

INVISIBLE WOUNDS, SILENT CRIES: EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF EMOTIONAL, VERBAL, AND PHYSICAL ABUSE ON MARRIED WOMEN IN CONSERVATIVE SOCIETIES

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15861419>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
19 April, 2025	25 May, 2025	25 June, 2025	11 July, 2025

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the often-unseen psychological effects of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse on married women living in conservative societies. While physical violence is more easily recognized, emotional and verbal abuse are frequently hidden behind cultural norms, family expectations, and social silence leaving women to suffer alone. Through in-depth interviews with married women who have experienced different forms of abuse, the study uncovers four major themes: silent suffering, cultural pressure to endure abuse, psychological scars on mental health and self-worth, and the ways women cope or build resilience. The findings show that women often face intense emotional trauma, depression, anxiety, and a deep sense of isolation, while cultural expectations force them to stay silent to protect family honour and avoid shame. Guided by Feminist Theory and Trauma Theory, the research reveals how abuse is both a personal and societal issue. It highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive mental health support, legal reforms, community awareness, and greater education around emotional and psychological abuse. This study gives voice to women whose pain is often dismissed or misunderstood, and calls for action to create safer, more respectful marriages.

Keywords: emotional abuse, verbal abuse, physical violence, married women, conservative societies, mental health, trauma, feminist theory, psychological impact.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is often seen as a sacred and lifelong partnership a space of love, trust, support, and mutual respect. However, for many women around the world, particularly in conservative societies, this ideal picture is far from reality. Instead, marriage can become a source of fear, stress, and emotional suffering. While physical abuse is more visible and more easily recognized, emotional and verbal abuse are often hidden yet

they can cause deep psychological damage that may last for years.

Emotional abuse includes constant criticism, humiliation, controlling behavior, and manipulation. **Verbal abuse** may take the form of shouting, name-calling, threats, or degrading comments. These types of abuse are sometimes brushed off as "normal marital problems," especially in cultures where women are expected to remain silent, be obedient, and prioritize

family honor over their own well-being. Even **physical abuse**, though more widely condemned, is still normalized or hidden in many homes due to societal pressure, fear of divorce, or lack of support.

In conservative societies, women are often raised to believe that patience, silence, and sacrifice are the keys to a successful marriage. Speaking out or seeking help is discouraged and sometimes even punished. As a result, many women suffer in silence, hiding their pain from family, friends, and even themselves. This silence not only increases their isolation but also worsens the emotional impact of abuse, leading to mental health conditions such as **anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, trauma, and even suicidal thoughts**.

Despite the severe consequences, emotional and verbal abuses are still not given enough attention in mental health research especially in the context of marriage. Most studies focus on physical violence, while emotional scars are often overlooked. Yet, the pain of being constantly belittled, controlled, or ignored can leave invisible wounds that are just as damaging as physical injuries.

This research aims to give voice to those silent sufferers. By exploring the lived experiences of married women who have faced emotional, verbal, and physical abuse and this study seeks to highlight the serious psychological effects of such abuse. It will also examine how cultural norms, gender expectations, and societal pressures contribute to women's continued suffering and silence.

Understanding these complex layers is essential not just for creating awareness, but also for improving mental health services, informing therapeutic interventions, and advocating for societal change. Only by acknowledging these hidden struggles can we begin to support women more effectively and challenge the systems that keep them in cycles of abuse.

1. Problem Statement

In many conservative societies, marriage is viewed as a defining aspect of a woman's identity and success. However, this idealized image often masks a harsh reality where women silently endure emotional, verbal, and physical abuse within their marriages. While physical violence is more easily recognized, emotional and verbal

abuse are frequently overlooked, normalized, or even denied both by the victims and by society. These forms of abuse can deeply affect a woman's mental health, leading to depression, anxiety, trauma-related symptoms, and long-term psychological distress.

The problem is further intensified by societal expectations that pressure women to tolerate abuse in the name of family honor, patience, or religious duty. This silence not only prevents women from seeking help but also leads to the internalization of trauma. Despite the growing awareness of gender-based violence, there remains a significant gap in clinical research focusing on the psychological toll of non-physical (and physical) abuse within marriage, especially in patriarchal and conservative cultural settings.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of married women who have faced emotional, verbal, and/or physical abuse, and by examining the mental health consequences of such experiences within a cultural context that discourages open discussion of abuse.

2. Research Objectives

1. To explore the psychological impact of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse on married women.
2. To identify common mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, PTSD) resulting from such abuse.
3. To examine how cultural and societal norms influence women's responses to abuse and their coping mechanisms, To highlight the barriers women face in recognizing abuse and seeking psychological support.
4. To contribute culturally relevant insights to inform clinical practice and policy on women's mental health.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the psychological consequences of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse experienced by married women in conservative societies? How do cultural expectations and social norms shape women's understanding and tolerance of abuse in marriage?
2. What mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety, and trauma) are most

commonly reported by women who experience such abuse?

3. What coping strategies do women use to deal with abuse, and how effective are they in protecting mental well-being? What are the main barriers that prevent women from seeking psychological help or leaving abusive marriages?

4. Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory: explains how societal power imbalances and traditional gender roles in conservative societies force women into submissive positions, often normalizing emotional, verbal, and physical abuse in marriage. It helps us understand why many women stay silent and endure abuse due to cultural pressure and fear of stigma.

Trauma Theory: focuses on the psychological effects of abuse, showing how repeated emotional, verbal, and physical violence can cause lasting mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and PTSD. It highlights that the invisible emotional wounds are as damaging as physical injuries.

Methodology

Research Design This study uses a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of married women who have suffered emotional, verbal, or physical abuse.

Participants The sample will consist of 8 married women, aged 18–50, who have experienced emotional, verbal, or physical abuse within their marriages. Purposive sampling will be used to identify participants who can provide rich, relevant, and in-depth information.

Inclusion Criteria Legally or traditionally married for at least one year. Have experienced any form of abuse (emotional, verbal, or physical). Willing to share their experiences in a safe, confidential setting

Exclusion Criteria Currently undergoing acute psychiatric treatment (to ensure emotional stability for interviews). Under 18 years of age.

Data Collection Interviews will last approximately 45–60 minutes and will be

conducted in the local language (e.g., Urdu) and translated later for analysis.

Sample questions may include:

- “Can you describe your experience of emotional or verbal abuse in your marriage?”
- “How did this experience affect your mental and emotional well-being?”
- “What prevented you from seeking help or speaking out?”
- “What helped you cope during or after the abuse?”

Data Analysis The data will be analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involves:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

Results

This chapter presents the findings from in-depth interviews with married women who experienced emotional, verbal, and physical abuse. Analysis revealed four major themes reflecting their lived experiences and the psychological impact of abuse within the cultural context.

Theme 1: Silent Suffering (The Invisible Nature of Abuse)

Many participants described how emotional and verbal abuse often went unnoticed by others because these wounds are not visible. Women reported feeling isolated, misunderstood, and trapped in silence, as society tends to recognize only physical violence. The “invisible” nature of their pain made it difficult to seek help or even to validate their own suffering.

“People say, ‘You look fine, what’s wrong?’ But inside, I feel broken. They don’t see the pain from words or insults.”

Subthemes:

- **Invisible Pain** Women felt their emotional wounds were ignored because others only recognize physical abuse as “real” suffering. Codes: “No visible scars,” “People don’t believe me,” “Invisible wounds hurt deeply.”
- **Normalization of Abuse** Many described how emotional and verbal abuses were

seen as “normal” in marriage, so their suffering was minimized.

Codes: "It's just how marriage is," "Everyone gets scolded," "No one thinks it's abuse."

- **Internalized Silence** Women often kept their pain to themselves, fearing judgment or not wanting to burden others.

Codes: "I cried alone," "I didn't tell anyone," "I felt trapped."

Theme 2: Cultural Chains (Pressure to Endure Abuse for Family Honor)

Participants highlighted the strong cultural expectations to remain silent and endure abuse for the sake of family reputation, social acceptance, and religious beliefs. Many women felt that speaking out would bring shame to their families or result in social rejection, forcing them to suppress their trauma.

"Leaving or complaining would shame my family. It is better to suffer quietly than lose respect."

Subthemes:

- **Fear of Social Stigma** Women worried about gossip, shame, and losing respect in their communities if they spoke out.

Codes: "People will talk," "Shame on my family," "Fear of being judged."

- **Religious and Traditional Beliefs** Some believed that marriage is sacred and that women must be patient and obedient regardless of the suffering.

Codes: "It's God's test," "Women must obey," "Divorce is not an option."

- **Family Pressure and Control** Family members, especially in-laws, sometimes discouraged women from complaining or leaving abusive situations.

Codes: "In-laws told me to be quiet," "Family said to tolerate," "Pressure to keep peace."

Theme 3: Psychological Scars (Impact on Mental Health and Self Worth)

Women described how abuse affected their emotional well-being and self-image deeply. All participants reported significant psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness. Emotional and verbal abuse deeply affected their identity and sense of self, sometimes even more than physical violence.

"The constant insults made me doubt my value as a person. I became anxious all the time and feared being alone."

Subthemes:

- **Anxiety and Fear** Many lived in constant worry about their partner's mood or possible outbursts.

Codes: "Always afraid," "Walking on eggshells," "Fear controlled me."

- **Depression and Hopelessness** Feelings of sadness, helplessness, and loss of interest in life were common.

Codes: "Felt worthless," "No energy to live," "Wished to disappear."

- **Low Self-Esteem and Self-Blame** Emotional abuse shattered women's confidence, making them believe they deserved the abuse.

Codes: "I am not good enough," "It's my fault," "I am broken."

- **Physical Health Symptoms Linked to Stress** Some reported headaches, insomnia, and other physical symptoms caused by ongoing mental stress.

Codes: "Cannot sleep," "Constant headaches," "Body aches from stress."

Theme 4: Coping and Resilience (Strategies to Survive and Cope)

Despite their suffering, many women developed various coping mechanisms to protect their mental health. These included seeking emotional support from trusted friends or family, religious faith, distraction through work or children, and internal resilience. However, they often lacked professional mental health support.

