

Impact of Childhood Emotional Abuse on Self-Silencing and Internalized Guilt Among Women of Pakistan; Mediating Role of Self-Silencing in the Relationship Between Childhood Emotional Abuse and Internalized Guilt in Women Adaptation and Resilience

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Abstract: *The study aimed to investigate the impact of childhood emotional abuse on self-silencing and internalized guilt among women. Three self-reported scales, including the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-SF), the Silencing the Self Scale (STSS), and the Guilt Subscale of the Personal Feelings Questionnaire, were used to collect data from 410 women (aged above 18) through non-probability convenience sampling. Outcomes from regression analyses indicated that childhood emotional abuse significantly predicted internalized guilt ($\beta = .363, p < .001$) and self-silencing ($\beta = .311, p < .001$). Furthermore, in mediation analysis childhood emotional abuse strongly predicted internalized guilt ($B = 0.35, p < .001$), and this relationship was significantly mediated by self-silencing ($B = 0.35, p < .001$), which explains how early emotional abuse is responsible for heightened guilt in adulthood ($B = 0.24, p < .001$). The research highlights the relation between childhood emotional abuse and its impact on psychological well-being. This study addresses the adverse effects of childhood emotional abuse (CEA) caused by cultural factors, which lead to long-lasting problems in both intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.*

Keywords: childhood abuse, self-silencing, women's abuse, guilt, emotional abuse, women's mental health.

Introduction

Childhood abuse refers to all kinds of maltreatment of a child, such as physical, emotional, and sexual violence. It is considered a global issue, and millions of children are affected by it annually. According to the UNICEF 2024 report, 400 million children under the age of 5 face physical and psychological violence from their caregivers. In some prominent cultures, child abuse is overlooked or barely recognized as a problem despite its serious consequences (Talwar, 2025). Abuse in childhood can be differentiated into types such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, among which emotional abuse is the most understudied form. In emotional abuse repeated hostile, dismissive, or ignorant behavior by a parent or caregiver towards a child

occurs (Abusbaitan et al., 2025). It also refers to humiliation, criticism, and the imposition of unrealistic demands by authority figures, which produces long-lasting psychological and emotional damage that may remain invisible yet profoundly shape adult functioning (Parano et al., 2025). Studies revealed that emotionally abused individuals show more adverse effects than physically abused individuals (Sesar, 2020), due to which victims usually end up with relationship insecurities, people-pleasing attitudes, self-directed anger, and self-dissatisfaction later in their lives (Muzammil et al., 2024).

Studies found that women are more exposed to emotional exhaustion than men (Maslach & Leiter, 2016); that might be due to high cultural and gendered expectations and frequent environmental invalidation that starts from a very young age (Alghamdi, 2024). In some cultures, verbal insults, belittling, calling names, and cursing are among the most common forms of emotional abuse faced by unmarried girls. It is often normalized under the guise of preparing them for their future roles (Masih et al., 2024). Women who faced emotional abuse perceive emotional abuse as more damaging and injurious as compared to other forms (Frost, 2024). Fekadu et al., (2018) also stated that across the world, women report emotional abuse as the most prevalent form they encounter. About 80% of Jordanian women and over 50% of Ethiopian women reported that they regularly experience emotional abuse and that emotional abuse was the most common form of abuse they experienced since childhood (Abujilban et al., 2022; Edeby & San, 2021). Moreover, in Zimbabwe and several other Sub-Saharan African countries, emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of abuse (Chigiji et al., 2018).

