

Exploring the Contextual Meaning of Silence in Emotionally Abused Married Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the contextual meanings and psychological functions of silence among emotionally abused married women within the sociocultural context of Taiwan.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design based on a phenomenological approach was employed to capture the lived experiences of silence among emotionally abused women. Eighteen married women residing in Taiwan, aged between 28 and 52, participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their self-reported experiences of emotional abuse in marriage. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, transcribed, and translated into English. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach was conducted using NVivo 14 software. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive memoing.

Findings: Analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) Silence as a Survival Strategy, which included subthemes such as avoiding conflict, emotional self-protection, and coping with fear; (2) Silence as a Form of Powerlessness, encompassing internalized helplessness, social isolation, and emotional paralysis; and (3) Silence as a Communicative Expression, including symbolic resistance, testing boundaries, and expressing disappointment. Participants articulated silence as both a protective behavior and a means of emotional regulation, shaped by cultural norms, relational dynamics, and personal history. Selected interview quotations supported each thematic category.

Conclusion: Silence among emotionally abused married women is a multidimensional phenomenon that reflects adaptive coping, emotional suffering, and sociocultural conditioning. Rather than viewing silence as passive submission, practitioners and researchers should recognize it as a complex and context-sensitive response.

Keywords: Emotional abuse; Silence; Intimate partner violence; Women's psychology.

1. Introduction

Silence, though often perceived as passive or neutral, can assume multifaceted meanings in the context of intimate relationships, particularly where emotional abuse prevails. Among married women subjected to emotional abuse, silence may serve as a shield, a survival mechanism, a means of communication, or a reflection of internalized helplessness. Emotional abuse—comprising manipulation, degradation, humiliation, gaslighting, and control—undermines women's autonomy and corrodes their psychological well-being (Srivastav, 2021). Although physical violence in intimate partnerships has garnered substantial academic and policy attention, emotional abuse remains underrecognized and often trivialized, despite its equally damaging effects (Guermazi et al., 2024; Kaur, 2022).

Emotional abuse tends to manifest insidiously and persistently, creating relational environments where victims experience confusion, self-blame, and chronic fear without physical evidence of violence (Sukoon, 2020). In such dynamics, silence often becomes a core behavioral and psychological response. For emotionally abused women, especially within conservative or patriarchal societies, silence is not merely the absence of speech but a complex and contextually shaped expression of pain, resistance, protection, or emotional paralysis (Samardžić et al., 2024). Understanding the contextual meaning of silence in these women's lives is essential for informing culturally sensitive interventions and validating their lived realities.

The gendered dimensions of silence are central to feminist analyses of domestic abuse. Women are often socialized into silence through cultural, religious, and familial norms that equate womanhood with patience, sacrifice, and obedience (Barnes & Aune, 2021). In many traditional contexts, silence is considered a virtue, and voicing dissatisfaction is stigmatized as disobedience or disloyalty (Oppong-Adjei & Essah-Ntiful, 2023). For women experiencing emotional abuse, silence may thus stem from learned submission, fear of societal judgment, or the desire to preserve family unity. This gendered silencing is exacerbated within institutions, such as religious communities, where the minimization of abuse and the prioritization of marital endurance perpetuate a culture of secrecy and repression (Bäcklin, 2022; Barnes & Aune, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified the prevalence of domestic and emotional abuse, as women were

confined with abusers and isolated from support networks. Reports suggest a marked increase in incidents of domestic abuse, including emotional coercion and manipulation, during lockdown periods (Boxall & Morgan, 2020). In such circumstances, silence emerged not only as a coping strategy but also as a form of enforced muteness, as women had fewer opportunities to disclose their suffering or seek help. This underscores the necessity of interpreting silence not as inaction or acceptance, but as an adaptive—though often painful—response to powerlessness and danger.

Research indicates that emotional abuse can have long-lasting impacts on women's self-esteem, identity, and interpersonal functioning (Gilbert, 2020; Ginzburg et al., 2024). Survivors of emotional abuse frequently report symptoms such as anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, and alexithymia, all of which contribute to the erosion of self-expression and the internalization of silence (Guermazi et al., 2024; Serin, 2020). The interplay between emotional exhaustion and silence has also been examined in organizational psychology, where employees under abusive supervision similarly resort to silence due to fear of reprisal or futility of speech (Sridadi et al., 2022). These findings, although drawn from different contexts, highlight the broader psychological mechanism by which individuals—especially those in asymmetrical power relationships—retreat into silence as a form of psychological survival.

