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## Exploring Self-Silencing in Workplace Relationships: A Qualitative Study of Female Software Engineers


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### Abstract

Self-silencing has been extensively studied in the context of the relational aspect of the female psyche. The previous research on self-silencing mostly emphasized on intimate partner relationships and not much is explored in the context of workplace relationships, that is, relationships with colleagues, team managers etc. The present study aims to explore the self-silencing phenomenon in workplace relationships among a sample of female software engineers (N=21) in India. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the participants of the study. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect the data for the thematic analysis. At first, theoretical thematic analysis was done where Dana C. Jack's (1991) self-silencing theory has been used as the theoretical lens. Then, inductive thematic analysis has been used for unravelling the mechanisms, antecedents, consequences involved in self-silencing inside the organization. The result revealed that the need to maintain relationships, need to conform to the traditional feminine roles, a sense of powerlessness, and some factors inherent to the culture of the organization functioned as the antecedents of self-silencing in the organizational setting. Self-silencing inside an organization is also found to affect the female software engineers' psychological wellbeing and their growth in career. Moreover, it hampers the growth of the organization since negative experiences inside organizations go unreported and women self-silence their views and opinions in group meetings leading to organizational ignorance.

### Keywords

Gender Roles, Self-Silencing, Thematic Analysis, Women in Technology

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## Exploring Self-Silencing in Workplace Relationships: A Qualitative Study of Female Software Engineers

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### Introduction

“And so girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. Who silence themselves. Who cannot say what they truly think. Who have turned pretense into an art form.”

(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 2014)

### Women's Relational Self

Psychologists have long been intrigued by the concept of self. From the literature, it is evident that the development of self does not take place in a social vacuum. Social interactions build the foundation of the self. Since the gender-role expectancy of society is different for males and females, it is obvious that the self-concept would vary across genders (Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975). Self, in the initial era of research, was conceived as a “bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe” (Greetz, 1975, p. 48). Later, Chodorow (1999) introduced the connected nature of self among women; she mentioned that “the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate” (p. 169). Equivocally, Gilligan (1982) proposed that women's definition of self comes from their relationship-networks and when women are in separation from others, their gender

identification gets threatened. Later, Jordan (1991) proposed the self-in-relation theory which argues that the concept of separate self is a myth for women. Also, women's self-concept is developed through the complex process of mutual reciprocity and connection with others. The sense of connection is so inevitable for the wellbeing of women that "non-growth promoting" relationships and disconnection often lead to psychopathologies (Miller, 1988, p. 1). Analogously, Jack (1991), discovered a common pattern of relationship dynamics among women who suffer from depressive disorders. She observed that these women conform to the socially prescribed feminine roles characterized by care, sacrifice, and docility and they often "silence certain feelings, thoughts, and actions" (Jack & Dill, 1992, p. 98) in their intimate relationships. The motivation to silence oneself comes mostly from the attempt "to fill a gender role marked by passivity, body shame, fear and vulnerability, and niceness" (Jack & Ali, 2010, p. 141). The relational-self, described above serves as the foundation of self-silencing. Also, the learned gender roles develop an "over-eye" to monitor their behaviors.

There are four major components of self-silencing:

1. External self-perception where the reflected appraisals (Mead, 1934) in social interactions serve as the sole base of the self-concept. The internal understanding of care is also climacteric in self-silencing, especially because care and connection are crucial components of women's self-concept (Gilligan & Wiking, 1985).
2. Women who self-silence often define care in terms of the sacrifices they make in intimate partner relationships. The motivation of silencing might come from either to maintain a relationship or to avoid conflicts and retaliation.
3. The third component of self-silencing is the act of silencing one's emotions, opinions, and actions in order to fit it to the existing "good woman" template.
4. When a woman silences her opinion and emotion in order to conform to the socially defined feminine traits, they often experience a sense of divided self, where the other part of the self-experiences anger and guilt.

In the existing literature, self-silencing theory has largely foregrounded on the interpersonal dimension at the intimate partner relationship level (Harper, Dickson, & Welsh, 2006; Harper & Welsh, 2007; Impett, Sorsoli, Schooler, Henson, & Tolman, 2008; Jack & Dill, 1992; Whiffen, Foot, & Thompson, 2007) so far. Only a few studies have explored self-silencing beyond the arena of the romantic domain, that is, friendship self-silencing (McDonald, Bowker, Rubin, Laursen, & Duchene, 2010; Thomas & Bowker, 2015). A study by Swim, Eysell, Murdoch, and Ferguson (2010) revealed that self-silencing beliefs have a significant impact on the way a woman responds to sexism. However, there exists a clear gap of knowledge regarding whether self-silencing can also be found in workplace relationships and if it is at all evident in the workplace relationships where does it stem from and what does it lead to.

### **Relationships inside the Organization**

Elton Mayo (1945) brought the attention of organizational psychology researchers to the social and emotional needs of employees. Workplace relationships are generally defined as "all the interpersonal relationships in which individuals engage as they perform their jobs" (Sias & Cahill, 1998, p. 2). There are multiple classifications that describe different types of workplace relationships. Clarkson and Shaw (1992), for instance, mentioned five different types of workplace relationships, that is, unfinished, working alliance, developmental,

personal, and transpersonal. These different workplace relationships differ in terms of the existence of hierarchy, human motivation, as well as their contribution to the organization. These relationships might be formal in nature such as superior-subordinate dynamics (Afza, 2005; Vecchio & Bullis, 2001) or they might be informal and emotional bonding such as organizational peers (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Workplace friendships are researched exhaustively in the context of multiple organizational behaviors since they tend to impact an employee's life both at the individual and professional level (Rawlins, 1992). Organizational friendships tend to affect the commitment and job satisfaction of an employee (Lincoln & Miller, 1979), turnover rate and employee morale (Kram & Isabella, 1985). In the development of any sort of relationship (including workplace relationships), there is an importance of talk since only conversations "encapsulate the jointness of their relationship in a symbolic fashion" (Sias & Cahill, 1998, p. 280). Therefore, if through the process of self-silencing, communication is blocked, the development of friendship becomes difficult. In a similar fashion, the superior-subordinate relationship has been found to impact perceived procedural justice and job satisfaction among the subordinates (Wesolowski & Mossholder, 1997).