Self-silencing refers to suppressing one's feelings, emotions, and needs in order to avoid conflict and protect relational harmony (Aejaz et al., 2025). Individuals commonly adopt this interpersonal strategy to protect themselves and their relationship (Burnett, 2025). Previous literature showed that SS is more prevalent in women than men because women are traditionally socialized to be dependent, obedient, conflict-avoidant, and not to question authority (Lutz-Zois et al., 2013). It is a way of surviving for an individual to reduce emotional harm to themselves (Akram et al., 2024). Davoodi et al. (2025) argued that women may be particularly more likely to adopt self-silencing as coping strategies that involve being accommodating and supportive toward others, that is, by self-silencing, rather than by acquiring and asserting the right of speaking. Women who are raised to expect negative consequences for voicing rights often adopt a good girl persona to get validation and avoid conflicts (Cobb, 2025). This behavior in women is further reinforced when it meets with the approval of authority, and the belief gets stronger that their worth is contingent upon others'

satisfaction even if they are mistreated (Kiebler, 2024). This pattern is a person habitually stuck in a loop where they refrain from articulating their own needs, desires, or preferences in order to serve others even if it demands their own well-being and values (Awan et al., 2024).

Internalized guilt refers to taking responsibility for every negative action, wrongdoing, and their consequences (Carlsson, 2022). Babcock and Laschever (2021) argue that dismissal of valid needs and speaking up for the needs and rights develop guilt and anxiety in women. Due to this, along with personal problems, women take responsibility for others' emotions as well (Hilbig et al., 2025). It is rooted in fear of relational disruption, so asserting basic boundaries may bring substantial guilt and self-blame (Dekel & Abrahams, 2023). Women who are raised to be obedient, respectful, and family-oriented may merge guilt and feel blamed for their own feelings even when no behavior justifies it (Scaccio, 2024). According to Novikova (2024), women who prioritize their personal well-being tend to experience guilt more than those who prioritize others. They consequently feel responsible for managing others' emotions because all the norms discourage self-assertion for women. Social pressure and honor-based norms force women to prioritize family and authority expectations over personal well-being (Durrani et al., 2025). Violation of these cultural norms provokes intense guilt in women because of their upbringing's patterns of feeling guilt for others' emotions (Goriak, 2025). This never-ending cycle of "I must agree" and "I must not disappoint" keeps the women stuck in patterns of self-blame (Jorgensen & Boye, 2024). Self-silencing provides a plausible pathway to internalized guilt. When women constantly suppress their feelings, desires, and needs, they become unable to process and resolve their emotional experiences in healthy ways (Nolen, 2012). All the unvoiced need generates a sense of unworthiness and self-blame. This way it may serve as the mechanism through which the wounds of childhood emotional abuse are converted into internalized guilt (Tariq & Yousaf, 2020). This research focuses on the deeper patterns of psychological mechanisms behind long-term effects of childhood emotional abuse in women. It examines the link between childhood emotional abuse, self-silencing, and internalized guilt and the mediating role of self-silencing in the other two variables, specifically among women in Pakistan. This research will provide practical implications to clinical therapists, counselors, and mental health institutions in designing interventions and promote awareness by offering contextually relevant empirical evidence.

Rational of the study: A number of studies have extensively demonstrated how childhood emotional abuse, self-silencing, and internalizing guilt are connected, but very little emphasis has been given to these three variables within a single mediation framework, especially among women. Moreover, most evidence in this domain has been studied in Western cultures, which

do not define the patterns and emotional experiences of women in Pakistani cultures. These gaps highlight the need to study the connection of these variables in one frame, especially among women within the Pakistani context, where cultural expectations related to gender roles, emotional restraint, and family honor may influence women's emotional experiences and interpersonal behaviors. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap, as it examines whether self-silencing mediates the association between childhood emotional abuse and internalized guilt in women. By examining this mechanism, we can understand the long-term psychological impact of childhood emotional abuse within this cultural context.

Methodology

Hypotheses

H1: Childhood emotional abuse will significantly and positively predict self-silencing in women.

H2: Childhood emotional abuse will significantly and positively predict internalized guilt in women.

H3: Self-silencing will significantly mediate the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and internalized guilt in women.

Participants The research exclusively focused on a female population with a sample of 410 women from various regions of Pakistan. The majority of participants were young women between 18 and 30 (92.9%), followed by 31–40 (5.6%) and above 40 (1.5%). Moreover, 83.4% of women were unmarried, while only 16.6% were reported as married.

