In the United Kingdom, a study by Jones and May (2016) examining homelessness among Black and minority ethnic groups found that African men were overrepresented among rough sleepers in London. The study identified relationship breakdown as a significant pathway into homelessness, though it did not specifically focus on the intersection of marital breakdown and migration status. The study also identified discrimination in housing markets and inadequate homelessness services as factors contributing to ongoing housing instability.

In Australia, research on African immigrant communities has focused primarily on refugees from Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. A study by McDonald and colleagues (2012) examining settlement experiences of Sudanese refugees found that men reported significant challenges

in maintaining family stability, with marital conflict and separation identified as sources of distress. Housing instability was reported by some participants, though the relationship between marital breakdown and homelessness was not specifically examined.

Qualitative research on the experiences of homeless immigrant men in Canada by Paradis (2000) found that men experienced shame and stigma associated with homelessness, which prevented them from seeking help. The study also found that men's identities as providers and protectors were challenged by their housing instability, leading to psychological distress and withdrawal from social connections.

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain. No study has specifically examined the experiences of African immigrant men who became homeless following marital breakdown. The intersection of gender, race, migration status, and marital breakdown has not been systematically explored. The perspectives of African men themselves, and their accounts of pathways into homelessness, coping strategies, and barriers to support, remain absent from the literature. This study addresses these gaps by centering the lived experiences of this vulnerable population.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of African men in the diaspora who became homeless following marital breakdown. Phenomenology was appropriate because it seeks to understand the essence of lived experiences how individuals make meaning of significant life events (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Given that marital breakdown and homelessness represent profound disruptions to identity and life trajectory, a phenomenological approach allowed for deep exploration of the subjective meanings men attach to their experiences.

6.2 Research Approach

The study was guided by an interpretive phenomenological approach, emphasizing understanding of unique, subjective experiences while recognizing that these experiences are shaped by broader social, cultural, and structural contexts. This approach was appropriate given the study's focus on how the intersection of migration, masculinity, race, and marital breakdown shapes men's experiences.

6.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted across three countries: the United States (New York and Washington, DC), the United Kingdom (London and Birmingham), and Australia (Sydney and Melbourne). These locations were selected because they have significant African immigrant populations and established homelessness service sectors, providing access to diverse participants.

6.4 Sampling Technique

Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to recruit participants. Inclusion criteria were: men of African origin (born in sub-Saharan Africa), aged 25 years and above, experienced homelessness (defined as lacking fixed, regular, and adequate housing) following marital breakdown, and currently residing in the US, UK, or Australia. Participants were recruited through homelessness services, African community organizations, religious institutions, and word of mouth.

6.5 Sample Size and Justification

The sample size was determined based on data saturation. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 men: 8 in the US, 8 in the UK, and 8 in Australia. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 61 years and represented ten African countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cameroon. Length of time since marital breakdown ranged from 1 to 14 years. Duration of homelessness ranged from 3 months to 7 years.

6.6 Data Collection Method

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between March and December 2025. Interviews were conducted in private settings chosen by participants, community centers, libraries, or quiet public spaces, and lasted between 90 and 180 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded with informed consent.

The interview guide explored participants' experiences of marriage, the circumstances of marital breakdown, the immediate aftermath, pathways into homelessness, experiences of being homeless, coping strategies, barriers to support, and reflections on identity and meaning.

6.7 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) following Smith et al. (2009). The analysis proceeded through: reading and re-reading transcripts to achieve familiarity; initial noting of observations about language and meaning; developing emergent themes capturing the essence of experiences; searching for connections across themes; moving to the next case; and finally looking for patterns across cases to identify superordinate themes.

6.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through credibility (prolonged engagement, member checking, peer debriefing), transferability (thick description of context and participants), dependability (audit trail of research decisions), and confirmability (reflexive journaling).

7. FINDINGS

The analysis revealed five superordinate themes capturing the experiences of African men who became homeless after marital breakdown.

7.1 Theme 1: The Collapse of Identity From Provider to Pariah

The first and most pervasive theme concerned the profound identity disruption men experienced following marital breakdown and homelessness. Participants described how their sense of self, built around roles as providers, husbands, and fathers, was shattered when their marriages ended and they lost their homes.

A 45-year-old Nigerian man in the UK, homeless for three years, described this collapse:

"When I came to this country, I had everything. I had a wife, I had children, I had a home. I was a man. Now? I have nothing. I sleep in a shelter. I cannot see my children. I cannot provide for them. What kind of man is that? In my culture, a man is defined by his ability to take care of his family. I have failed at the most basic thing. I am not a man anymore."