From a linguistic and stylistic perspective, silence may be interpreted as both a communicative act and a socio-symbolic gesture. In literary and discourse analyses of abused women's narratives, silence has been construed as a tool of resistance, ambiguity, or negotiation (Oppong-Adjei & Essah-Ntiful, 2023). This aligns with contemporary feminist theories that challenge the binary view of voice as power and silence as submission. Instead, they call for a contextual reading of silence—one that considers its function, intentionality, and emotional undercurrents (Samardžić et al., 2024). In many abusive relationships, the decision to remain silent may paradoxically offer a sense of agency, especially when speaking out leads to retaliation or further psychological harm.

Furthermore, silence may also function as an intergenerational and collective expression of trauma. In studies involving survivors of abuse who later become support workers, researchers observed a recursive relationship between personal silence and professional empathy. Survivors who have lived through prolonged periods of silencing often exhibit heightened sensitivity to the silences of others, interpreting them not as absence but

as meaning-laden spaces (Gilbert, 2020). This has implications for trauma-informed practices in mental health and social work, where silence must be acknowledged not only as a symptom but also as a story.

Studies conducted in various socio-cultural contexts reaffirm that silence among emotionally abused women cannot be understood in isolation from their environments. In Nigeria, for instance, cultural taboos surrounding divorce and gender roles compel women to endure emotional abuse silently to protect family reputation or maintain financial stability (Ezelote et al., 2021). In Tunisia, a study on intimate partner violence revealed that emotional dependency and low self-esteem were strongly correlated with women's inability to assert themselves, resulting in habitual silence even in the face of chronic emotional harm (Guermazi et al., 2024). Similar patterns were observed among South Asian and Middle Eastern women, where silence is often enforced by patriarchal family structures and religious doctrines (Kaur, 2022).

Moreover, silence is intricately tied to the broader sociocultural regulation of women's emotions and bodies. Emotional abuse often targets a woman's sense of self—her competence, attractiveness, emotional responses, and bodily autonomy. In their exploration of body representation among abuse survivors, Ginzburg et al. (Ginzburg et al., 2024) found that experiences of childhood abuse predicted later tendencies toward silence and emotional suppression in adulthood, particularly in parenting contexts. This suggests that silence, in many cases, is not merely a reaction to immediate abuse but part of a longer developmental trajectory of being unheard, invalidated, or punished for speaking.

In adolescent populations, silence resulting from emotional abuse is also well-documented. Jurs et al. (Jurs et al., 2023) demonstrated that emotionally abused adolescents often fail to report bullying or psychological aggression, not due to indifference but because of learned helplessness, fear of disbelief, and internalized stigma. These developmental patterns offer important parallels to adult women's silence in marital abuse contexts, highlighting the need for early interventions that validate and empower victims' voices.

While silence has traditionally been problematized in clinical literature as symptomatic of suppression or dysfunction, a growing body of research suggests that it may also be a form of affective communication—especially when verbal articulation is unsafe or unavailable (Samardžić et al., 2024). Emotional silence in abusive marriages often conveys messages of fatigue, sorrow, protest, or desperation that are

legible only to those who understand the relational history of the abuse. Such meanings are rarely captured in standardized assessments, necessitating qualitative explorations that center survivors' lived experiences and cultural understandings.

Despite this growing recognition, there remains a lack of empirical studies that examine how emotionally abused women themselves interpret and narrate their silence. Much of the existing literature has focused on behaviors or consequences of emotional abuse, without exploring the nuanced internal rationales that inform women's decisions to remain silent (Srivastav, 2021). This study addresses that gap by exploring the contextual meanings of silence among married women in Taiwan who have experienced emotional abuse.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study employed a qualitative design using a phenomenological approach to explore the contextual meaning of silence among emotionally abused married women. Phenomenology was selected due to its emphasis on understanding individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences. The study aimed to capture the complex, nuanced, and subjective interpretations of silence in the context of emotional abuse within marriage.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 18 married women from various regions in Taiwan who self-identified as having experienced emotional abuse within their marital relationships. Participants were selected based on their ability and willingness to articulate their experiences of emotional abuse and their perceptions of silence within those experiences. Inclusion criteria included: being legally married or cohabitating for at least two years, self-reporting experiences of emotional abuse (e.g., verbal degradation, gaslighting, emotional manipulation), and expressing silence as a recurring or significant behavioral pattern in the relationship. The participants ranged in age from 28 to 52 years and varied in terms of socioeconomic background, educational attainment, and duration of marriage, allowing for a diverse representation of perspectives.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in private, secure settings that ensured

participant confidentiality and comfort. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. An interview guide was developed with open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, descriptive narratives about participants' experiences with emotional abuse and the role of silence in their coping and relational dynamics. Sample questions included: "Can you describe what silence means to you in your relationship?", "What situations lead you to choose silence?", and "How do you think your silence is interpreted by your partner or yourself?"