Instruments

- 1. Childhood Trauma Questionnaire** Emotional abuse experienced during childhood was measured by the subscale of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF; Bernstein & Fink, 2003). Originally, the CTQ-SF was developed by Bernstein and Fink (1998), which contains 28 items. It was designed to measure traumatic experiences during childhood, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional and physical neglect. This emotional abuse subscale consists of five items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never True; 5 = Very Often True). The scale has strong psychometric properties, with the value of Cronbach's alpha being 0.833, demonstrating good reliability (Bernstein et al., 2003).
- 2. Silencing the Self Scale (STSS)** The Silencing the Self Scale (STSS), originally developed by Jack and Dill (1992) consists of 31 items divided into four subscales: externalized self-perception, care as self-sacrifice, silencing the self, and divided self.

Based on the demands of the present study, only one subscale of the STSS containing nine items was used. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). The Cronbach's alpha value ($\alpha = 0.722$) suggests good internal consistency.

3. **Guilt** Guilt in women was measured by using the Guilt Subscale of the Personal Feelings Questionnaire–2 (PFQ-2), which was developed by Harder and Lewis (1987) and revised by Harder and Greenwald (1999). The PFQ-2 includes two dimensions: shame and guilt. However, in the present study, only the guilt factor was assessed. The guilt subscale consists of five items (e.g., "mild guilt," "remorse," "regret," and "self-blame") rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = Never; 4 = Continuously). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.81, which revealed good internal consistency of the scale.

Procedure: Data were collected using structured questionnaires distributed via email, WhatsApp, and paper-based forms. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and clear instructions were provided at the beginning of the questionnaire to minimize confusion. The time required to complete the questionnaires ranged from 10–15 minutes. After data collection, all data were transferred from google forms to IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26 for analysis. Demographic characteristics and study variables were summarized by Descriptive statistics. Linear regression analysis was conducted to find the effect of emotional abuse on self-silencing and internalized guilt followed by Mediation analysis to examine the mediating role of self-silencing in the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and internalized guilt. Before conducting these primary regression and mediation analyses, statistical assumptions for linear regression were systematically evaluated to ensure data viability. Extreme outliers were checked, and normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within acceptable ranges (between -1.0 and +1.0).

Results

Table 1

Sample Demographic Characteristics

Sample Characteristics	Frequency (n=410)	Percentage (%)
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Age		
18-30	381	92.9
31-40	23	5.6
Above 40	6	1.5
Marital status		
Married	68	16.6
Unmarried	342	83.4
Family type		
Nuclear	266	64.9
Joint	144	35.1

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of a sample consisted of 410 female participants. 92.9% of the participants are between 18-30 years old (n = 381), 5.6% are between 31 and 40 years old (n = 23) and 1.5% are above 40 (n=6). Unmarried women are 83.4% (n=342) followed by married women.

Table 2: *Linear Regression Summary for Predictive Relationship of CEA With Self-Silencing in Women (N = 410)*

Predictor	B	SE B	β	T	p
Constant	25.470	0.686		37.129	.000
CEA	0.354	0.054	.311	6.601	.000

Note. CEA=childhood emotional abuse; B = unstandardized coefficient; SE B = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; t = t-statistic. STTSS = Self silencing = dependent variable. The results revealed a significant positive relationship, demonstrating that childhood emotional abuse is a strong predictor of self-silencing behavior (B = 0.35, SE = 0.05, p < .001).

Table3:
Linear Regression Summary for Predictive Relationship of CEA With Internalized Guilt in Women (N = 410)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	8.681	0.583		14.899	.000
CEA	0.358	0.045	.363	7.872	.000

Note. . CEA=childhood emotional abuse; B = unstandardized coefficient; $SE\ B$ = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; t = t -statistic. GLT; Internalized guilt = dependent variable. The results revealed a significant positive predictive relationship. Childhood emotional abuse strongly predicts nternalized guilt in adults ($B = 0.358$, $\beta = .363$, $t = 7.872$, $p < .001$).

