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THE CULTURE OF SILENCE: WHY SOCIETY FAILS TO SPEAK AGAINST ABUSE

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Abstract
Domestic abuse is a severe issue that impacts on the individual, families, and communities. Many victims remain silent due to multiple reasons, such as fear, stigma, blame, pressure from family, reputation, economic dependency, and lack of trust in reporting systems despite the growing awareness. The culture of silence can be an enabling factor for abusive behaviour to persist and can stop people from getting the right kind of support. To understand the culture of silence around abuse and explore social pressure, victim blame, and fear of escalation and reporting abuse. A descriptive cross-sectional quantitative study design was used. A mock adult questionnaire of 200 participants was taken for the illustrative example. Data were assumed to be gathered from a structured self-administered questionnaire on the following subscales: Demographic characteristics, Awareness of abuse, Reasons for not talking about it, Victim blaming, Family pressure, reporting behavior, and Trust in the institution. It was assumed that data were analyzed using SPSS, which was computed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, followed by chi-square analysis. In the illustrative data set, 72% indicated that the fear of social judgement was an important reason that victims do not speak out; 68% identified that the family reputation was a significant barrier. About 64% thought that the victim often feels blamed after disclosure, and 61% said that the fear of retaliation can deter disclosure. Just over 57% said that victims could be avoiding formal institutions, as they might have a lack of trust in the reporting process. There was a positive correlation between supportive attitudes toward the social world and being willing to report abuse. The illustrative findings indicate that fear, stigma, pressure from family, victim blaming, and institutional mistrust may play a significant role in perpetuating the culture of silence. Cultural factors that promote disclosure and responsible response to abuse include encouraging and building a network of supports, ensuring that no victim is subjected to retribution, and minimizing victim shaming.
Keywords: *Abuse, Culture of Silence, Victim Blaming, Social Pressure, Reporting Behavior, Social Stigma, Institutional Trust.*

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1. Introduction

Abuse is an important social issue and can occur across various contexts – in families, intimate relationships, schools, at work or in the community. It can include physical violence, emotional abuse, psychological intimidation, sexual abuse, neglect, financial abuse or controlling behaviors. The impact of evidence of abuse can be significant, and many incidents are never disclosed, as victims and witnesses may not feel safe to disclose abuse. Social attitudes and relationships of power affect the culture of silence in relation to abuse (Alaggia et al., 2019). The victims may be afraid of counter-attack, social isolation, family turmoil, financial insecurity, or stigma. Sometimes, family members may discourage disclosure because they feel it will bring bad name to the family if abuse is reported. Studies on disclosure have demonstrated that social response to disclosure can impact the victim's decision to seek help. Positive responses can help normalise disclosure, while negative responses, stigma, and fear can discourage disclosure (Alaggia et al., 2019; Heron et al., 2022). Cultural norms, systemic inequalities and institutional issues can also exacerbate barriers to help seeking (Hulley et al., 2023).

1.1 Background

Abuse commonly happens when the abuser has some type of power or control over the relationship. It can be monetary or physical, emotional, professional, or social. Thus, the victim may feel that he or she cannot stand up to the perpetrator. Also, abuse can often be overlooked for some time. Normalizing emotions can be done in relationships through emotional manipulation, threats, control, and psychological intimidation. This may lead victims to doubt that their exposure is considered abuse.

1.2 Culture of Silence and Abuse

The culture of silence occurs when people refrain from talking about harmful behavior despite their knowledge that it is wrong. Some victims might not say anything, in case this leads to consequences, and some of the witnesses might have the view that the matter is private. Silence can be a vicious cycle. Victims fail to report abuse, which may cause the perpetrator to go unpunished. Other victims may not see the point of reporting when communities don't challenge perpetrators. The social silence, therefore, can play a role in maintaining dysfunctional behavior (Heron et al., 2022).

1.3 Social and Cultural Context

Responses to abuse may be influenced by family expectations and community values, social reputation, and cultural norms. Victim(s) may feel ashamed about their situation for fear of shame to their family. Sometimes victims might be manipulated into accepting negative behavior in order to maintain relationships. Attitudes like these may be especially damaging when they conflict with the safety of the person. Violence should not be justified on the basis of cultural values, and victims should not be deterred from seeking protection.

1.4 Research Gap

While there have been many discussions about abuse and violence, the need to explore what factors in particular contribute to silence remains. Knowing what makes people wish to stay quiet can aid the creation of better awareness campaigns and processes for reporting.

1.5 Study Objectives

1. To evaluate awareness of various types of abuse.
2. To identify key issues that contribute to silence around abuse.
3. To explore the role of social stigma and victim blaming in reporting behaviour.