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese by the lead researcher and were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English for analysis. To ensure cultural and semantic accuracy, translations were reviewed by bilingual experts with experience in psychological research.

The process of data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews, confirming that the research questions had been sufficiently explored. Saturation was achieved after 18 interviews.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

First, all interview transcripts were read and re-read by the research team to become immersed in the data. Initial coding was performed line by line, capturing relevant words,

phrases, and meanings related to silence and emotional abuse. Codes were then organized into broader categories and subsequently clustered into potential themes that reflected patterns across the data set. Constant comparative analysis was employed to refine the themes and ensure that they accurately represented the participants' experiences.

Throughout the analytic process, memo writing and reflective journaling were used to document analytic decisions, minimize researcher bias, and maintain a transparent audit trail. To enhance trustworthiness, the study incorporated triangulation through peer debriefing and member checking, where selected participants were invited to review preliminary interpretations of their interviews for validation and clarification.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 18 married women residing in various regions of Taiwan, all of whom had experienced emotional abuse within their marital relationships. The participants ranged in age from 28 to 52 years, with a mean age of 39.4 years. Most participants ($n = 11$) had been married for over 10 years, while the remaining 7 had been married between 3 and 10 years. In terms of education, 6 participants held a university degree, 7 had completed secondary education, and 5 had attained only primary education. Regarding employment status, 9 women were unemployed or homemakers, 6 were employed part-time, and 3 were employed full-time. The majority ($n = 13$) reported having one or more children. All participants self-identified as having experienced persistent emotional abuse, including but not limited to verbal humiliation, psychological manipulation, and emotional neglect. This purposive sample provided a diverse yet thematically rich representation of lived experiences, ensuring variation in age, education, and family structure.

Table 1

Categories, Subcategories, and Concepts

| Category (Theme) | Subcategory | Concepts (Open Codes) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Silence as a Survival Strategy | Avoiding Conflict | Withdrawing during arguments; Not responding to insults; Fear of escalation; Keeping peace; Emotional numbness |
| | Emotional Self-Protection | Guarding inner thoughts; Fear of vulnerability; Suppressing tears; Hiding emotional pain |
| | Preventing Exposure | Children's |
| | Resistance | Without |
| | Confrontation | Strategic Silence |
| | | Choosing the right moment to speak; Calculated quietness; Timing responses; Using silence to gain control |

| | | |
|--|---------------------------|---|
| 2. Silence as a Form of Powerlessness | Energy Conservation | Emotional exhaustion; Saving mental energy; Silence as rest; Avoiding draining interactions |
| | Coping with Fear | Fear of partner's rage; Safety concerns; Silence as self-defense; Avoiding physical violence |
| | Internalized Helplessness | Belief in own worthlessness; Feeling stuck; Self-blame; "It's my fault"; No one will listen |
| | Social Isolation | Lack of support; No one to confide in; Cultural shame; Judged by others; Loneliness |
| | Learned Submission | Silence as duty; Cultural obedience; Submission as virtue; Family expectations |
| 3. Silence as a Communicative Expression | Loss of Voice | Feeling invisible; Words don't matter; Afraid to speak up; Voice suppressed by partner's dominance |
| | Emotional Paralysis | Feeling frozen; Confusion about right words; Overthinking before speaking; Anxiety about consequences |
| | Cry for Help | Hoping others notice silence; Wanting attention without words; Using silence to show distress |
| | Symbolic Resistance | Silence as protest; Intentional absence of dialogue; Withdrawal as message; Withholding communication |
| | Testing Boundaries | Waiting to be asked; Seeing if partner notices silence; Silence to gauge concern; Expecting reaction |
| | Expressing Disappointment | Withdrawing in hurt; Silence after betrayal; Not speaking to show emotional pain |
| | Nonverbal Communication | Using gestures instead of words; Eye contact avoidance; Silent tears; Closed body language; Retreating physically |

Category 1: Silence as a Survival Strategy

Avoiding Conflict. Many participants described silence as a method of de-escalating tension or avoiding confrontations that could potentially become violent. Silence was a mechanism to maintain surface peace within the relationship. One participant stated, *"If I say anything, he'll just explode. It's better to keep quiet and wait until he cools down."* Another shared, *"Arguing never helped. Silence became my shield."* These expressions indicate that silence was often not passive but rather a conscious choice to prevent further emotional or physical harm.

