

DOUBLE SUBORDINATION: SILENCE AND RESISTANCE IN THE COMMUNICATION OF FEMALE PRISONERS WHO ARE SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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Abstract. This research aims to identify the factors contributing to communication silence, analyse the psychosocial experiences associated with it, and explore resistance strategies among female inmates who are survivors of sexual violence. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Muted Group Theory, the study was conducted at the Class IIA Women's Correctional Facility in Pekanbaru involving three informants through screening questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and observations. The results indicate that silence was associated with internal factors (shame, linguistic gaps, and self-voice devaluation) and external pressures (ridicule, authoritative control, and institutional structural barriers). Communication silence was described alongside psychosocial difficulties, including participants' reports of physical aggression and substance-based coping. Furthermore, survivors developed resistance strategies through symbolic catharsis and identity transformation as forms of communicative agency. In conclusion, the silence of female inmates is a systemic phenomenon arising from double subordination; however, they maintain the agency to negotiate their traumatic experiences. This study contributes theoretically to the expansion of MGT within correctional institutions and recommends providing private communication spaces to support the trauma recovery of inmates.

Keywords: double subordination; female inmates; muted group theory; resistance strategies; sexual violence

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap kebungkaman komunikasi, menganalisis pengalaman psikososial yang berkaitan dengannya, serta mengeksplorasi strategi resistensi pada narapidana perempuan penyintas kekerasan seksual. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan kerangka Muted Group Theory, penelitian dilakukan di Lapas Perempuan Kelas IIA Pekanbaru terhadap tiga orang informan melalui kuesioner penyaringan, wawancara mendalam, dan observasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kebungkaman berkaitan dengan faktor internal seperti perasaan malu, linguistic gap, dan devaluasi suara sendiri, serta faktor eksternal seperti ejekan, kontrol otoritas, dan hambatan struktural institusi. Kebungkaman juga muncul bersamaan dengan kesulitan psikososial, termasuk laporan informan mengenai agresi fisik dan penggunaan zat sebagai mekanisme koping. Strategi resistensi dikembangkan melalui katarsis simbolik dan transformasi identitas sebagai bentuk agensi komunikatif. Kesimpulannya, kebungkaman narapidana merupakan fenomena sistemik akibat subordinasi ganda, namun mereka tetap memiliki agensi untuk menegosiasikan traumanya. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis pada perluasan MGT dalam institusi pemasyarakatan serta merekomendasikan penyediaan ruang komunikasi yang menjamin privasi untuk mendukung pemulihan trauma narapidana.

Kata kunci: subordinasi ganda; narapidana perempuan; teori kelompok bungkam; strategi resistensi; kekerasan seksual

Introduction

Sexual violence refers broadly to non-consensual sexual acts and other acts directed against a person's sexuality through coercion or abuse of power (World Health Organization [WHO], 2012). It remains a global concern because of its high prevalence worldwide (Li et al., 2023), and has also been examined in Indonesian and ASEAN contexts (Nurbayani et al., 2022; Taufiqurrohman et al., 2024). WHO (2021) estimates that nearly one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by a non-partner during their lifetime. In Indonesia, data recorded in the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KemenPPPA) SIMFONI-PPA system in 2024 indicated 31,947 reported cases of violence against women and children, of which 14,459 were categorised as sexual violence (KemenPPPA, 2024). The impact of this violence is profound, ranging from physical injuries and reproductive health issues (Schalk et al., 2023), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression (Sigurdardottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021), to the erosion of self-confidence and a tendency to withdraw and isolate oneself due to fear of negative judgement from their social environment (Fredrik & Azeharie, 2023).

One important consequence of sexual violence is survivors' reluctance or inability to disclose their experiences (Mulder et al., 2021; Wieberneit et al., 2024). This silence is influenced by factors such as social stigma, a culture of collectivism, conservatism that still views sex as a taboo subject, and a patriarchal culture that reinforces victim-blaming practices, leading to victims often being positioned as partly responsible for the violence they have experienced (Jamil, 2020; Lai et al., 2024). Fear of retaliation from the perpetrator and the risk of reprisals further reinforce victims' tendency to remain silent (Mulder et al., 2021; Wieberneit et al., 2024). In a study of female commuter-line passengers in Jakarta, Toni and Maknunah (2025) reported that 79% of participants who experienced sexual violence did not report the incident, with victim-blaming stigma identified as one of the barriers. Low reporting rates are influenced by complex social, psychological, and structural factors (Mulder et al., 2021; Wieberneit et al., 2024). From a communication perspective, this situation indicates that victims' silence is the result of a social process that makes their experiences difficult to articulate and accept within a communication system dominated by more powerful groups. This phenomenon aligns with Muted Group Theory, which explains that silence is not merely an individual psychological issue, but a systemic problem in which the language system and communication norms are largely dominated by the dominant group (Jan et al., 2023). Subordinate groups, particularly women, often experience silencing because their experiences do not receive equal space for expression in society (Indra, 2025; West & Turner, 2010).