Table 4 Mediation Analysis: Effects of Childhood Emotional Abuse (CEA) on Internalized Guilt via Self-Silencing

Path / Effect Type	B	SE	t	p	95% LLCI	95% ULCI
<i>Direct and Total Effects</i>						
Path a (CEA → Self-Silencing)	0.35	0.05	7.00	< .001	0.25	0.45
Path b (Self-Silencing → Guilt)	0.35	0.04	8.75	< .001	0.27	0.43
Direct Effect c' (CEA → Guilt)	0.24	0.04	6.00	< .001	0.16	0.32
Total Effect c (CEA → Guilt)	0.36	0.04	9.00	< .001	0.28	0.44
<i>Indirect Mediation Effect</i>						
CEA → Self-Silencing → Internalized Guilt	0.12	0.02	—	—	0.08	0.17

Note. $N = 410$. STSS = Self-Silencing; GLT = Internalized Guilt. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. As shown in Table 4, a regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the mediating role of self-silencing on the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and internalized guilt. The findings in Model 1 indicate that childhood emotional abuse significantly and positively predicted self-silencing ($B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$). In Model 2, both childhood emotional abuse ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) and self-silencing ($B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.04$, $P < .001$) emerged as significant predictors of internalized guilt, collectively accounting for 27.5% of the total variance ($R^2 = .275$, $F = 77.24$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Emotional abuse, as compared to physical abuse, is less visible and deteriorates an individual's sense of self through constant neglect, criticism and inattention to emotional needs without an apparent sign (Goel & Kumar, 2024). In collectivistic societies, emotional abuse during earlier stages, such as verbal assault or persistent criticism, is accepted and substantially justified as essential for character development, which might lead to difficulty in identifying

emotional abuse as a form of abuse (Waseem et al., 2024). The current research measured the impact of childhood emotional abuse (CEA) on self-silencing and internalised guilt and the mediating role of self-silencing between CEA and internalised guilt in a sample of 410 women across Pakistan.

For the first hypothesis, regression analysis proved that CEA predicts self-silencing in women ($B = .354$, $\beta = .311$, $t = 6.601$, $p < .001$). This positive impact means women who experienced childhood abuse in their childhood are more likely to develop self-suppression as a coping strategy to avoid conflict and maintain relationships. These findings are consistent with the previous study, suggesting emotional abuse, i.e., criticism, rejection or anger in childhood, causes suppression of emotional expression and self-criticism (Garcia, 2023). This might make an individual overly obedient, always apologising, staying silent on injustice and doing things at the expense of their comfort and well-being (Komala, 2022). Moreover, according to the findings of Naeem et al. (2024), women who survived authoritarian parenting and experienced constant rejection tend to adopt over-compliant behaviour with substantial psychological distress. One of the most important studies of Suslow et al., 2025, greatly supports the findings. The study suggests women, in contrast to men, are more likely at risk for sexual and emotional abuse during childhood and also demonstrates the impact of enduring experiences of neglect and abuse in early ages on the development of cognitive-affective competencies in women, which results in difficulties in identifying and verbalising emotions. Regression analysis for the second hypothesis demonstrates childhood emotional abuse as a predictor of internalised guilt ($B = .358$, $\beta = .363$, $t = 7.872$, $p < .001$), clearly suggesting if women deal with emotional abuse as children, they presumably feel a sense of guilt internally. These findings are supported by the study of Haim-Nachum et al. (2024) on women, which indicates that the maldevelopment of self-stigmatising beliefs and emotional processing in women is highly linked to childhood emotional maltreatment. Carretta et al. (2020) claimed that women tend to internalise distressing situations due to which they may self-blame for every negative outcome, which further reinforces guilt. Gender-specific research has shown that childhood emotional abuse deteriorates emotional processing ability, emotional intelligence and emotion regulation, which contributes to high guilt in women (Petrenchik, 2025).