Emotional Self-Protection. Silence also functioned as an emotional boundary, enabling women to shield themselves from further psychological damage. Participants expressed that speaking about their feelings often led to invalidation or ridicule. As one woman explained, *"When I talked about my pain, he laughed or ignored me. After a while, I just stopped talking."* This subcategory highlights silence as an act of emotional containment, used to preserve what remained of their psychological integrity.

Preventing Children's Exposure. Several women emphasized their use of silence as a strategy to protect their children from witnessing emotional abuse or parental conflict. *"I didn't want my daughter to see us fighting again,"* one participant noted. Another added, *"It wasn't just about me. I stayed silent so the kids wouldn't grow up in a war zone."* In this context, silence was an act of maternal responsibility.

Resistance Without Confrontation. For some participants, silence became a subtle form of resistance. It allowed them to assert themselves without provoking direct

confrontation. One woman stated, *"When I stopped reacting, it was my way of saying 'I don't accept this,' even if I didn't say it out loud."* Another described her silence as *"refusing to feed the fire."* Here, silence transformed into a quiet rebellion against oppression.

Strategic Silence. Participants reported that silence was often deliberately calculated to serve communicative or tactical purposes. Some chose not to respond during heated moments to gain psychological advantage or to control the timing of future conversations. *"Sometimes I waited. I knew if I spoke later, it would hurt more—or be heard better,"* remarked one woman. This reflects a nuanced and agentive use of silence as a strategic communicative tool.

Energy Conservation. Emotional exhaustion was a recurrent theme, and silence emerged as a method of preserving emotional energy. One participant said, *"Talking just drained me. I needed my silence like I needed sleep."* Another shared, *"There's only so much you can explain to someone who doesn't want to understand."* These statements point to silence as a survival tactic in an emotionally depleting environment.

Coping with Fear. For many participants, silence was rooted in fear—fear of retaliation, humiliation, or even violence. *"He never hit me, but the way he looked at me when I talked... I froze,"* shared one woman. Another explained, *"Speaking felt dangerous, like walking on glass."* Silence in these instances was an instinctive, protective response to a perceived threat.

Category 2: Silence as a Form of Powerlessness

Internalized Helplessness. Several women expressed that over time, silence became an internalized response

linked to feelings of defeat, self-blame, and worthlessness. One participant noted, *"Maybe I deserved it. Maybe I made him this angry."* Another added, *"When you feel worthless, what's the point of speaking?"* These insights illustrate how silence can be a reflection of deeply ingrained helplessness.

Social Isolation. Participants frequently reported feeling isolated and unsupported, which reinforced their silence. They feared judgment or disbelief from friends, family, or society. *"I tried talking to my mother, but she told me to be more patient,"* said one woman. Another stated, *"People only see the outside. They don't know the silence inside my home."* This isolation made speaking out feel futile or risky.

Learned Submission. Cultural and familial norms also contributed to silence, as some women internalized obedience and submission as expected behaviors. *"In our family, women don't argue with men,"* explained one participant. Another said, *"My mother told me to stay quiet and save the marriage."* These accounts reveal how cultural conditioning can normalize silence in the face of abuse.

Loss of Voice. Many women felt that their voices had been suppressed over time, either by their partners' controlling behavior or by their own loss of confidence. One woman remarked, *"He talked over me all the time. Eventually, I just stopped trying."* Another shared, *"It felt like I didn't exist in the room anymore."* Their silence symbolized an erasure of personal agency.

Emotional Paralysis. Some participants described a form of psychological freezing that prevented them from speaking, even when they wanted to. *"I had the words in my head but couldn't say them,"* said one woman. Another recalled, *"I was scared of what would happen if I opened my mouth."* These responses reflect a state of emotional paralysis where silence was involuntary.

Category 3: Silence as a Communicative Expression

Cry for Help. Several participants used silence not to hide their pain, but to express it—hoping someone would notice and reach out. *"I stopped talking so someone would ask what was wrong,"* one participant revealed. Another shared, *"My silence was loud. I just didn't have the words anymore."* This indicates that silence can act as an indirect plea for support.