"Praying gave me strength. Talking to my sister helped me hold on, even when everything felt hopeless"

Subthemes:

- **Seeking Social Support** Trusted friends or female relatives provided emotional relief and a sense of hope.

Codes: "Talking to sister helped," "Friends listened," "Support kept me going."

- **Religious Faith and Spirituality** Prayer and religious beliefs were a major source of comfort and strength.

Codes: "Faith gave me peace," "Praying calmed me," "God helped me endure."

- **Distraction and Focus on Children/Work** Engaging in household duties, child-rearing, or work helped women cope by keeping busy.

Codes: "Focusing on kids," "Work took my mind off pain," "Staying busy helped."

- **Emotional Suppression and Acceptance** some women coped by suppressing emotions or accepting abuse as fate.

Codes: "I stopped crying," "I accepted my situation," "Pretended to be okay."

- **Barriers to Seeking Professional Help** Many felt they couldn't access or trust mental health services.

Codes: "No one to talk to professionally," "Mental health is taboo," "Afraid to ask for help."

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of this study on the psychological impact of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse on married women in conservative societies. The four major themes are interpreted in the light of existing research and supported by Feminist Theory and Trauma Theory. The discussion also highlights how deeply culture, patriarchy, and silence influence women's mental health and coping strategies.

Theme 1: Silent Suffering (the Invisible Nature of Abuse)

Participants described how emotional and verbal abuse left them feeling broken inside, even when there were no visible signs of harm. Verywell Health (2021) emphasizes that emotional abuse, though non-physical, can severely damage a person's mental well-being, leading to diminished self-worth and confidence, and potentially escalating to physical violence. Very well Mind (2021) elaborates on the mental health consequences of various types of abuse, noting that emotional abuse can result in depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

These findings align with Trauma Theory, which highlights that trauma can manifest silently, through long-term emotional pain, fear, and internalized shame.

Theme 2: Cultural Chains (Pressure to Endure Abuse for Family Honor)

Women felt strong pressure to remain in abusive marriages to preserve family reputation

and avoid social judgment. Recent studies support this: A study in Delhi, India (2023) found that emotional violence is often underreported due to cultural norms that discourage women from speaking out, with 19% of women admitting to experiencing emotional violence in the past year. Research from Vhembe district, South Africa (2022) revealed that some women do not consider emotional abuse as serious, viewing it as a private matter, influenced by cultural scripts that prioritize family honor over individual well-being.

These cultural chains reflect Feminist Theory, which explains how patriarchal systems control and silence women, especially in marriage.

Theme 3: Psychological Scars (Impact on Mental Health and Self-Worth)

All participants experienced deep psychological effects, including depression, anxiety, fear, and self-blame. A study in Pakistan (2021) found a positive relationship between domestic violence and depression, anxiety, and stress among married women, highlighting the significant impact on their quality of life. Research in Tunisia (2024) indicated that 83.3% of women who experienced assault had low self-esteem, which was associated with anxiety symptoms, suicidal ideation, and social isolation.

These findings support Trauma Theory, which explains how ongoing abuse can lead to a loss of identity, emotional disconnection, and a constant feeling of fear.

Theme 4: Coping and Resilience (Strategies to Survive and Cope)

Despite their pain, many women found ways to survive. Some turned to religion, children, or close female relatives to find emotional relief. However, most did not seek professional help due to stigma, lack of trust, or cultural barriers. Recent studies highlight these coping mechanisms: A qualitative systematic review (2024) on South Asian women found that victims often feel helpless, worthless, and hopeless, leading to self-loathing behaviors and isolation. Research in Tehran (2024) revealed that nearly half of married women experienced emotional divorce, with significant relationships between emotional divorce, domestic violence, and internet addiction, indicating complex coping strategies in the digital age.

These findings reflect how resilience exists even in suffering, but it is shaped by limited options and cultural constraints. These findings reveal that the abuse women face in marriage is not just physical it is also emotional, cultural, and psychological. The abuse is often hidden and normalized, and women are forced to stay silent due to cultural expectations. This silence leads to deep mental health challenges that are rarely addressed. By using Feminist Theory, we can understand how gender roles and patriarchy trap women in cycles of silence and suffering. Trauma Theory explains how repeated abuse even if it's emotional causes serious psychological harm, such as PTSD, depression, and fear.

Conclusion

This study explored the deep psychological, emotional, and physical impacts of abuse on married women living in conservative societies. Through a qualitative approach, the voices of women who have suffered in silence were brought to light. The findings revealed four central themes: silent suffering, cultural pressure, mental health consequences, and coping strategies. One of the most important insights from this research is that abuse is not always visible. Emotional and verbal abuse can hurt just as much, if not more, than physical violence. Many women reported feeling isolated, depressed, and hopeless, yet they continued to stay in abusive marriages to protect family honor and due to societal expectations. Cultural and religious norms, gender roles, and the fear of shame play a huge role in keeping women silent. These women often internalize their pain, blame themselves, and suffer in isolation. While some find strength in faith or through their children, many lack access to proper mental health care and support systems.

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