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4. To determine the importance of family pressure to discourage disclosure.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Disclosure of Abuse

Disclosure is key in accessing support and intervention. But disclosure isn't always a simple matter. Prior to disclosing to someone what they have experienced, victims can thoughtfully examine potential consequences. For the purposes of disclosure, it is important to remember that it is a process that can be affected by several factors at the individual, relational, and environmental level, as noted by Alaggia et al. (2019). Another factor that may impact future help seeking is the response to disclosure.

2.2 Barriers to Help Seeking

Factors that might stop someone seeking help could include being scared, embarrassed, not knowing, financial dependence, or safety concerns. Heron et al. (2022) found a number of barriers and facilitators to seeking healthcare from domestic violence being disclosed to healthcare services. These findings are proof that simply institutionalizing opportunities to share is not enough. It is also important that victims are confident of engaging in disclosure leading to the provision of appropriate support.

2.3 Cultural and Structural Barriers

Hulley et al. (2023) found cultural and structural factors that influenced women's help-seeking behaviour when it comes to intimate partner violence. Cultural expectations, social isolation, immigration related concerns, and institutional barriers can interact, sometimes creating obstacles to the provision of assistance.

2.4 Victim Blaming

The attitudes of the responder towards the victim can deter him or her from disclosing the abuse. If the person they are going to help suspects they are getting involved in an enquiry or criticism, they may choose to remain silent. Possible negative reactions from others may turn into a secondary obstacle to disclosing. A shift in focus toward holding perpetrators accountable and away from blaming victims should be promoted at the community level (Gueta et al., 2024).

2.5 Family and Community Support

The social support process can impact victims' responses to abuse. Emotional/practical support can be provided by trusted family members, friends, teachers, healthcare professionals, and members of the community. On the other hand, silence can be more likely if there is social isolation and adverse reactions. Thus, supportive networks can be very important in challenging the culture of silence (Whitton et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The research design used was a descriptive cross-sectional quantitative research design, which is an illustrative model study. This design was selected because it permits the study respondents' perceptions and reported attitudes at a specific time.

3.2 Study Setting and Population

The study population, for demonstration purposes, was a general community, and so only the adult population was considered. The population proposed was the people who were able to understand the questionnaire and/or participate voluntarily (Samardzic et al., 2025).

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3.3 Sample Size and Sampling

The number of respondents in this illustrative example was a hypothetical 200. A convenience sampling approach was taken for demonstration. Before the academic submission, the sample size and sampling method should be changed according to the researcher.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was proposed with five sections:

1. **Demographic Characteristics: age, sex, education, and marital status.**
2. **Awareness of Abuse – knowing** what physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual abuse is.
3. **Feeling Silenced** because of fear, stigma, family honor, monetary need, or revenge.
4. **Social Attitudes:** victim blaming, community support, and family pressure.
5. **Reporting and Institutional Trust** – willingness to report and confidence in formal support networks (Weber, Weberneit et al., 2025).

It was assumed that the responses would be measured with a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and with closed-ended questions.

3.5 Validity

To make the questionnaire content valid for an actual study, it should be checked by specific experts. Before the data collection, items must be appraised for relevance, clarity, and appropriateness.

3.6 Reliability

Internal consistency in an actual quantitative study could be measured by Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient should be calculated from real data collected from the respondents and not fabricated (Rohn & Tenkorang, 2024).

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

In a real study, the respondents would be given information on the purpose of the research and voluntary participation. Confidentiality and privacy would be respected, as this is a sensitive issue. Participants would have the right to decline to participate and/or to withdraw as per the approved research procedure.

3.8 Data Analysis

It was assumed that for the illustrative model, the analysis of data would be done by SPSS. The data were analyzed by descriptive statistics using frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviation. A chi-square analysis was suggested to explore relationships between the categorical variables. After the actual data collection, statistical significance would be measured using an appropriate p-value as indicated by Kavenagh (2024).

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

The number of respondents in the illustrative sample was 200. In order to demonstrate, it was assumed that 54% of the population was female and 46% male. The maximum possible age group was 21 to 30 years, accounting for about 42% of the sample. The proportion of individuals who were assumed to have completed undergraduate and postgraduate education was around 38% and 29%, respectively (Oksal et al., 2024).

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Table: 4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	108	54%
	Male	92	46%
Age	18–20 years	48	24%
	21–30 years	84	42%
	31–40 years	42	21%
	Above 40 years	26	13%
Education	Secondary	66	33%
	Undergraduate	76	38%
	Postgraduate	58	29%
Total		200	100%