The situation of silencing becomes more complex when experienced by women serving prison sentences in correctional institutions. Female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence occupy a position of double subordination: as women who have experienced sexual violence and as prisoners within a hierarchical and highly supervised institutional structure. Communication structures within prisons may be formal and hierarchical; in Pekanbaru, Destiana et al. (2020)

documented interpersonal communication within correctional guidance, while the present study specifically examines how privacy constraints and institutional control shape trauma disclosure. Previous studies reviewed by Karlsson and Zielinski (2020) reported that approximately 28-66% of incarcerated women had experienced childhood sexual abuse, although prevalence estimates varied according to definitions, measurement instruments, and sample characteristics. Correctional settings may reproduce trauma-related vulnerabilities when rehabilitation is not trauma-informed (Devos & Nagy, 2022; Kelman et al., 2024). Consequently, survivors face greater challenges in negotiating and communicating their traumatic experiences amidst the limited available spaces for communication.

The phenomenon of silencing victims of sexual violence has also been found in various previous studies, ranging from female journalists in digital media digital (Setyowati & Watie, 2023), survivors in online communities (Randazzo & Ammari, 2023), artists on social media (Stephani & Sarwono, 2020), and users of public spaces and transport (Toni & Maknunah, 2025). However, a shortcoming of these studies is the lack of attention to how closed and restrictive physical institutions such as prisons construct silence through strict authoritarian control and the absence of private space (Karlsson & Zielinski, 2020). Research examining how communicative silence is formed among women survivors of sexual violence within the prison system remains very limited. Consequently, little is known about how positions of double subordination influence victims' communicative experiences, how they interpret this silence, and what forms of communicative resistance are developed to maintain identity and manage trauma.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the phenomenon of communicative silence among female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence at the Class IIA Women's Prison in Pekanbaru. The novelty of this research lies in its context, research subjects, and the development of the application of Muted Group Theory within the prison setting. The objectives of this study are to identify the internal and external factors contributing to communicative silence, to analyse the psychosocial experiences associated with silence, and to map the resistance strategies or processes of 'unmuting' (finding one's voice) developed by survivors amidst the limitations of the institutional structure. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute theoretically to the expansion of MGT within total institutions and provide input for the development of rehabilitation programmes that are more humane, trauma-sensitive, and supportive of the recovery of agency among female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of communicative silence experienced by female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence. This approach aims to holistically describe the informants' behaviours, perceptions, and actions whilst preserving the original meaning of the participants' accounts (Fiantika et al., 2022; Sugiyono, 2019). The primary analytical framework used is Muted Group Theory (MGT)

by Edwin Ardener and Cheris Kramarae to examine how the dominance of social structures and language creates communication barriers for subordinate groups (Griffin et al., 2019; West & Turner, 2010).

The research was conducted at the Class IIA Women's Correctional Institution in Pekanbaru, Riau, between September 2025 and January 2026. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, i.e. the selection of informants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Naamy, 2019). The criteria for informants included female prisoners with a history of sexual violence, who were capable of verbal communication, and who were willing to participate voluntarily.

Data collection was carried out in three stages. The first stage involved distributing a screening questionnaire to identify the history of sexual violence experienced by female prisoners. The use of a questionnaire was chosen because spontaneous interviews are difficult to implement in prisons due to limited access, institutional rules, and considerations regarding the safety and comfort of inmates. This questionnaire covered five main indicators: 1) lifetime experiences of sexual violence, 2) the forms of violence experienced, 3) age at the time of the incident, 4) the nature of the relationship with the perpetrator, and 5) history of disclosing the trauma to others. In this study, the questionnaire served as a screening tool and supported data interpretation; it was not used for statistical analysis (Naamy, 2019). Randazzo and Ammari (2023) employed a screening questionnaire, while Setyowati and Watie (2023) used questionnaire data to identify relevant experiences and select participants for further interviews on sensitive topics.