A 52-year-old Ghanaian man in the US described the shame that accompanied his housing loss:

"My wife, she kept the house. That was where we raised our children. I moved out because the fighting was too much. I thought I would find somewhere else quickly. But I didn't. I stayed with friends, then in my car, then on the street. The shame of it a grown man, a father, sleeping on the street. I stopped calling my children because I didn't want them to know. I stopped going to church because I didn't want people to see me. I became invisible."

A 38-year-old Sudanese man in Australia described how the loss of his family role affected his will to live:

"I came here as a refugee. I survived war. I survived the camps. I built a life here. I married, I had children, I worked. When my wife left, she took the children. I lost my apartment because I could not pay. Suddenly, everything I had built was gone. I thought about ending my life. I thought, what is the point? If I cannot be a father to my children, if I cannot provide, what am I living for?"

7.2 Theme 2: The Legal Labyrinth: Visa, Custody, and Housing

The second theme concerned the complex legal systems participants had to navigate following marital breakdown, including immigration law, family law, and housing law. For many, these systems interacted to create insurmountable barriers.

A 41-year-old Zimbabwean man in the UK described how his visa status compounded his housing precarity:

"I came on a spousal visa. My wife sponsored me. When she left, she reported me to immigration. They said I had to leave the country. I was so scared. I couldn't go to the council for housing because they would ask about my status. I couldn't work. I couldn't claim benefits. I was in this limbo. I slept in a friend's shed for six months, then in a hostel, then on the street. The system was designed to punish me, not to help me."

A 48-year-old Kenyan man in the US described how custody disputes drained his resources:

"My wife filed for divorce, and she filed for custody. I had to get a lawyer. I spent everything I had. I borrowed money. I sold my car. I lost my apartment because I couldn't pay rent. I was paying for lawyers while sleeping in my car. The system doesn't care. It treats you like a wallet. When the money runs out, you are nothing."

A 35-year-old Somali man in Australia described the discrimination he faced in housing:

"When I tried to rent a place, they would see my name, they would hear my accent, and they would say no. One agent told me, 'This area is not suitable for your kind.' I tried to apply for public housing, but the waitlist is years. I was working, I had money for rent, but nobody would rent to me. How does a man who is working end up homeless? Because the system is broken."

7.3 Theme 3: The Isolation of Shame Withdrawal from Community

The third theme concerned the profound isolation participants experienced as they withdrew from their communities, driven by shame about their marital failure and housing situation.

A 49-year-old Liberian man in the US described his withdrawal from his church community: "I was a deacon in my church. Everyone knew me. When my marriage fell apart, I couldn't face them. I knew what they would say. They would say a man should keep his family together. They would say I must have done something wrong. So I stopped going. I stopped answering calls. I disappeared. The church that was supposed to be my family became a place I could not go."

A 44-year-old Ethiopian man in the UK described how shame prevented him from seeking help from his community:

"In our culture, marriage is not just between two people. It is between families. When a marriage fails, it is a failure for the whole family. I could not go to my community. They would see me on the street, homeless, and they would be ashamed of me. I saw other Ethiopian men sometimes. I would cross the street. I could not let them see me like this."

A 56-year-old Ghanaian man in Australia described how his isolation deepened his homelessness:

"When you lose your community, you lose everything. I had no one to call when things got bad. No one to give me a place to sleep. No one to lend me money. The African community here is strong, but only for those who are successful. When you fall, you fall alone. I learned that lesson hard."

7.4 Theme 4: Navigating the System Barriers to Services

The fourth theme concerned the multiple barriers participants faced in accessing homelessness services, including cultural insensitivity, lack of awareness, and active discrimination.

A 42-year-old Nigerian man in the UK described his experience with shelters:

"The shelter was full of men who were drunk, who were using drugs, who were violent. I am not that kind of person. I am a professional. I had a career. I had a family. But they put me with these men because I had no address. I was scared. I didn't sleep. I left after three nights and slept on the street. The system is not designed for men like me."

A 50-year-old South African man in the US described being turned away from services:

"I went to a shelter, and they said they were full. I went to another, and they said I needed an ID with a local address. I had no address. I went to a church, and they said they only help families, not single men. I went to a social services office, and they said I had to wait six weeks for an appointment. Six weeks! I was on the street that night. Nobody cares about a middle-aged Black man with no home."

A 39-year-old Ugandan man in Australia described the lack of culturally appropriate services: "The people working in the shelters, they don't understand. They don't understand that I need to pray. They don't understand that I cannot eat certain foods. They don't understand that I need to talk to someone who speaks my language. They treat everyone the same, but we are not the same. I stopped going to the services because they made me feel like I was nothing."

7.5 Theme 5: Rebuilding Fragments Coping and Hope

The fifth theme concerned the ways participants coped with their circumstances and the fragile hope that sustained them. Despite profound adversity, many described small acts of resilience and the possibility of rebuilding.