Previous research in self-silencing has barely stepped out of the romantic domain of relationships. Therefore, it is important to understand whether the self-silencing theory can be generalized to organization relationships, too. It is possible that women in technology might experience self-silencing in organizational relationships since,

The engineering and technology sector is still broadly patrifocal (Eapen & Kodoth, 2002) and is characterized by hegemonic masculinity (Sagebiel, 2008). In India, too, traditional gender roles are evidently observed (Patel & Parmentier, 2005) in male-dominated work sectors. In a masculine organizational culture, especially, in a less female-represented team, gender identity of women becomes absolutely salient (Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003). It is observed that women who conform to the traditional feminine identity, characterized by docility and submissiveness are more likely to self-silence. Since the teams are dominated by males, it is possible that women feel the pressure to behave in an overly feminine and docile manner in these male-dominated technology teams. Since traditional gender roles do not allow women to raise their voice, these women might end up self-silencing. Swim and colleagues (2010), for example, found that while confronting sexism in the organization, women often choose to self-silence. Similarly, in another qualitative study, it was found that in the face of participatory pressuring, people often use self-silencing as a strategy (Rudderham-Gaudet, 2013).

In organizations, women use a tend and befriend (Taylor et al., 2000) strategy (Morrison & Sheahan, 2009) to cope with organizational stress. It is also found that women value relationships and communications in the workplace whereas men emphasize on the status and pay (Peterson, 2004). Therefore, workplace friendships provide women with a significant level of emotional and social support (Morrison & Nolan, 2009). The fear of losing relationships serves as a driving force for self-silencing. Since organizational relationships provide some form of emotional connection to women employees, it is possible that they self-silence in order to maintain these organizational friendships.

Women might self-silence in the fear of annihilation, losing their jobs and/or hostile retaliation. The gender dynamics leads to self-silencing since the power hierarchy based on gender is highly evident. The Indian IT sector is mostly characterized by male team leaders since around eighty-nine per cent of organizations have less than ten per cent of female representation at the C-suite levels (Raghuram, Herman, Ruiz-Ben, & Sondhi, 2017). Women often use self-silencing as a coping strategy to deal with authoritarian leaders. This is especially true for early-career professionals who want to earn acceptance from their male leaders (Pololi & Jones, 2010).

In the experience of self, culture plays an important role (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Since Indian self is characterized by “we” where “I” is always defined in relation to “you” (Roland, 1991), there is a high probability that the need to maintain relationships would be more powerful among women in India. Especially because, the external self-perception and concern for others are also evidently observed among Indians (Jack & Ali, 2010).

Bisel, Messersmith, and Kelley (2012) found that there exists a “Hierarchical Mum Effect” in the superior-subordinate communication pattern where subordinates tend to be reluctant in providing negative comment to their superiors. This might, as well, emerge from the concern of losing relationship (Tesser & Rosen, 1972) with the superior. Among women, since the relational self-structure is well developed, the strategy of self-silencing might be even more prominent in their communication with their superiors.

From the discussion of the literature, we observe that self-silencing is one relevant variable in the organizational context and there is a clear gap of knowledge in the existing literature in this matter. We, as psychology researchers, who have been working in the area of “Gender in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics” were interested in unveiling whether the boundary of self-silencing extends beyond the domain of intimate personal relationships and impact women software professionals’ workplace experience. The purpose of the present work, therefore, is to answer the following research questions,

1. Do women software engineers use self-silencing phenomenon in workplace relationships?
2. What are the antecedents of the self-silencing phenomenon in workplace relationships among female software engineers?
3. What are the consequences of the self-silencing phenomenon in workplace relationships among female software engineers?

## **Method**

This section deals with the theoretical perspective, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. After the conceptualization of the study, ethical approval was received from the Institutional Ethical Committee of Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur. The paradigmatic standpoint of the researchers is constructivism. Ontologically the researchers believe in relativism where reality is constructed through intersubjective meanings and experiences. The researchers relied on a qualitative approach for getting an in-depth understanding of the self-silencing phenomenon in workplace relationships. The introduction of the interpretive approach (Putnam, 1983) in the arena of organizational communication developed interest among researchers to study interpersonal relationships through qualitative methodologies (Fritz, 2014). Fritz (2014) also mentions “Qualitative research was recognized as ideal for revealing constructions of the meaning of work relationships and negotiation of lived relational experience within the organizational context” (p. 462). Rumens (2017) supported the qualitative turn in workplace relationship research. Moreover, the subjective experience such as the motivations behind one’s self-silencing and the psychological processes one goes through cannot be fully explored through quantitative method. There is a standardized questionnaire developed by Jack (1991) to quantitatively assess the level of self-silencing among individuals. However, the aims of the present work emphasized not only on checking whether the four symptoms of self-silencing were present in workplace relationships or not, but also, to understand the psychological processes involved in it which could only be traced through qualitative methodology.

For procuring the qualitative data, we relied on in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Interviews are generally considered to be ideal for the studies that aim to explore the experience of the individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In addition, interviews have proven to be an effective tool for working with women's experience (Kitzinger & Willmott, 2002); i.e., "interview is a critical tool for developing new frameworks and theories based on women's lives and women's formulations" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 164). For the present study, the interviews were semi-structured where a general guided interviewing approach was used (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Turner, 2010) in order "to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee" (McNamara, 2009; quoted in Turner, 2010, p. 755).