A total of 50 screening questionnaires were distributed to inmates participating in a drug rehabilitation programme and users of psychological services within the prison. Of these, 6 individuals met the criteria as potential informants. However, only 3 could be interviewed in depth: ESD, YF, and HC. One potential informant had been released before the interview process began, whilst the other two could not be accessed as they were serving disciplinary sanctions in isolation cells. The three informants generated detailed and context-specific accounts; however, adequacy was not inferred from sample size alone. Information power depends on the specificity of the study aim and sample, the use of theory, the quality of dialogue, and the analytic strategy (Roberts et al., 2026). Because potential informants were recruited from a drug rehabilitation programme and users of psychological services, the sample may overrepresent participants with substance-use histories or psychological distress; this limitation was considered when interpreting the findings.

The second stage was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore experiences of sexual violence, factors driving communication silence, associated psychosocial experiences, and strategies of resistance or alternative communication developed by the informants. The third stage was carried out through non-participant observation during the researcher's two-month placement at the prison clinic to observe social conditions, patterns of interaction among inmates, and the dynamics of the relationship between staff and inmates. Throughout this process, the researcher built rapport through empathetic communication and adopted the role of a 'safe

stranger', an analytical term used in this study to describe a neutral interlocutor perceived by participants as being outside their long-term social relationships. The researcher obtained official permission from the prison authorities, and each informant voluntarily signed an informed consent form.

Data analysis utilised the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which encompasses data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Hardani et al., 2020; Rijali, 2018). During the data reduction stage, interview transcripts, observation results, and screening questionnaires were read repeatedly to generate initial codes (open coding) relating to experiences of sexual violence, communication barriers, environmental responses, psychosocial experiences, and forms of communication resistance. Codes with common themes were then grouped into broader categories (axial coding), such as factors contributing to silence, psychosocial experiences associated with silence, and resistance strategies. Subsequently, these categories were developed into the main themes of the research and interpreted using core MGT mechanisms and analytical extensions, including linguistic gap, ridicule, control, translation, and unmuting (Griffin et al., 2019; West & Turner, 2010). The results of the analysis were then presented in the form of thematic narratives to explain the relationship between the informants' experiences and the theoretical framework employed. Following Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria as summarised by Fiantika et al. (2022), credibility was supported by comparing interview accounts with observation notes and with relevant descriptive information from screening questionnaires. Because the questionnaires primarily served as screening tools, they were used in triangulation only where their content directly overlapped with interview data. Dependability and confirmability were supported through an audit trail documenting recruitment, data collection, coding decisions, category development, and interpretive revisions. Transferability was supported through contextual descriptions of the setting and participants.

Results and Discussion

This study involved three female prisoners who were survivors of sexual violence at the Class IIA Women's Prison in Pekanbaru, aged between 30 and 50 years. Their educational backgrounds ranged from primary to upper secondary school. All informants had a history of sexual violence that began at a young age, between 11 and 17 years old. The perpetrators were predominantly figures in positions of power or within the informants' immediate social circle, including immediate family members (father and uncle), partners, extended relatives, peers, and former work colleagues. Despite having different socio-demographic backgrounds, all informants exhibited a similar pattern of prolonged silence before finally disclosing their experiences during the research process.

Factors Driving Communication Silence

Communication silence among female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence is a structural condition formed through layered pressures (internal and external). Research findings indicate that the informants' decision to remain silent was influenced by psychological barriers within the victims themselves, as well as social pressures from their environment that limited their courage to disclose their experiences of sexual violence.

Internal Silencing (Self-Silencing)

The informants found it difficult to articulate their trauma in words or verbal language due to a lack of adequate vocabulary (a linguistic gap). Informant ESD stated: "I want to explain... but I'm not good at putting it into words. I want to speak but I can't." In addition to language barriers, feelings of shame also acted as a major obstacle. Experiences of sexual violence are perceived as a "disgrace" that can damage self-esteem or the family's reputation, making it safer to keep them hidden. There is also a deep-seated fear that their accounts will be dismissed as lies or that they will be blamed for provoking the situation (victim blaming). On the other hand, silence is also maintained as a form of emotional protection for family members. Informants refrain from speaking out because they do not wish to cause family conflict, embarrass their parents, or provoke hatred towards certain family members. This situation is reinforced by the belief that their experiences are not significant enough to be heard, thereby reducing their motivation to share them with others.