Lastly the findings of mediation analysis suggest that Self-silencing acted as a mediator in the relationship between emotional abuse and internalize guilt. The model 1 shows childhood emotional abuse significantly and positively predicts self-silencing ($B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$). In the model 2 when self-silencing is

introduced into the model, both childhood emotional abuse ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) and self-silencing ($B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) revealed as significant, independent predictors of internalized guilt, with the substantial variance of 27.5% ($R^2 = .275$, $F = 77.24$, $p < .001$). Consistent with these findings, previous studies demonstrated that self-silencing behaviors develop as a consequence of adverse childhood experiences, which may act as a psychological process that links early traumas to emotional and psychological problems later in life (Bacon & White 2023). Likewise, White (2022) also proposed that emotional maltreatment in childhood is associated with self-silencing among women, which translates into the idea that inhibition of demanding personal needs and emotional expression can be an adaptive response to adverse childhood experiences (Daneshvar et al. 2025). According to Davasaz (2025), women who consistently suppress their authentic thoughts and emotions in order to protect interpersonal relationships become significantly vulnerable to self-blame and guilt. Because women inhibit emotional expression and prioritize others' needs, they are more likely to internalize responsibility for interpersonal difficulties, which, as a result, reinforces negative self-beliefs and increases internalized guilt (Acar et al., 2025). Furthermore, maladaptive self-worth that regulates self-expression mediates the psychological consequences of childhood emotional abuse (Araya, 2025). It reflects the idea that guilt as a consequence of early emotional abuse is transmitted through self-silencing (Mohd et al., 2026). These studies support our findings by suggesting that survivors of emotional abuse may come to adopt a pattern where they suppress their voices, which leads, accordingly, to higher levels of internalized guilt.

Implications: This study has several important implications for developing useful psychological interventions. As the study indicates correlations between childhood emotional abuse, self-silencing, and internalised guilt in women, psychoeducation programs become essential that target parents, educators, and carers for early prevention of childhood emotional abuse. Raising awareness about the long-term psychological outcomes of criticism, emotional invalidation, and neglect can create a big impact on cultural narratives that normalise such behaviour as necessary for character development. Similarly, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can be a primary therapeutic approach to address the unhealthy beliefs, followed by Emotion Regulation Therapy (ERT), which might be beneficial for emotional exhaustion resulting from chronic emotional suppression.

Limitations: There are several limitations that should be considered. First, this study was entirely based on a self-report questionnaire for measuring the variables. Self-report data can be susceptible to subjectivity and recall bias, especially in this case when respondents were

reporting based on their childhood experiences. Women in collectivistic societies often do not report such experiences due to cultural norms that discourage women from expressing them, or they simply see it as a normal part of upbringing as a woman. Secondly, this study solely targeted a women's population, so this cannot be used for gender-based comparisons. Future studies can include male participants to examine the existence of similar patterns across genders and whether the consequences of CEA manifest differently for the male population. And finally, the research did not consider some potential factors such as religiosity, resilience, social support, demographic factors, and education level, which may buffer the psychological effect of CEA. Future incorporation of these factors can provide a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the sample heavily contain young and unmarried women, occurred due to convenience method of data collection. Future studies may target older, married and less privileged demographics to make the finding more generalized across diverse socio-economic strata in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Childhood emotional abuse is an important predictor of self-silencing and internalised guilt in women. According to our findings, women who experienced CEA are more likely to get trapped in the pattern of self-silencing, which leads them to internalise guilt. When women don't speak up for their rights, it eventually leads to internalised guilt because of the constant suppression of their feelings and desires. This implies the extensive outcomes of emotional abuse in childhood, specifically in the society of Pakistan, where women are generally expected to be compliant, self-sacrificing, and submissive. Women in these cultures often face a lack of emotional support and neglect, unlike the male gender. Young girls grow up under the guise of 'paraye ghar ki hai' (she belongs to another house), which projects the message that they are unwanted and less valued. The desire to get validation makes them submit to the authoritative figures and mould themselves into whatever the society demands at the cost of their "SELF".

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