A total number of twenty-one software professionals were interviewed for the present study. Maximum variation strategy was used where the researchers "go to the groups which they believe will maximize the possibilities of obtaining data and leads for more data on their question" (Glaser, 1978, p. 45). The researcher made an attempt to interview female software engineers from a large range in terms of experience. It was ensured that 1. the interviewees are coming from different organizations (small start-ups to large corporates), 2. there was representation of both married and unmarried professionals, 3. The interviewees had a large age and experience range. The details of the participants are provided in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** Details of the participants of the study.

Serial no.	Marital Status	Children	Age	Years of Experience
1	Married	no	32	8
2	Married	yes	38	17
3	Married	no	27	5
4	Married	no	29	5.5
5	Married	no	35	8
6	Unmarried	no	27	4.5
7	Married	no	33	8.5
8	Married	yes	45	14
9	Unmarried	no	27	4.5
10	Unmarried	no	30	6

11	Married	no	31	5
12	Unmarried	no	28	6
13	Unmarried	no	28	4
14	Unmarried	no	30	6
15	Unmarried	no	42	14
16	Unmarried	no	33	7
17	Married	yes	32	9
18	Unmarried	no	30	7.5
19	Unmarried	no	31	7
20	Married	yes	43	22
21	Unmarried	no	29	8

Some of the women were single (N=11), some were married (N=10). Some of the participants have kids (N=4) and some did not (N=17). Some of the participants came from an urban background (N=8) whereas some came from rural strata (N=13). The software engineers had a work-experience ranging from five years to twenty-one years. All the interviews took place in Bangalore city, India. The interviewees were met through technology-meetups in Bangalore and were requested for interviews stating the purpose of the study. Then, individual meetings were set based on the convenience of them. The interview duration varied from 22 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. The interviews aimed at figuring out the extent to which the four components of self-silencing, i.e., care as self-sacrifice, divided self, silencing the self and external self-perception are present among the participants. In addition, the interviews involve questions to find out the motivations behind self-silencing as well as the physical, psychological, and professional consequences of self-silencing among the professionals.

In the interview process, the power dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2007) is one of the biggest challenges experienced by the qualitative researchers since researchers have the power in terms of selection of setting, time, and questions. It is difficult to get access to the real experience of the interviewee if the power dynamics become evident. However, for the present study, the settings and timings were mostly decided by the interviewees. Most of the time, interviews took place in the residences of the interviewees or a place of the interviewee's convenience. In addition, to combat the power hierarchy, the nature of the interview was interactive (Dixon, 2015).

Also, gender of interviewer and interviewee is found to impact the quality and nature of an interview. There tends to exist a "focal gender myth of field research" (Warren, 1988, p. 64) which suggests that women can better establish rapport in an interview due to their less



threatening presence and communication skills. Like any other conversations, interviews also occur in a gendered context (Williams & Heikes, 1993). Since the interviewee was a female (interviews were conducted by the first author of the present work), it was easier for women to talk about their experiences.

### **Thematic Analysis**

For analyzing the data derived from the in-depth interviews, we have used thematic analysis. Choosing a suitable analytical tool is a challenge faced by every qualitative researcher and it depends on the skill, training, and experience of the researcher. TA is “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insights into patterns of meaning across a dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 57). TA has been chosen due to its accessibility, especially for early qualitative researchers. Also, it was suitable for the present work, since it is considered to be most suitable for “elucidating the specific nature of a given group’s conceptualization of the phenomenon under study” (Joffe, 2012). We have used a hybrid of theoretical and inductive TA. In the theoretical TA we follow a top-down process where we have a theory in mind and go from theory to data to search for the themes from the data. Here “the researcher’s theoretical underpinnings and understanding of the research area of interest or previously established theoretical phenomenon” (Mahapatra & Chandola, 2018, p. 1967) is used as a filter to interpret the data. On the contrary, an inductive TA takes a bottom-up approach where the development of themes is solely determined by the data. The researcher had the self-silencing theory as the theoretical framework in mind, where the researchers aimed at understanding whether the four characterizing features of self-silencing phenomenon can also be observed in the workplace relationships. But the analysis also aimed at looking beyond this theory and through induction process derive knowledge from the data. So, in the analysis, two simultaneous processes were happening, first, checking whether the four characterizing features of self-silencing suggested by Jack (1991) are present in the narratives or not and if they are present how they are present; second, what are the major themes of antecedents and consequences of such behavior. We have used the six steps of TA suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