External (Social-Institutional) Silencing

In addition to stemming from internal barriers, communication silence is also reinforced by social and institutional pressures that limit the informants' scope for expression. At the interpersonal level, the informants experience unequal power dynamics with the perpetrators and family members. One informant admitted to experiencing strict control from their partner, including restrictions on social interaction and repeated coercion into sexual relations. Another informant also revealed that they were forbidden from reporting the incident they had experienced as it would cause family conflict. Other findings indicate experiences of ridicule and negative labelling such as "promiscuous woman" or "illegitimate child" when victims attempted to disclose their experiences of sexual violence. Such labelling were used to delegitimise the truth of the victims' accounts, thereby forcing them to withdraw. In the face of this pressure, some informants developed narrative adaptation strategies by concealing or altering certain facts to make their accounts more acceptable to their social environment. Informant YF distorted the facts by claiming to her mother that she had entered into a "nikah siri" (informal marriage) to conceal the reality of the sexual violence she had experienced. This strategy was employed to avoid stigma, family conflict, and negative judgement from the community.

This silencing is further reinforced by structural conditions within the prison system. Based on observations in the present study, institutional communication tended to be formal,

hierarchical, one-way (top-down), and oriented towards maintaining order. The lack of private space and strict communication procedures resulted in limited opportunities for personal conversation, whilst the social distance between staff and inmates made it difficult to openly discuss traumatic experiences and disrupted the space for empathetic interpersonal dialogue. Several informants also perceived an imbalance in access to services, where staff attention tended to be directed more towards prisoners possessing certain economic resources or social influence. Consequently, the informants not only experienced silence associated with the sexual violence they had endured, but also faced limitations in communication within the institutional environment where they were serving their sentences.

Psychosocial Experiences Associated with Silence

The findings indicate that prolonged silence was described alongside various psychosocial difficulties among the informants. These experiences involved emotional and psychological distress, interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and daily behaviour. All informants reported prolonged distress following sexual violence, including fear, shame, stress, sleep disturbances, and the re-emergence of traumatic memories. One informant expressed an extreme generalised distrust of men: “They’re animals among animals. So, I never want to trust them. I don’t believe in their sincerity.” The informants also associated trauma with communication difficulties. ESD reported stuttering during periods of severe depression: “Because of that depression, I started stuttering. Whenever I speak, people don’t understand.” In social life, the informants tended to withdraw and limit their interactions with their surroundings. They preferred to keep their experiences to themselves rather than face the possibility of stigma or negative judgement from society.

Furthermore, participants described behavioural changes that they associated with unresolved trauma. One informant described aggressive behaviour towards others in relation to fear that had been suppressed for years: “If people just look at me, I’ll slash them, I’ll hit them with a hoe. Don’t look at me. I become brutal. But that’s actually my fear.” Another informant described using drugs and alcohol to “calm down” and numb fear associated with traumatic memories she felt unable to communicate openly. These accounts suggest an association between unresolved trauma, restricted disclosure, and coping behaviour; they do not establish a causal relationship.

Resistance Strategies (Alternative Communication)

Despite enduring prolonged silence, the informants did not entirely lose the ability to express the traumatic experiences they had endured. The research findings indicate that they developed various forms of communicative resistance as an effort to manage emotions, maintain their sense of self, and negotiate traumatic experiences that were difficult to articulate verbally. One form of resistance identified was symbolic catharsis. Informants channelled emotions and experiences that were difficult to articulate through non-verbal means, such as writing personal experiences in a

diary which was then immediately burnt, or engaging in specific activities that provided a space to express feelings without having to recount them directly to others. These practices served as alternative forms of communication when verbal expression was deemed unsafe or impossible.