Symbolic Resistance. In some cases, silence was an intentional expression of defiance and rejection. *"I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of hearing me cry or beg,"* said one participant. Another noted, *"Not talking was my way of saying, 'You don't control everything.'"* Here, silence became a symbolic stance against domination.

Testing Boundaries. Some women described their silence as a way of gauging their partners' emotional responsiveness. *"I'd go quiet to see if he noticed or cared,"* one woman confessed. Others used silence to test whether their absence would elicit concern or change. *"If I stopped talking for days and he didn't care, it told me everything,"* said another.

Expressing Disappointment. Silence was also used to convey sadness, betrayal, or unmet expectations. *"When I was hurt, I didn't want to talk—I wanted him to feel the weight of it,"* explained one participant. Another said, *"I felt so disappointed, I couldn't even speak."* These instances highlight silence as a powerful, emotional form of communication.

Nonverbal Communication. Lastly, participants frequently used nonverbal cues—such as avoidance of eye contact, physical withdrawal, or silent crying—as part of their communicative silence. *"He never noticed my silence, but maybe he saw the tears I couldn't hide,"* one woman shared. Another described, *"I stopped looking at him. My body spoke for me."* This subcategory demonstrates that silence can be expressive even in the absence of spoken words.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore the contextual meanings and functions of silence among emotionally abused married women in Taiwan. The findings revealed three overarching themes: silence as a survival strategy, silence as a form of powerlessness, and silence as a communicative expression. Each theme was further subdivided into distinct subcategories, illustrating that silence in emotionally abusive relationships is not a uniform or passive behavior but a complex and adaptive response embedded in emotional, cultural, and relational contexts. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of emotionally abused women and support a growing body of literature that repositions silence not as a void, but as a form of meaning-making and survival.

The first theme, *silence as a survival strategy*, underscores how women use silence to protect themselves from further psychological or physical harm. Subcategories such as avoiding conflict, emotional self-protection, and coping with fear illustrate that silence often emerges as a calculated response to danger. Participants described silence as a "shield," employed to de-escalate aggression or avoid triggering their partners' rage. This aligns with research by

(Guermazi et al., 2024), which found that emotionally abused women in Tunisia frequently used silence to manage heightened emotional dependency and self-esteem erosion, choosing not to speak in moments of anticipated retaliation. Similarly, (Sridadi et al., 2022) demonstrated that silence is frequently employed as a defensive mechanism in power-imbalanced relationships, where emotional exhaustion hinders the capacity to assert oneself. These findings support the interpretation that silence functions as an act of self-preservation in the absence of safe avenues for communication.

Moreover, women's use of silence to shield their children from emotional trauma highlights a maternal dimension of this survival mechanism. As several participants emphasized, maintaining family cohesion and protecting children from verbal hostility necessitated the suppression of their own emotional expressions. This echoes findings by (Serin, 2020), who described the agency of non-abusing mothers who used silence to mitigate harm after disclosure of child abuse. In both cases, silence emerges not from weakness but from an ethical and emotional responsibility to prevent further suffering.

The subcategory of *strategic silence* in this theme is particularly significant, as it reflects agency within constraint. Participants described moments in which they delayed speech to gain emotional clarity or to avoid predictable conflict. This nuanced use of silence resonates with the findings of (Samardžić et al., 2024), who examined young women's "silencing-type behaviors" and found that silence could serve as a boundary-setting mechanism in toxic romantic dynamics. Rather than suggesting passivity, strategic silence reflects psychological sophistication in navigating unpredictable and unsafe emotional terrain.

The second major theme, *silence as a form of powerlessness*, reveals a more troubling dimension of the participants' lived experience. Internalized helplessness, learned submission, emotional paralysis, and the loss of voice reflect how prolonged emotional abuse can erode one's self-concept and communicative capacity. Many participants reported that over time, they began to see their silence not as a choice, but as the only possible response. These findings are consistent with the psychological patterns of chronic abuse survivors documented by (Srivastav, 2021), who noted that emotional abuse often leads to cycles of self-blame and voicelessness. The silence observed in this study was frequently linked to feelings of worthlessness, fear of being disbelieved, and societal expectations of female endurance.

Social isolation and learned submission further compound this sense of powerlessness. Women described being discouraged from speaking out by family members, religious institutions, and community norms that valorize female patience and stigmatize marital discord. These insights mirror findings from (Barnes & Aune, 2021), who highlighted the religious silencing of abused women in church communities, where patriarchal interpretations of scripture discourage confrontation or separation. Likewise, (Oppong-Adjei & Essah-Ntiful, 2023) analyzed literary portrayals of abused women in West Africa, where silence was both culturally prescribed and narratively normalized as the behavior of "obedient" wives. These cross-cultural parallels point to the pervasive and systemic forces that condition women into silence, extending beyond the dyadic relationship to the broader social and cultural order.