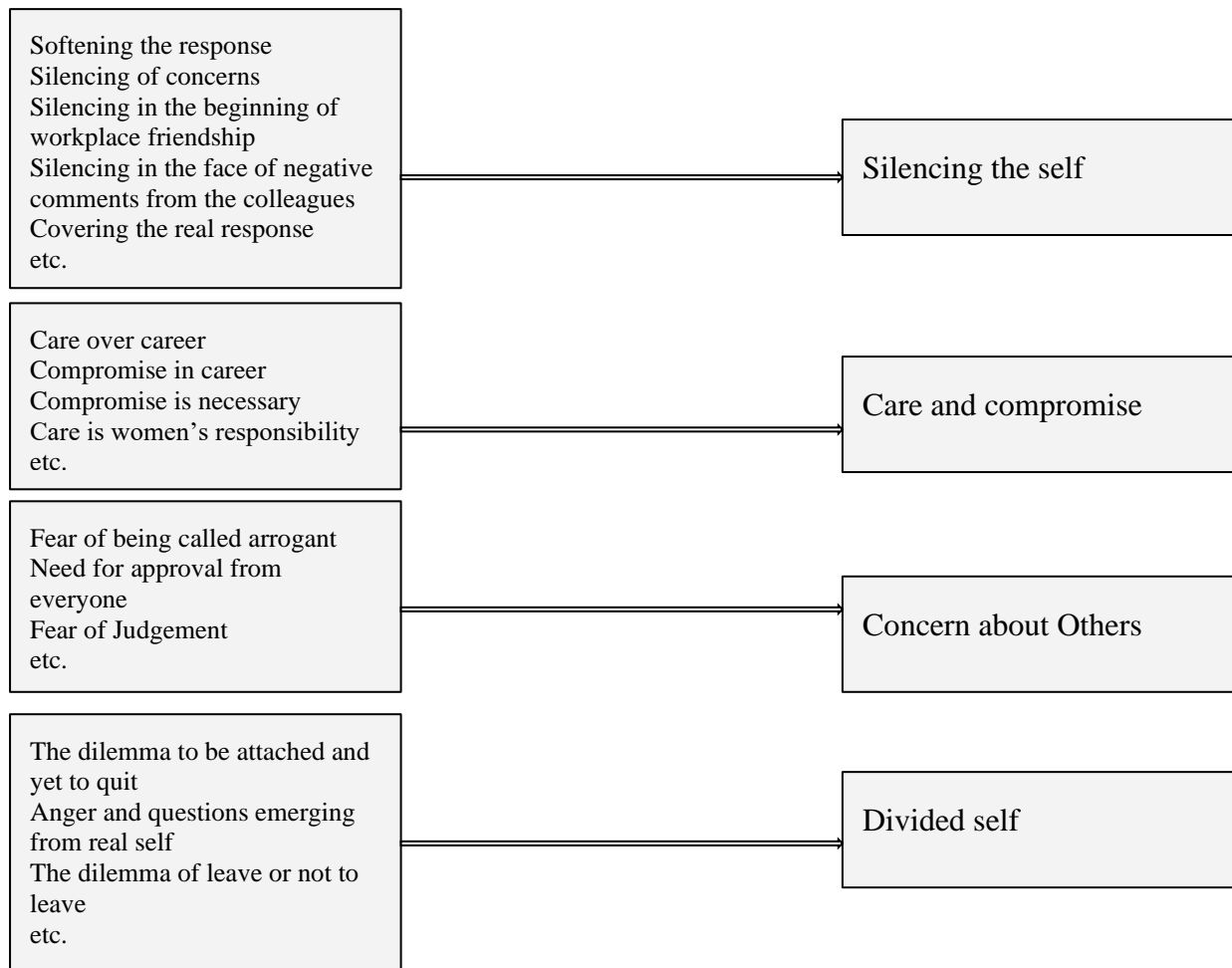
Initial codes are developed from the data corpus based on the repeated reading of the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) mentioned, initial codes are like the building blocks of the thematic analysis, they develop the foundation of the themes. While developing initial codes, it was kept in mind that “a “good code” is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1). Coding has been done at the semantic level where basic summarization has been done to understand the meaning of the account provided by the interviewees. For instance, Interviewee 2 said, “we cannot always be outspoken. I was outspoken, but now I am not outspoken. Because, maybe my wordings are very sharp, and maybe insulting for some people, so, I just don’t speak so much. I don’t want to hurt them.” The initial code for this narrative was “Fear of hurting others.”

After we have initial codes developed from the narratives, we search for themes from the codes where we cluster the codes with some unifying feature and meaningful pattern. For instance, initial codes like “not wanting to annoy,” “fear of hurting others” these are connected to the theme relational self since deep down all these concerns emerge from the relational self. How the initial codes have formed the themes can be found in figure 1, 2, and 3.

After the themes are developed, a closer review of the themes was done for quality check. It was made sure that the themes properly explain the research interest rather than simply summarizing the data. Also, it was made sure that all the themes are substantiated by the examples from the narratives. At this phase, a further reviewing of the themes was done to ensure that the themes are coherent, relevant, and thoroughly substantiated.

## Results

The research started with three basic quests: first, whether self-silencing phenomenon can be observed in the contexts of workplace relationships; second, what drives women software professionals to self-silence in their workplace connections; third, what are the consequences of self-silencing in women software professionals' life. These three research questions are discussed one by one in the following section. Themes are represented in Figures 1, 2, and 3.



*Figure 1.* Representation of themes related to self-silencing phenomenon in organization based on theoretical TA where Silencing the self-theory has been used as the theoretical framework.