The research findings also revealed identity transformation and the reversal of power relations as forms of adaptation to traumatic experiences. One informant deliberately adopted a 'tomboy' identity so as no longer to be viewed as a weak object. Meanwhile, another informant engaged in extreme resistance through a reversal of power dynamics (power play) by using money to "buy men": "I'd rather pay a man; the important thing is that I can enslave him." On the other hand, resistance strategies also emerged in the form of strategic isolation and selective openness. The informants tended to limit their social interactions to avoid discussions about the past. One informant chose to sever ties with their original community and only wished to befriend new people who were unaware of their background to avoid the stigma of "shame". Furthermore, the informants demonstrated selective openness towards "safe strangers". Informants felt more confident opening up to the researcher due to the researcher's neutral status and freedom from the risk of long-term relational judgement. Informant ESD stated: "I'm willing to speak because you (the researcher) are an outsider. If it were someone close to me, I wouldn't want to."

Furthermore, the research also identified a process of 'unmuting', that is, a shift from a position of silence towards the courage to voice their experiences and views. Although not all experiences of sexual violence were disclosed publicly, the informants began to demonstrate communicative agency through their ability to reflect on their life experiences and convey messages of resistance to other women. One informant stated emphatically, "No one should end up like me; victims must fight back." Meanwhile, another informant emphasised the importance of having the courage to report the perpetrator, stating that "Women must not be afraid of the perpetrator's threats; they must be brave enough to report it because, through that report, it is the perpetrator who will be arrested." Furthermore, ESD and YF view their children's success as a long-term mission of resistance or a form of "revenge" against their own misfortune: "I teach them not to be like me... I don't want my children to suffer the same fate as me." These findings indicate that the informants no longer entirely position themselves as passive parties. Experiences of sexual violence that were previously kept hidden and silenced are beginning to be transformed into reflective knowledge that can be shared with others. In this regard, the voices that were previously muffled have not entirely disappeared, but have re-emerged in the form of alternative communication and advocacy messages aimed at preventing other women from experiencing similar situations.

Partial Transformation Amid Institutional Limitations

The findings of this study reveal a paradoxical dynamic within the prison system. On the one hand, the communication structure within prisons is hierarchical, formal, and restricts inmates' scope for personal expression. On the other hand, under certain conditions, the prison environment can also serve as a space for reflection, enabling some informants to process their trauma, rebuild

self-control, and undergo a gradual psychosocial transformation. This transformation does not entirely erase past trauma, but rather represents a process of adaptation and partial recovery amidst the constraints of an institutional structure that continues to limit their freedom. For some informants, the regularity of activities within the prison provides a certain routine and stability that they previously found difficult to obtain in their original social environment, which was fraught with pressure and traumatic experiences. ESD informant described changes in psychological condition and lifestyle whilst serving their sentence in prison: "This prison is actually much better than out there... I actually became sane in prison". They felt more in control of their eating and sleeping patterns, and began to learn to share food and communicate empathetically with fellow prisoners. However, this experience cannot be interpreted as a complete resolution of trauma, but rather as a form of self-adjustment and a search for a sense of security within an institutional context that continues to exercise strict control over the inmates' lives.

For the informants, spiritual activities and religious guidance within the prison became one of the mechanisms that helped them reflect on their life experiences and rebuild their sense of self after enduring prolonged trauma. Through religious guidance in prison, ESD underwent a profound transformation of moral consciousness; she only realised that all the sexual violence she had experienced, including her past behaviour of 'buying' men, constituted acts she now perceived as contrary to the religious values she had come to understand following her rehabilitation in prison. She stated: "It turns out what I did was a grave sin. I only understood after entering prison. I used to harbour resentment but have now made peace with myself." Meanwhile, YF underwent a transformation from drug dependency to a person with a new sense of purpose: "It is here (in prison) that I have learnt my lesson. How to survive, how to change here. I realised that what I did out there was wrong. All this time, I was just getting drunk. It was here that I realised it." Thus, these findings suggest that prisons do not fully function as ideal spaces for recovery, as their institutional structures still have the potential to restrict inmates' personal expression. However, in certain situations, social order, spiritual activities, and interpersonal interactions within the prison can open up spaces for reflection that allow for a gradual process of agency recovery. These findings reveal that the experiences of female prisoners within the prison are complex and paradoxical, situated between a process of structural silencing and efforts to rebuild their voices and control over themselves.