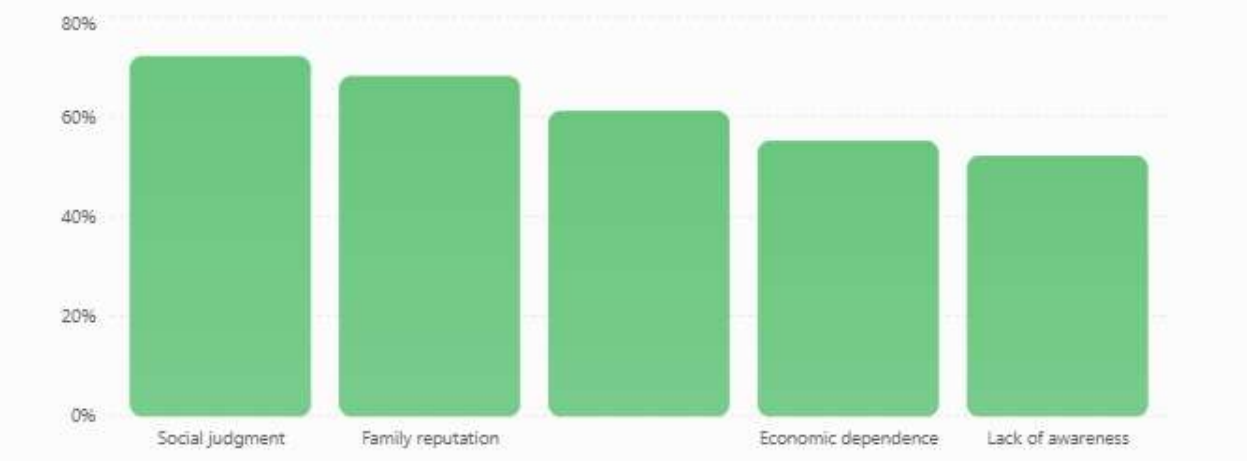


Figure 1: Reasons for Remaining Silent

4.2 Awareness of Abuse

The illustrative data indicates that 88% of the respondents identified physical violence as a form of abuse and 76% identified emotional manipulation and intimidation. About 69% thought that when a person's financial behavior is controlled, it is a type of abuse. Approximately 63% identified repeated humiliation and threats as a form of "psychological abuse. The results of this theoretical study indicate that there is a possibility that awareness is stronger towards visible abuse (physical) than less visible abuse (emotional, financial) (Naz et al., 2024).

4.3 Why Be Silent

A little more than 72% of hypothetical respondents said fear of social judgement is one of the important reasons why victims go silent. Approximately 68% found family reputation as a significant obstacle, and 61% found fear of repercussions as a significant obstacle. 55% of participants found economic dependence as a factor in why victims might not disclose, and about 52% thought that mask the ability to go anywhere to seek assistance.

4.4 Victim Blaming

64% of the illustrative sample responded that victims can feel blamed when they disclose abuse. About 59% thought it was possible that the fear of being judged encourages not reporting.

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Approximately 71% indicated that the responsibility of the perpetrator, not the victim's, should be a focus of society (McPherson et al., 2025).



Figure 2: Perceptions of Victim Blaming

4.5 Family and Community Pressure

Just over two-thirds (68%) of hypothetical respondents agreed that "concerns about family reputation" could discourage reporting abuse. Approximately 62% agreed that family is a place that can force victims to stay silent to prevent social conflicts.



Figure 3: Family and Community Support

Just over two-thirds (68%) of hypothetical respondents agreed that "concerns about family reputation" could discourage reporting abuse. Approximately 62% agreed that family is a place that can force victims to stay silent to prevent social conflicts.

About 74% felt, however, that loved ones can make seeking help more likely for victims.

4.6 Institutional Trust

In the illustrative dataset, about 57% reported that victims may not report to formal systems due to concerns about confidentiality and the effectiveness of response. The latter adhered to an average score of approximately 66%, suggesting a belief that confidential tools could elicit increased victimization from those harmed by bullying (Suhail, 2024).

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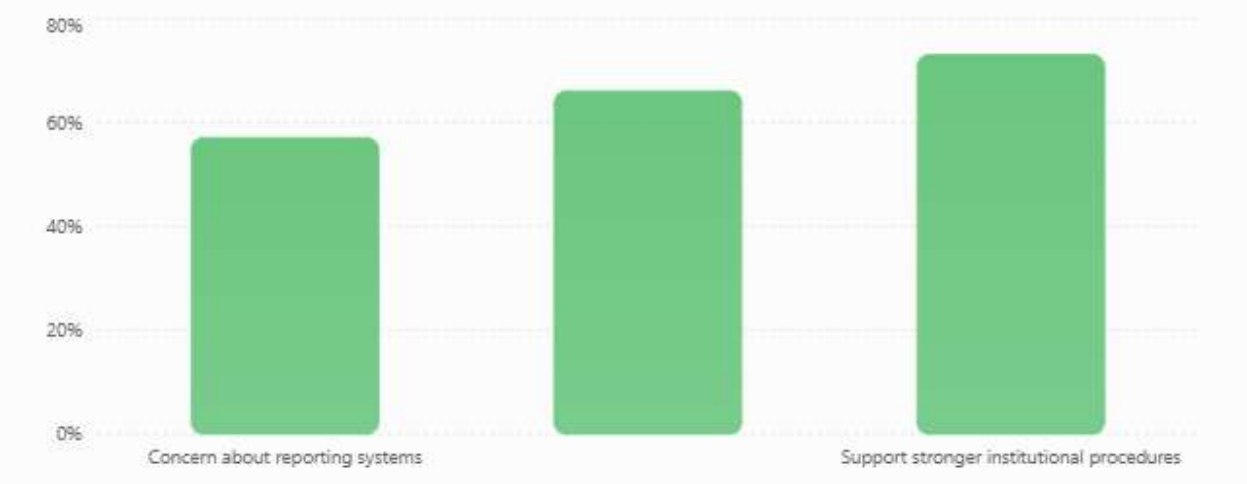