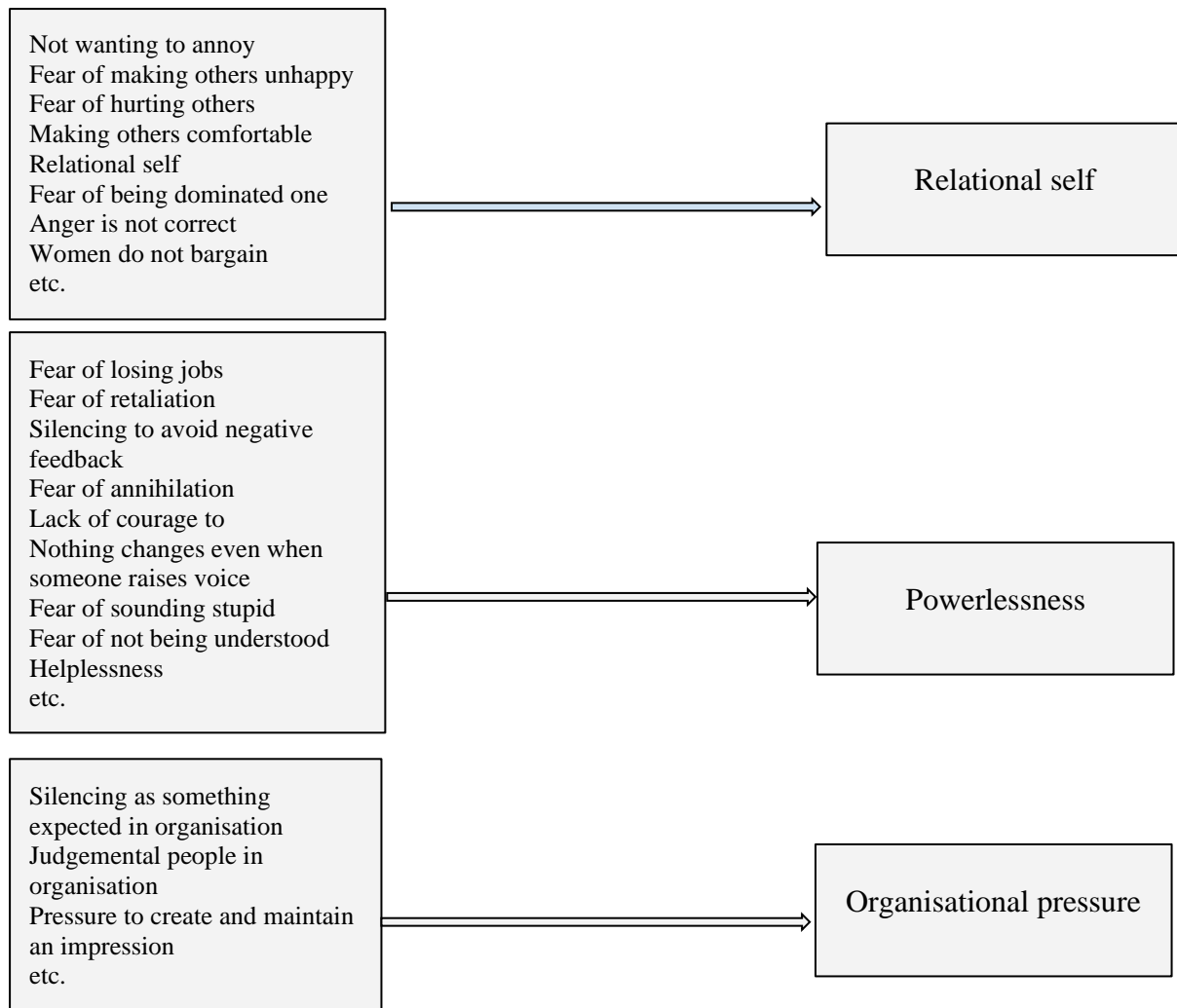
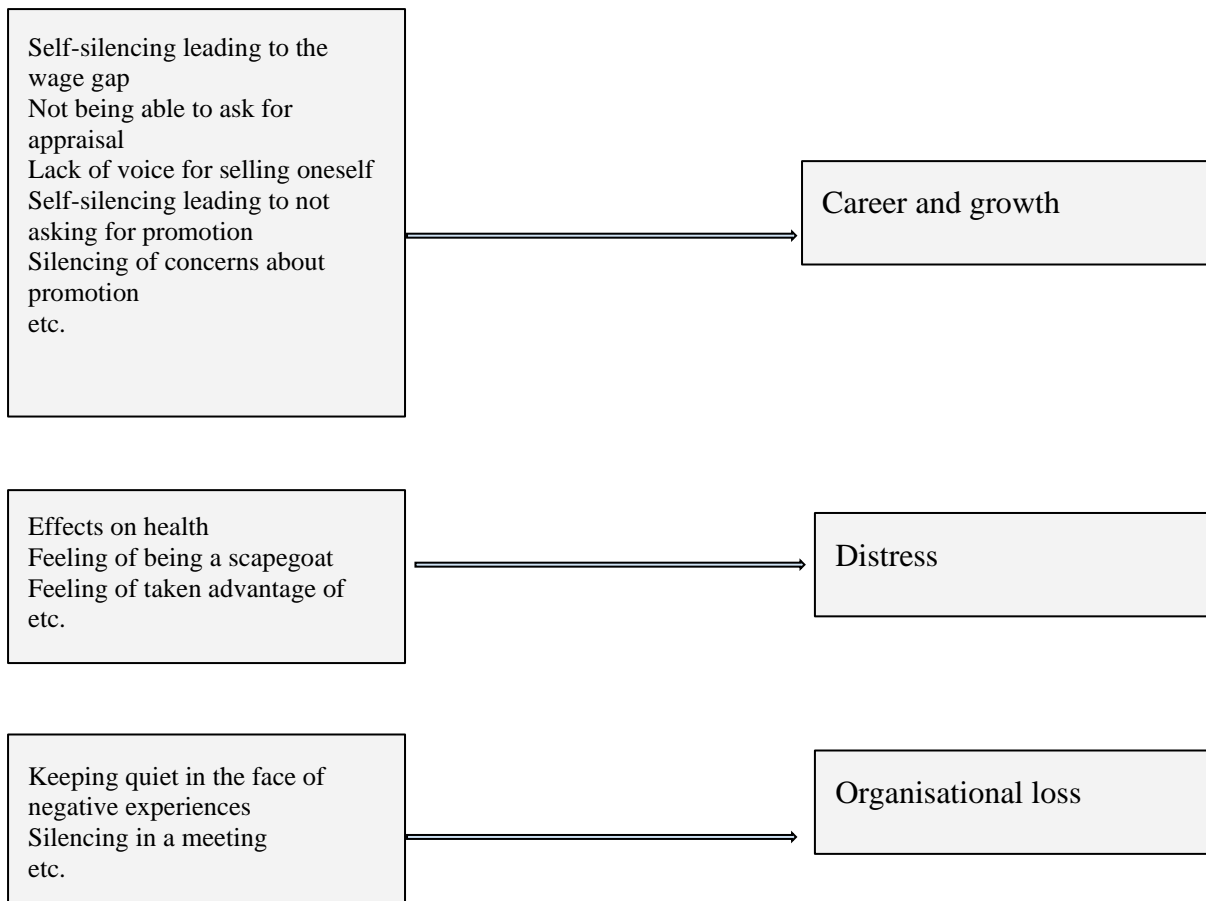


Figure 2. Representation of themes related to antecedents of self-silencing phenomenon in organization based on Inductive TA



*Figure 3.* Representation of themes related to the consequences of self-silencing phenomenon in the organization based on inductive TA.