Discussion

This section discusses the research findings by relating them to the framework of Muted Group Theory (MGT) to analyse how the phenomenon of communicative silencing among female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence is constructed systemically. Unlike psychological approaches, which tend to view silence as a symptom of individual trauma, this study positions silencing as the result of complex social processes, namely power relations, social stigma, the limitations of the dominant language system, and institutional conditions that restrict survivors'

space for communication. Within the MGT framework, silence is understood as a consequence of women's position as a subordinate group who must express their life experiences through a system of meaning largely shaped by the dominant group (Griffin et al., 2019; West & Turner, 2010). In this study, this subordination occurs in multiple layers: as women survivors of sexual violence within a patriarchal social structure, and simultaneously as prisoners within a correctional institution characterised by hierarchy and strict control. Consequently, the experiences of sexual violence endured by survivors are not only difficult to articulate due to trauma, but also because of social and structural barriers that limit the acceptance of their voices. In this study, linguistic gap, ridicule, and control are treated as core MGT mechanisms, whereas translation and unmuting are used as analytical extensions to describe narrative adaptation and the recovery of communicative agency. To clarify the relationship between the MGT framework, these analytical extensions, and the field findings, a synthesis of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Systematic Analysis of the Phenomenon of Silence through the Lens of MGT

MGT Concepts and Analytical Extensions	Field Data Patterns	Theoretical Contribution Analysis
Linguistic Gap	Informants find it difficult to narrate their experiences of sexual violence verbally. Trauma is considered difficult to express, and they choose to remain silent because they lack the appropriate vocabulary to describe these experiences.	The dominant linguistic system fails to provide a vocabulary for women's unique experiences, causing survivors to lose the ability to put their trauma into words.
Ridicule	Informants face stigma, victim-blaming, and negative judgement when disclosing experiences of sexual violence.	Ridicule serves to delegitimise the truth of survivors' stories through moral stigma, so that their voices are deemed non-authoritative and worthy of being ignored.
Control	Informants experience control from partners, family, or their social environment, which limits their courage to speak out or report incidents.	Power relations act as a mechanism of silencing that reinforces subordination, creating boundaries regarding what may and may not be voiced.
Translation	Informants adapt or simplify their stories to make them more acceptable to their social environment.	Survivors are forced to alter their original reality by translating their experiences into a form that is socially acceptable or conforms to dominant norms, so as not to be further marginalised.
Unmuting	Informants begin to show the courage to speak out about their experiences and send a message to other women to resist sexual violence.	Subordinate groups are not entirely passive; they develop alternative channels of expression and communicative agency to reclaim their space of meaning.

(Source: Primary data processed by the researcher, 2026)

Table 1 shows that the process of silencing experienced by female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence occurs gradually and in a multidimensional manner. Silencing does not arise solely from linguistic limitations in articulating traumatic experiences (linguistic gap), but is also reinforced by social stigma (ridicule), power relations that restrict victims' expression (control), and the need to align narratives with prevailing norms (translation). However, the research findings also indicate that silencing is not a permanent condition. Through various forms of communicative resistance, the informants began to demonstrate a process of 'unmuting' that signalled the re-emergence of their communicative agency. Thus, the Muted Group Theory not only explains the mechanisms of silencing experienced by the informants, but also helps to understand how they gradually negotiate and reclaim their space to speak.

Silence as a Product of Double Subordination: Linguistic Disparity and Social Stigma

Research findings indicate that prisoners' silence is not merely a passive choice, but rather a compulsion resulting from a linguistic gap—that is, a situation in which the experiences of subordinate groups are difficult to articulate because the dominant linguistic and meaning systems are not fully capable of representing their reality (West & Turner, 2010). As Kramarae (1981) noted, language is not a neutral instrument, but a construction of the dominant group (men) that is often unable to accommodate women's unique experiences, rendering those experiences "nameless" (Setyowati & Watie, 2023; Stephani & Sarwono, 2020). Consequently, survivors face difficulties in defining, explaining, or even understanding the traumatic experiences they have endured. This situation aligns with the concept of 'muted survivors' proposed by Randazzo & Ammari (2023), referring to individuals who have lost access to the social language necessary to communicate their traumatic experiences. This limitation then develops into a feeling that their voices will not be believed, are unimportant, or will not bring about any change if expressed. According to MGT, this condition arises because women's voices are rarely positioned as a legitimate source of authority in social or legal spaces, leading them to internalise the belief that their personal experiences are not worthy of being heard (West & Turner, 2010). This finding reinforces the research by Toni & Maknunah (2025), which shows that survivors of sexual violence are often positioned as weak and powerless, and thus must remain silent and accept their fate.