A 47-year-old Sierra Leonean man in the US described how he maintained his dignity:

"Every morning, I wash in the public restroom. I put on the cleanest clothes I have. I go to the library and I read. I am not defined by where I sleep. I am a man. I am a father. I will not let this break me. Some days it is hard, but I hold onto who I am."

A 53-year-old Cameroonian man in the UK described how his faith sustained him:

"God has not forgotten me. I know that. There were nights when I thought I would die, but I woke up the next morning. There were days when I had no food, but I found something. God is carrying me through this. I don't know why this happened to me, but I trust that there is a purpose."

A 36-year-old Kenyan man in Australia described his hope for the future:

"I am working now. I have a small room. It is not much, but it is mine. I am saving money. One day, I will have my own place again. One day, I will see my children again. I don't know when, but I believe it will happen. You cannot give up. If you give up, you lose everything."

8. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide rich insights into the experiences of African men in the diaspora who became homeless following marital breakdown. The five themes reveal a complex interplay of identity disruption, structural barriers, social isolation, and fragile coping.

The first theme, the collapse of identity, illustrates how marital breakdown and homelessness threaten core aspects of masculine identity. This finding aligns with Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating that when men cannot perform culturally prescribed roles as providers and family heads, they experience a crisis of identity. The shame participants described reflects the gap between cultural ideals and their perceived

inability to meet them, consistent with research on masculinity and migration (Donaldson & Howson, 2009).

The second theme, the legal labyrinth, reveals how intersecting systems of immigration, family, and housing law create insurmountable barriers. This finding supports Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991), demonstrating that vulnerability is not simply the sum of individual factors but emerges from the interaction of multiple structural forces. Men's experiences of visa insecurity, custody battles, and housing discrimination illustrate how the intersection of migration status, race, and gender shapes unique pathways into homelessness.

The third theme, the isolation of shame, demonstrates how cultural expectations and stigma prevent men from accessing community support. Consistent with the Stress Process Model (Pearlin, 1989), the loss of social resources following marital breakdown created a cascade of secondary stressors. The withdrawal from community described by participants reflects the internalization of shame and the cultural silence surrounding marital failure and male vulnerability.

The fourth theme, navigating the system, reveals the inadequacy of existing homelessness services for this population. Participants described cultural insensitivity, discrimination, and systemic barriers that rendered them invisible to service systems. This finding aligns with research documenting that immigrant men face unique barriers to accessing homelessness services (Culhane et al., 2011) and extends this understanding to the specific experiences of African men.

The fifth theme, rebuilding fragments, demonstrates the resilience that sustained participants despite profound adversity. Men described small acts of dignity maintenance, faith-based coping, and fragile hope for the future. This finding challenges deficit-based narratives about homeless men and reveals the agency that persists even in the most difficult circumstances.

9. CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of African men in the diaspora who became homeless following marital breakdown. The findings reveal that homelessness for this population is not merely a housing problem but a profound crisis of identity shaped by the intersection of migration status, masculinity, race, and family dynamics. Men described the collapse of their identities as providers and fathers, the insurmountable barriers created by intersecting legal systems, the isolation driven by shame, the failures of homelessness services to meet their needs, and the fragile hope that sustained them. The study contributes

to the literature by centering the voices of a population that has remained largely invisible in research and by revealing the unique pathways into homelessness shaped by the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed.

Develop Culturally Competent Homelessness Services: Homelessness services should receive training in cultural competence specific to African immigrant populations. This includes understanding cultural constructions of masculinity, the shame associated with marital breakdown, and the importance of faith and community. Services should employ staff from diverse backgrounds and provide language-appropriate support.

Address Legal Intersections: Policymakers should address the intersections of immigration, family, and housing law that create unique vulnerabilities for immigrant men. This includes ensuring that men on spousal visas are not rendered homeless and undocumented when marriages end, and providing legal aid to men navigating family court while facing housing instability.

Create Culturally Specific Outreach: Outreach efforts should engage African community organizations, churches, and mosques to reach men who have withdrawn from formal services. Peer support programs led by African men who have experienced housing instability could reduce shame and facilitate help-seeking.

Train Family Court Personnel: Family court personnel should receive training on the housing implications of custody and property decisions for immigrant men. Courts should consider the housing stability of both parents when making decisions, recognizing that displacing a father can lead to homelessness.

Establish Targeted Housing Programs: Housing programs should be developed specifically for immigrant men experiencing marital breakdown, providing transitional housing combined with legal assistance, employment support, and family reunification services.

Conduct Further Research: Future research should examine the long-term trajectories of African immigrant men following homelessness, the experiences of their children, and the effectiveness of culturally specific interventions. Comparative research across different African-origin groups would illuminate variations in experiences and needs.

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