### Self-silencing phenomenon

The following four themes are found based on the interviews which shows how the self-silencing phenomenon can be observed in workplace relationships.

#### Theme 1: Silencing the self

The defining feature of self-silencing is a “tendency to inhibit self-expression and action” (Jack & Ali, 2010, p. 5). Silencing the self involves both the behavioral and phenomenological component. Almost all the interviewees have reported that they have silenced their opinions, emotions, and real-self in workplace relationships. The act of silencing not only involves keeping quiet and not expressing the real-self, but also, it incorporates the act of delaying in giving a negative response and keeping patience for the negative act to occur again. This has been found in case of bad behaviors from colleagues, sexist jokes, or while facing conflicting opinions, softening of a negative response, explaining a negative response, and letting go of a negative confrontation were often reported. The act of silencing the self was present both with the workplace friends (especially at the beginning phase of the relationship) and with authority figures.

Interviewee 6, a 27-year old female software engineer shared that after receiving a sexist comment from a male colleague, she tries to manage it in a subtle way without expressing her annoyance.

I will definitely not create a fuss out of it then and there, I will take time and I will understand and in a very subtle way, I will communicate things to him (a colleague) so that he understands; also, at the same time he does not get annoyed.

Therefore, from this narrative we see that there is an attempt to suppress the real emotion of annoyance from the male-colleague in day-to-day interactions. Similarly, Interviewee 10, an Artificial Intelligence engineer expressed how frequently she self-silences in her work-place relationships. She narrated that,

All the time. For example, if someone passes a comment in the workplace, at that time I feel if I stay calm it will be ok, in order to save that relationship you let go things, you think it is ok. I do it often, I am a little sensitive so I generally feel it is ok, leave.

Therefore, the narratives reveal that the female software professionals do indulge in the act of silencing or the behavioral component of self-silencing by either completely suppressing their real negative emotions or coating the negative emotions in a positive expression, or by softening their tone.

## **Theme 2: Care and Compromise**

The concerns for care and compromise have been repeatedly come up in the interviews. The caregiving role is mostly performed by women and some women report how this caregiving role is more important than the professional life. Interviewee 1, a software professional with eight years of experience in the industry explained how care has been a priority in her life.

Ya, it does happen sometimes that you have to take off. I have a single mother as I told you, so sometimes I have to take care of her. I have to be with her. If my brother goes out of the station, I have to be with her. Those kinds of things you can't help; you have to do. You can't care whether it affects your job or not.

As Jack (1991) mentioned that the concern for the care and compromise emerge from the need to conform to the traditional feminine roles. In general, care is considered to be a major part of these roles. Similar to this finding, in our study, interviewee 2, a 48-year-old senior professional, who has reported indulging in emphasized on the fact that compromise is required in every aspect of life and it is expected only from women.

Yes. Without compromising you cannot do anything. Neither in the profession, not in personal life, compromising and sacrificing is meant for ladies.

From these, it becomes evident that the concern for the care and compromise becomes an emerging theme in the context of workplace relationships. Also, women who reported self-silencing in their work-place relationships tend to conform to the roles where women are expected to care and compromise in life.

### **Theme 3: Divided Self**

When a woman self-silences, she goes through a split in herself, where one part feels the compulsion to comply to the socially prescribed gender roles marked by submissiveness, docility, and lack of voice and the other part feels anger and frustration as a result of not being able to revolt and speak up. This anger and frustration are reported in the context of workplace relationships as well. Interviewee 9, a 27-year-old technology professional with 4.5 years of work-experience shared such experience of divided self. She continued silencing her concerns for appraisal and later felt conflicts about it inside her own mind.

Many times, like, there are so many conflicts at the back of my mind, I question myself why am I doing this even when I am completely self-dependent a person? Why do I let go? Why am I suffering? I should not. I feel like not doing anything, I would lie down, neither eat nor sleep, I don't know, I become numb.

This experience is exactly what Jack and Ali (2010) mentioned as divided self or the “presentation of an outer self that does not correspond with inner thoughts and experiences” (p. 158). There is an ongoing conflict between the self that conforms to the socially-prescribed feminine roles and the self that feels anger and guilt for not standing up for oneself.

### **Theme 4: Concern about Others**

Jack and Dill (2010) defines externalized self-perception as a “schema regarding standards for self-judgment and includes the extent to which a person judges the self through external standards” (p. 6). The concept of we-self is common in collectivist cultures like India, however, among women, who self-silence, due to a weak inner-self, their source of self-definition solely comes from the feedback from others. In the present study, the concern for others has come out repeatedly where maybe one does not solely define herself in terms of others' perception, however, the concern for being judged by others and to maintain an impression have been found to bother the professionals.

If I am talking to someone, I am creating an impression...Whether you are doing good or bad, if the impression is good, then it will go good. If you make a mistake, and if you have a good impression, people will say mistakes happen sometimes. If the impression is wrong it will escalate, and even if you are performing better also, they won't feel like it.

How others' judgement determines women behavior inside organization is also reported by interviewee 1, who shared,

When you are successful, you are getting promoted, there is a tendency in organization, to attribute this success to something else. Maybe your beauty, your gender or maybe your friendliness.

Therefore, even when the self-perception is not externally located, the presence and judgement of others in the organization tend to be evident in the context of workplace relationships. Women who have silenced themselves had the concern of others even more.

## **Antecedents of Self-silencing**

The second aim of the present work was to find out the antecedents of self-silencing in the organization. We found that there are three main themes as the sources of motivation for self-silencing in workplace relationships, they are discussed below.