This silence arises not only from limitations in expressing their experiences but is also reinforced by stigma, negative labelling, and unequal power dynamics within the social environment. The research findings indicate that the informants were viewed as 'bad women', blamed for the events they experienced, or feared being seen as a disgrace to their families. According to MGT, ridicule is one mechanism of silencing because it serves to delegitimise the truth of women's experiences (Simeon, 2022). These findings are also consistent with the research by Stephani and Sarwono (2020), as well as Toni and Maknunah (2025), who found that survivors of sexual violence often face victim blaming, belittlement, and negative stereotypes that drive them to choose silence. This social pressure leads to the emergence of an adaptive strategy known as

“translating lies”, which involves adapting the narrative of their experience to make it more acceptable to their social environment. From an MGT perspective, this strategy indicates that when women’s experiences do not receive adequate recognition, they are forced to alter or simplify their reality to avoid stigma and social rejection (Griffin et al., 2019; West & Turner, 2010). Interestingly, this study found that this stigma does not cease after the violent incident has occurred, but persists even after the informants enter the prison environment.

Furthermore, this study identified a more complex context than previous research. The informants were not only in a subordinate position as women survivors of sexual violence, but also as inmates within a correctional institution characterised by formal, hierarchical, and highly controlled communication structures. Following Goffman (1961), the prison is treated here as a total institution in which daily activities occur under a single authority and within a highly regulated environment. These conditions create what this study terms ‘double subordination’, namely a situation where silencing occurs through a combination of gendered and institutional domination simultaneously. Consequently, the linguistic limitations and social stigma experienced prior to entering prison intersect with the constraints on communication within the prison environment, thereby further reinforcing the tendency for victims to conceal their experiences of sexual violence. Thus, the silence experienced by the informants is not merely a matter of personal trauma, but is also a product of social and institutional structures that systematically limit the acceptance of the voices of women survivors of sexual violence.

Psychosocial Experiences Associated with Silence

The communicative silence experienced by survivors over decades was described alongside trauma-related distress, but the study design does not establish that silence caused subsequent behavioural or mental health outcomes. From the perspective of Muted Group Theory, a subordinate group that cannot readily articulate its experiences may have reduced access to validation, support, and social recognition (West & Turner, 2010). One informant reported an extreme generalised distrust of men. Participants also associated trauma with communication difficulties, social withdrawal, and restricted interaction. They linked aggressive or ‘brutal’ responses to accumulated fear and unresolved trauma. Research on survivors of sexual violence has found that trauma-related disgust and emotion-regulation difficulties are associated with PTSD symptoms and mental contamination (Tipsword et al., 2025). This evidence supports a cautious interpretation of emotional dysregulation, but it does not establish a direct causal pathway from silence to aggressive behaviour.

Meanwhile, some informants described using drugs and alcohol to “calm themselves” and numb fear associated with traumatic memories they felt unable to communicate openly. These accounts suggest that substance use functioned as a coping response for these participants, rather than demonstrating a universal or causal relationship. In a study of women in 12-step recovery communities, Uscola (2025) found that some participants described alcohol use as a strategy for

managing fear, anger, trauma, and experiences they felt unable to disclose safely. The “game of secrets” therefore refers to the concealment of trauma within social environments perceived as unsafe for disclosure.

The Prison Paradox: Spaces of Restriction and Self-Reflection

One key finding in this research is the paradoxical nature of the position of the Correctional Institution (Lapas) for female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence. On the one hand, the prison is an institution that restricts individual freedom through various rules, surveillance, and limitations on privacy and personal communication. These conditions can limit inmates’ opportunities to openly express their traumatic experiences. However, some informants indicated a shift in how they interpreted themselves and their life experiences whilst serving their sentences. This finding does not suggest that prisons are spaces for trauma recovery. Rather, some participants described institutional routines and temporary separation from prior social threats as conditions that supported reflection. From the perspective of Muted Group Theory, this situation indicates that although subordinate groups are situated within restrictive structures, they can still construct new meanings regarding experiences that have long been silenced. Jamil (2020) similarly shows that people experiencing silencing can develop adaptive resilience, although that study concerns female journalists rather than incarcerated women. These data do not demonstrate that strict institutional control produces healing. While Setyowati and Watie (2023) examined digital spaces as venues for voicing experience, the present findings suggest that limited forms of reflection and meaning reconstruction may also emerge in restrictive physical settings; this does not make prison a therapeutic environment.