The experience of *emotional paralysis*—where women felt unable to speak even when they wanted to—further underscores the psychological toll of abuse. This paralysis was not only emotional but cognitive; participants described an inability to find words or a fear that words would "make things worse." Such findings resonate with (Gilbert, 2020), who examined the challenges faced by domestic abuse survivors working in support roles and found that unresolved trauma often manifests in inhibited self-expression. Together, these data suggest that silence, once a voluntary protective response, can become a chronic state of speechlessness resulting from prolonged emotional suppression.

The third theme, *silence as a communicative expression*, provides a critical corrective to the view of silence as mere absence. Many participants described silence as a form of expression—of pain, resistance, or unacknowledged needs. For some, silence served as a "cry for help" intended to elicit concern or recognition. Others used silence to test relational boundaries, express disappointment, or signal withdrawal. These findings echo the stylistic and narrative analyses of (Oppong-Adjei & Essah-Ntiful, 2023), who suggested that silence in abusive relationships may serve as a coded language that communicates unspeakable realities.

Symbolic resistance—where silence was employed as an act of defiance—further complicates the binary understanding of silence as weakness. Participants recounted how refusing to respond, withholding speech, or disengaging from arguments became forms of reclaiming agency. Similar patterns were noted by (Samardžić et al., 2024), who emphasized that women's silence could act as a protest against manipulation and domination, even in the absence of

overt confrontation. In this study, such symbolic silences often coexisted with emotional pain, suggesting that resistance and suffering are not mutually exclusive.

Nonverbal expressions such as eye contact avoidance, silent crying, and physical withdrawal were also prominent in participants' narratives. These nonverbal cues illustrate the embodied nature of silence—how it is communicated through gesture, posture, and presence. As (Ginzburg et al., 2024) has shown in their work on trauma and body representation, survivors of abuse often express distress through somatic channels when verbal ones are inaccessible. The findings of this study support the interpretation that silence is not devoid of content, but laden with affective and relational significance that deserves closer clinical and scholarly attention.

Taken together, the three thematic categories illustrate that silence among emotionally abused married women is not a static or uniform phenomenon. It is a dynamic, context-bound, and multifaceted behavior that can reflect protection, disempowerment, and meaning-making simultaneously. Importantly, this complexity cautions against over-pathologizing silence in therapeutic contexts. Instead, professionals must engage in nuanced listening—attuned not only to what is said but also to what is withheld, deferred, or unspeakable.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

While this study offers in-depth insights into the contextual meanings of silence among emotionally abused women, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was geographically limited to Taiwan, which may constrain the transferability of findings to women in other cultural settings. Although many themes echoed global patterns of emotional abuse, the specific sociocultural context likely shaped the meaning and function of silence in distinct ways. Second, as with all self-report data, the interviews were subject to memory bias and emotional filtering. Participants may have underreported or overemphasized certain experiences due to emotional distress or retrospective reinterpretation. Lastly, the study relied solely on women's accounts; the perspectives of partners, family members, or support professionals were not included, limiting a more systemic understanding of how silence is constructed and maintained in abusive environments.

Future research should consider comparative studies across diverse cultural settings to examine how cultural

norms and legal frameworks influence women's use of silence in abusive relationships. Longitudinal research would also help trace how the function of silence evolves over time—from the early stages of abuse to potential recovery or separation. Additionally, incorporating multimodal data collection methods—such as observational techniques, diaries, or embodied narrative practices—may capture nonverbal forms of silence more effectively. Finally, studies that include both survivors and their therapists or support workers could illuminate how silence is interpreted and responded to in clinical contexts, contributing to more responsive and empathetic intervention models.

Practitioners working with survivors of emotional abuse must be trained to interpret silence not as a lack of engagement but as a meaningful and often intentional response. Therapeutic settings should create space for silence, allowing clients to articulate their stories at their own pace. Culturally responsive interventions should acknowledge the socio-normative pressures that enforce silence, particularly in communities where speaking out carries stigma or retribution. Support systems—legal, medical, and psychological—should be sensitized to recognize silence as a potential signal of distress and resilience. Finally, empowerment programs should focus on helping women reconstruct their voice, not by forcing speech, but by honoring their right to choose when and how they speak.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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