### **Theme 5: Powerlessness**

In the present study, women software engineers have reported indulging in self-silencing in the face of authority figures like team managers, especially when they have a feeling of powerlessness. The powerlessness is voiced through women's fears. The fears take a number of forms such as fear of losing jobs, fear of getting negative feedback, fear of retaliation and so on.

Interviewee 12, a software professional with six years of experience in the Information and Technology sector, shared her motivation behind self-silencing in front of her team leader which sourced from her fear of losing the job.

I felt that they might not find me a good fit for the job and I might end up losing my job itself. That really scared me because it is my first job and you always get this thought that unless I have a backup I cannot afford losing this job.

This powerlessness in front of the authority figures is also expressed through a sense of helplessness and lack of courage. Interviewee 10, a 32 years old artificial intelligence engineer explained how her motivation of self-silencing emerges from the helplessness that even if she speaks up, nothing will change.

Maybe we are scared you know, I mean, what I think is the decision lies in there, even if you tell them they might not agree. Suppose you are my manager and I ask you for appraisal, you have already set a predefined judgement about me, though I have worked hard your perception about me is not going to change.

Jack (1991) suggests that women who self-silence in an intimate partner relationship have the fear of annihilation which stems from the power difference between the partners in a romantic relationship. Fear of annihilation occurs among women who are financially dependent on their spouses. Therefore, for the security of them and their children, they choose to silence themselves rather than expressing their real selves. Here, we see that in the context of organizational authority, a similar fear and concern for security are voiced, especially among women who are at the early phase of their career.

### **Theme 6: Relational Self**

Apart from being motivated by a sense of powerlessness, self-silencing among the female software engineers is also driven by the pressure to conform to the traditional feminine roles characterized by the care and submissiveness. The constant need to please others, take care of others, and the fear of losing others have been frequently mentioned as explanations of self-silencing in all the interviews. Needless to mention, these concerns are mostly derived from the relational self (Surrey, 1985). J B Miller (1988) suggested that "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliation and relationships" (p. 83); also, women "have developed the sense that their lives should be guided by the constant need to attune themselves to the wishes, desires, and needs of others" (p. 61).

Since the sense of self is derived from the relationships, in workplace relationships women often choose to self-silence to save the relationships.

I would not go and say anything easily. I will try (to) solve things myself and keep bad things away from them and not putting a lot on them so that they are not (unhappy), I will not want them to become unhappy for me. That is the problem.

The need for attachment even when the relationships are hurtful is also voiced through the interviews. Similarly, Jack (1991) found in her interviews that women often wish to help their partners even when they are in a hurtful marriage. This need for attachment is also found in one of the interviews where the interviewee expressed how she is attached to the relationships of her life from workplace friendships to intimate partner relationships.

I am really afraid that the people who are with me they will leave me one day, I know that I don't deserve them, I can get better people, but I get so emotionally attached and I am so attached that I don't want to care even if someone else likes me or loves me. I feel that I am connected to him, and I need him

Women's need to conform to the culturally defined "good woman" template which is defined as "a core premise is that women are unequal to men and yet responsible for the quality of relationships" (Jack & Ali, 2010, p. 11). This need to comply with the socially prescribed feminine gender roles has also been reported as one major motivation behind silencing the self.

I think a girl should do that. I feel bad if I show my anger. I don't feel like expressing my anger just because I do not like it. I feel if I do this it will be some kind of dominating behavior. Or I am putting (imposing) my opinion on you. I don't want to do that.

### **Theme 7: Organizational Environment of Keeping Mum**

Whereas the motivation derived from a relational self and powerlessness are observed in self-silencing in the arena of intimate partner relationships, the present study also revealed that there are some factors located in the organizational environment that leads to self-silencing. However, since the data was collected only from women, there was no way to check how these organizational factors are different or similar between male and female professionals in the same industry.

Some participants reported that the organization demands some form of silencing among the employees. Interviewee 2, who had a long work-experience of seventeen years and experienced discrimination in the workplace in terms of career-growth narrated that,

The organization is OK with my ideas, my innovations, no one stops me there. But, they are not OK with the concerns of the employees. Every human being will have a concern, I have a concern. Ok? My peer is not working, I am not getting a proper appraisal, these are the concerns I have. These are my concerns. But, these concerns cannot be expressed. We get suppressed while expressing our concerns. I faced discrimination. I did not get a promotion for five years. I know what has happened. But what is the point of expressing that concern? They will never be able to understand my concern, rather that they will give it back in a negative way, they will say she is very arrogant.



Some of the interviewees have expressed an existence of judgmental environment, which might drive women to silence themselves. Therefore, from the interview narratives, it becomes evident that there is something inherent in the organizational culture which reinforces the self-silencing.

### **Consequences of Self-silencing**

In the present study, we found that self-silencing tends to have consequences in a woman software engineer's life at two levels. It adversely impacts their career and growth and also, it leads to psychological distress. In addition, the study unveiled that the organization also suffers from some negative outcomes when the women employees self-silence. These three themes are discussed in this section.

#### **Theme 8: Career and Growth:**

The most pernicious aspect of self-silencing is a stunted growth of women's career in software engineering. In the Indian IT sector, the issue of the glass ceiling has always been a matter of concern for the organizational psychologists (Afza, 2005; Bhattacharyya & Ghosh, 2012). The issue of the wage gap between male and female software professionals at the same professional rank has come up as one major act of discrimination and inequality. The interviewees have reported that when it comes to bargaining for appraisals and being expressive about promotion, women often self-silence even when they want to be assertive. Interviewee 9, a system engineer with four and a half years of experience, shared how self-silencing eventually leads to the wage gap between genders.