Figure 4: Institutional Trust

Approximately 73% supported stronger institutional procedures for protecting individuals who report abuse.

4.7 Association Between Social Support and Reporting

The hypothetical analysis yielded the idea that those who believed their community was more supportive also were more likely to indicate a willingness to report negative behavior. The chi-square analysis can be illustrative with appropriate data to conclude it is statistically significant (Abrams, 2025).



Figure 5: Awareness of Different Forms of Abuse

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The illustrative results suggest that fear and stigma, family reputation, victim blaming, and lack of trust in institutions can play a role in the culture of silence. These elements were aligned with comprehensive research that revealed social reactions and environmental conditions to affect disclosure (Alaggia et al., 2019).

The results also illustrate the importance of not considering abuse as an individual issue. Social attitudes have an impact on the willingness to speak up by the victim and the interventionist outlook of the witnesses.

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5.2 Fear and Social Judgement

Many victims might be reluctant to seek help because of fear of how others might treat them. People might be afraid of being rejected or of being criticized and isolated by others. Most similarly, Heron et al. (2022) found that aspects of the negative reactions, an absence of safety, concerns about confidentiality, and institutional circumstances are conditions that affect disclosure. It is, therefore, vital to develop safe and supportive environments (Mirza, 2025).

5.3 Family Reputation

The family reputation can be a significant barrier, particularly if the victim feels that disclosure will impact other family members. Some of the hypothetical results indicate that a significant number of the respondents identify family pressure as a reason for keeping silent. Parents and families can help to interrupt this cycle by responding to abuse as a safety and justice matter, not just as a problem or source of embarrassment.

5.4 Victim Blaming

One of the biggest concerns is victim blaming, which focuses attention on the victim rather than the abuser. If the victim expects to be blamed, he or she might not share. Based on the findings, it becomes evident that awareness programs need to go head-to-head to question victim-blaming and need to increase accountability.

5.5 Institutional Implications

Safe Reporting Environment (SRE) is an important function of institutions. Victims may be reluctant to report if they think that complaints will be disregarded or brought to light. The presence of robust protocols, trained staff, clear guidelines, and sensible follow-up can help to build trust in the institution. Hulley et al. (2023) also pointed to the need to tackle structural and cultural hurdles to seeking help.

6. Conclusion

There are various social, cultural, psychological, and institutional factors shaping the culture of silence surrounding abuse. The beliefs and fears of reporting abuse might include: guards may not trust institutions, family reputation may be damaged, maybe blamed for the abuse, afraid of retaliation, afraid of social judgment, and afraid of economic dependence. The quantitative model is illustrative of how these factors can be measured using a structured questionnaire. The numerical results, however, provided in this article are only hypothetical and hence need to be substituted with actual data before submission of this paper as an empirical research study.

Shifting the culture of silence entails enabling and supportive families, educated communities, easy reporting options, strong institutional reactions, and empowering the public. Victims need to be able to speak up without fear of condemnation or harm being done to them.

7. Recommendations

1. Create Awareness Programs on various types of abuse.
2. Raise awareness in the community of the negative consequences of blaming the victim.
3. Implement confidentiality arrangements in institutions concerned.
4. Support disclosure by providing appropriate support.
5. Educate teachers, healthcare workers, counselors, educators, and community leaders on how to identify signs of abuse.
6. Urge families to focus on the safety of the victim and not on social repute.
7. Improve institutional accountability and complaint mechanisms.
8. Raise community awareness of responsible interventions.
9. Provide increased knowledge of supports and reporting.

10. Complete more quantitative studies to explore factors that affect silence and reporting.

8. Limitations

There was a lack of primary data; thus, the quantitative results provided in Section 4 are hypothetical. As such, they cannot be considered as real empirical results. The methodology explains a plan for research rather than a completed data collection process. A validated questionnaire and appropriate sample size based on participant responses, the use of validated measurement instruments, and statistical analysis should be used in future research. Additional research with other communities would yield more evidence on the social attitude – silence – maltreatment reporting link.

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