From Muting to Unmuting: Survivors’ Communicative Resistance

Despite experiencing various forms of silencing, the research findings indicate that the informants have not entirely lost their voices. They have developed a range of alternative communication strategies that allow traumatic experiences to be expressed, albeit not always through open verbal communication. These forms are evident through symbolic catharsis, self-reflection, a shift in how power relations are perceived, and the ability to convey advocacy messages to other women. Within the MGT framework, a ‘silent’ or suppressed condition does not imply that the group is entirely silent or passive and powerless. On the contrary, theorists in this field emphasise that groups in subordinate positions continue to seek ways to express themselves outside the public modes of expression dominated by men (Griffin et al., 2019; West & Turner, 2010). These strategies include the use of alternative channels of expression such as diaries, journals, art, and even non-verbal behaviour, which allow them to validate feelings and experiences that have long been ignored or dismissed by society (Griffin et al., 2019).

This process is evident in the various forms of resistance practised by the informants. Symbolic catharsis through the act of writing and then burning diaries serves as an attempt create an alternative space of meaning outside the communication system that has so far failed to accommodate their experiences. Furthermore, some informants demonstrated self-protection strategies through identity transformation and the reversal of power dynamics to avoid being positioned as the weak or vulnerable party. A more explicit form of resistance is evident when informants begin to critique their past experiences and encourage other women to dare to resist and report sexual violence. This situation indicates that they are no longer merely enduring silence, but are beginning to reclaim the ability to define their experiences and voice their own perspectives.

These findings align with Indra's (2025) research, which shows that women who were previously silenced can develop agency through various forms of resistance against the structures that oppress them. Wardhani et al. (2026) also explain that subordinate groups retain the capacity to maintain their voice through resilience and alternative communication strategies. Furthermore, Setyowati & Watie (2023) assert that the existence of groups daring to speak out amidst silencing structures constitutes an "anomaly" within MGT, proving that communicative agency is never entirely extinguished. However, unlike previous research, much of which was conducted in the contexts of media, literature, or the public sphere, this study demonstrates that the process of 'unmuting' can still emerge within a prison environment that is structurally characterised by greater communicative limitations. Thus, this study shows that silencing is not a permanent condition. Survivors' voices are not entirely lost, but rather undergo processes of negotiation, adaptation, and reconstruction that enable them to gradually regain their communicative agency. The process of unmuting in this study is not always marked by the open disclosure of trauma, but also through various forms of resistance that allow survivors to maintain their meaning, identity, and voice amidst restrictive structures.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the silencing of female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence is a systemic phenomenon rooted in double subordination: their position as female survivors of sexual violence within the patriarchal structure and as inmates within a hierarchical total institution. This silence was described alongside psychosocial difficulties, including aggressive behaviour and substance-based coping reported by participants; the findings do not establish that silence caused these outcomes. Despite being in a restrictive environment, survivors maintain communicative agency through various resistance strategies, ranging from symbolic catharsis to identity transformations that challenge structural domination. This study makes a theoretical contribution by extending the application of Muted Group Theory to the context of correctional institutions, demonstrating that the process of 'unmuting' (voicing) can still emerge amidst strict institutional control. However, transferability is limited by the sample of three informants, the single-prison setting, retrospective accounts, and recruitment from a drug rehabilitation programme and users of

psychological services, which may overrepresent substance-use histories or psychological distress. As operational steps, this study recommends that correctional authorities provide counselling facilities that guarantee full privacy, design mechanisms for safe trauma disclosure free from the risk of stigma, and organise empathetic communication training for staff to support the restoration of agency and mental well-being of female prisoners who are survivors of sexual violence.

Author Contributions

PA contributed to the conceptualization of the study, development of the theoretical framework, methodology, investigation, data collection, data curation, formal analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the original draft. EH contributed to methodological refinement, supervision of the research process, validation of the analytical approach, interpretation of the findings, and critical review and editing of the manuscript. BA contributed to the validation of the research findings, supporting analysis and interpretation of the data, refinement of the discussion, and review and editing of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the intellectual development of the study, critically reviewed the manuscript, and have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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