There is one of my friends, she is working in this company. Though she is working pretty well, but, there is nothing like she is getting an amazing package. Now there is another guy, he is having less eligibility, but she is got 30 per cent of appraisal compared to the guy. When the manager communicated her appraisal, she was like ok, fine, she did not say anything. I asked her why didn't you say anything? She was regretting that she should have said

#### **Theme 9: Distress**

The journey of research in self-silencing began in the context of depression (Jack, 1991; Jack & Dill, 1992). It has been consistently found in the literature that self-silencing leads to multiple hazardous effects on the psychological wellbeing of a person. The present study was conducted in an organizational setting and the researchers did not aim to diagnose or understand the mental health effects of self-silencing in the first place, however, some of the interviewees expressed how silencing in the face of authority has affected their psychological wellbeing. Interviewee 8, who suffered from severe distress as a consequence of her work-issues and not being able to communicate it through to her team leader. She took a career break thrice to deal with these issues, shared her experience of distress every day after coming back home.

I mostly get headaches, stress headaches, I would not take it out on people at home, I used to end up in discussions with my husband regarding what I need to do, so, he used to tell me not to worry so much and all, so yeah, mean it has

affected me so much that I will take it out in my personal life, it affected my health, though.

The distress might also arise from a sense of being exploited by the team members when one silences herself in the face of pressure from them. This provides a sense of helplessness and guilt which deteriorate the psychological wellbeing.

There were times, when I was involved in two projects and they involved me in three, I used to feel frustrated and ask myself why are they giving it to me? But I didn't have the guts (smiling) to talk to the manager, I just cannot speak, I will think 10 times in my mind should I speak or not, then, that is why most of the time I keep all the things inside me.

### **Theme 10: Organizational Loss:**

In some interviews, the researchers came up with some issues where the organization also loses something when the employees self-silence. Some interviewees, for instance, reported that while facing the experience of casual sexism to sexual harassment inside the organization, women often self-silence and leave the organization rather than being assertive about it.

These unreported and unresponded negative responses would eventually impact the workplace experience and overall job satisfaction of a woman. Apart from these, women often also self-silence in meetings, where they do not contribute to decision making.

Maybe one or two instances I will try to convince them but when I realize that (even) if I say, also it will not (effect in the discussion), I mean they will not react the way I think, I will prefer keeping it to myself and keeping silent. (Silence) If I feel that the topic is very relevant to me and if I talk I will burst out then also I'll keep silent.

Similarly, in the context of facing workplace sexual harassment women choose to keep silent and leave the organization. Interviewee 5, a software developer with eight years of work experience in the Indian Information and Technology sector shared that,

For most of the women, if they face something negative like harassment they keep silent. I mean they will share it with someone or the other, for sure, but they will wait for sometime and after that either they will try to go out of that place as they do not want to see the face of those persons anymore

Therefore, when women in an organization self-silence, especially in decision-making meetings, and in the case of harassment-like issues, it leads to a form of organizational ignorance (Harvey, Novicevic, Buckley, & Ferris, 2001).

## **Discussion**

The present work provides ample evidence that self-silencing is not limited to romantic relationships only; rather, women might self-silence in workplace relationships as well. Self-silencing in workplace relationships with colleagues usually arise from the relational-self where women software engineers were afraid of losing relationships, affection, and emotional attachment. The motivation for self-silencing in the relationships with authority figures such

as team leaders and organizational authority most frequently arose from a feeling of powerlessness where female software professionals perceive that their security at the professional level might be at stake if they raise their voice. Women software professionals, especially those at their early career phase, were more likely to express this fear of annihilation in terms of fear of losing jobs, fear of getting negative feedback from the authority, also, fear of losing a good impression. Since self-silencing is evident in workplace relationships, future research must attempt the development of a standardized questionnaire for its measurement.

This blockage in workplace communication has absolute significance in the context of organizational behavior as well as in the growth of the organization. One previous study, for instance, suggests that a lack of appropriate superior-subordinate communication, characterized by “hierarchical mum effect” (Bisel et al., 2012) leads to a pluralistic ignorance of the organization regarding the issues and environment of the organization. Therefore, the organization loses the opportunity to interpret the real problems, take required steps, and learn (Bisel et al., 2012). The present work, in consonance with these previous studies, does support that “hierarchical mum effect” was present among women software professionals and self-silencing worked as a psychological mechanism behind it.

Self-silencing in the organization, also, suppresses the dissent of the subordinates where they can raise voices against issues which are unethical and inappropriate. For dealing with gender-related malpractices inside organizations, beginning from casual sexism to sexual harassment dissents are of absolute importance; and this is being suppressed through the process of self-silencing of women.

The work environment of Indian IT sector is not only characterized by highly skewed sex-ratio but also issues like glass ceiling (Bhattacharya & Ghosh, 2012) are still enormous challenges faced by women. Multiple psychological and sociological analysis has been made to comprehend this issue. However, this study suggests that this internal psychological struggle in terms of self-silencing of women where they lack the voice to raise their concerns for their career growth has also found to be a significant factor of the disproportional career growth of male and female software professionals in Indian Information Technology industry.

The present work also suggests that self-silencing leads to the need to hide the real self in workplace relationships to maintain them. Which, in turn, leads to a feeling of exploitation from the team members and the perception of injustice. At the same time, the inability to raise voice against it to abide by the “over-eye” provided by society leads to guilt and anxiety. The everyday internal conflicts emerging from the divided-self have some severe impacts on the psychological wellbeing of the female employees. Workplace self-silencing, thereafter, should not only be considered as an important variable in the context of organizational growth but also, organizational mental health professionals must work in this area.

However, the present work has drawn its data from the Indian population. Since self-silencing is defined by the culturally and socially defined gender roles, one must be cautious while generalizing the findings of the findings to another culture that differs in terms of gender egalitarianism. Also, the study deals with workplace self-silencing among female software professionals, a profession characterized by worrisome sex-ratio. Therefore, generalizing the findings to other professions and other industries might be erroneous.

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