

Trapped with a Plan: Investigating the Disconnect between Exit Strategies and Execution among Women in Toxic Marriages

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the disconnect between exit strategies and their execution among women living in toxic marriages in Zimbabwe. Despite clear intentions to leave these emotionally and psychologically abusive relationships, many women remain in such unions for extended periods due to psychological, relational, cultural, religious, and socio-economic constraints. In a period over two years, this study used a qualitative systemic case-study design to explore this disconnect between exit strategies and their execution among women living in toxic marriages in a counselling centre in Zimbabwe. The study involved ten married women who presented with marital distress and repeatedly discussed separation or divorce during therapy. The study is grounded in systemic theory, which explains how individual agency is shaped by broader relational systems. Data were collected through therapeutic conversations, counselling sessions, and follow-up interviews, enabling longitudinal insights into participants' narratives. Thematic analysis identified recurring psychological, cultural, and structural patterns influencing decision-making. Findings showed that, although participants understood their marital toxicity and developed exit plans, action was hindered by intersecting barriers. Key themes included fear of stigma, financial dependence, religious and cultural expectations of the permanence of marriage, concern for children, emotional attachment, hope for change, and psychological exhaustion. Participants described feeling "trapped with a plan", but reflecting emotional paralysis despite awareness. Extended family systems, patriarchal norms, and community narratives further reinforced ambivalence and limited perceived options. The study concludes that leaving a toxic marriage is a gradual, systemic process rather than a single decision. It recommends culturally responsive, trauma-informed interventions, economic empowerment, psychoeducation, and collaboration with community and religious leaders to reduce structural barriers.

Keywords: toxic marriages, exit strategies, systemic therapy, psychological entrapment, Zimbabwe, women

Introduction

Many women in toxic marriages express a desire to leave, and often develop detailed exit strategies. However, despite this awareness and planning, many remain in harmful relationships for extended periods. This disconnect between intention and action reflects a complex interaction of psychological, relational, cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors shaping women's lived experiences within marriage. In Zimbabwe, marriage is embedded within broader systems of kinship, spirituality, and communal identity, making separation more than an individual decision. Women are often positioned within interconnected relational networks involving children, extended family, in-laws, religious leaders, and community structures, all of which influence their ability to leave (Nichols & Davis, 2020). Cultural expectations surrounding womanhood, endurance, *lobola* (bride price), motherhood, and marital perseverance frequently reinforce silence and discourage separation even in emotionally harmful relationships (Munyuki-Hungwe, 2019; Chirongoma & Mangena, 2021). Studies in African contexts further show that economic dependency, cultural obligations, and fear of stigma complicate women's decisions to leave toxic marriages (Guruge et al., 2019; Machisa et al., 2021).

Within marital and family systems, repetitive interactional cycles such as blame, emotional withdrawal, dependency, and fear often maintain relational distress and inhibit change (Goldenberg et al., 2017). Systemic scholars argue that individual behaviour cannot be understood outside the emotional systems in which it occurs, as family members continuously shape one another through reciprocal interactions (Vetere & Dallos, 2018). Family-of-origin experiences, religious teachings, and societal narratives around sacrifice and respectability may reinforce endurance and influence women's perceptions of self-worth, obligation, and agency. Research in Zimbabwe suggests that women often internalise expectations of perseverance and submissiveness, even in emotionally distressing marriages (Chitongo & Mlambo, 2021). In many cases, women's suffering is normalised within families and communities, making disclosure and action increasingly difficult. These patterns highlight the need to understand toxic marriages, not only as interpersonal issues, but as experiences embedded within wider socio-cultural and relational systems.

Cultural narratives, counselling conversations, and community discourses also shape how women understand marriage, resilience, and leaving. Women often negotiate competing identities between being a ‘good wife’, preserving family dignity, protecting children, and safeguarding their own wellbeing. Although counselling may create opportunities for reflection and empowerment, societal stigma surrounding divorce and separation can intensify fear, shame, and emotional paralysis. Feminist and systemic scholars argue that emotional entrapment in toxic relationships is sustained by both interpersonal dynamics and broader structural inequalities that restrict women’s agency (Brown, 2019). As Zimbabwe continues to experience changing gender roles, economic instability, and evolving family structures, the experiences of women in toxic marriages remain an important area for therapeutic and scholarly attention. This study therefore sought to explore the disconnect between exit strategies and their execution among women in toxic marriages, focusing on the relational, cultural, psychological, and systemic dynamics that sustain patterns of entrapment.

Aim of the study

The study aimed to explore the underlying factors contributing to the disconnect between the development of exit strategies and their execution among women in toxic marriages.

Objectives

The study sought:

1. To explore how women in toxic marriages conceptualise and develop exit strategies.
2. To examine the psychological, relational, and structural factors that create a disconnect between exit strategies and their execution.
3. To analyse how power dynamics, coping mechanisms, and decision-making processes influence women’s ability to act on their plans.
4. To document women’s lived experiences of being ‘trapped with a plan’ and generate context-specific recommendations for counselling and intervention.

Research questions

1. How do women in toxic marriages conceptualise and develop exit strategies?

2. What psychological, relational, and structural factors contribute to the disconnect between exit strategies and their execution?
3. How do power dynamics, coping mechanisms, and decision-making processes influence women's ability to act on their plans to leave?
4. How do women experience the phenomenon of being 'trapped with a plan', and what Interventions can support the transition from planning to execution?

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in systemic theory, particularly Bowen's family systems theory, which views individuals as deeply shaped by the relational systems in which they exist rather than as isolated beings (Bowen, 1978). From this perspective, the disconnect between women's intentions to leave toxic marriages and their actual ability to do so is understood within broader relational and socio-cultural systems involving spouses, children, extended family, religious influences, and community expectations. Contemporary systemic scholars argue that relationship difficulties are maintained through repetitive interactional patterns in which individuals continuously influence one another's behaviours and emotional responses (Carr, 2020; Nichols & Davis, 2020). Exit strategies are therefore not purely individual decisions, but are formed and negotiated within systems that may either support or resist change.

Key concepts from Bowen's theory, including differentiation of self, emotional fusion, and circular causality, help explain why it often remains difficult for women to leave toxic marriages despite their clear intentions to leave. Differentiation of self refers to the ability to maintain one's identity and decision-making capacity while remaining emotionally connected to others. Low differentiation may result in women struggling to act independently due to fear, guilt, emotional dependency, or concern about family and community reactions. Emotional fusion further intensifies this struggle when personal identity becomes heavily tied to the marital relationship. Repetitive relational cycles involving conflict, apology, hope, and disappointment may reinforce emotional attachment and prolong marital stay despite ongoing distress. Contemporary systemic and attachment-based research further suggests that such relational patterns are often reinforced across generations through learned beliefs about sacrifice, endurance, and marital permanence (Vetere & Dallos, 2018; Carr, 2020).

The concept of being ‘trapped with a plan’ is therefore understood not as weakness or indecisiveness, but as the lived experience of being caught between personal intentions and powerful relational, cultural, and structural forces. Even when women make practical plans to leave, broader systems involving family expectations, children’s wellbeing, cultural norms, economic dependency, and emotional attachment may inhibit action. Systemic theory highlights how families and social systems often resist change in order to maintain stability, even when that stability is emotionally harmful (Nichols & Davis, 2020). The gap between planning and action therefore reflects the influence of interconnected relational and socio-cultural systems that sustain patterns of entrapment despite a desire for change.

Literature review

Conceptualising exit strategies in toxic marriages

Toxic marriages are characterised by persistent patterns of emotional, psychological, verbal, physical, or relational harm that negatively affect the wellbeing of one or both partners. Although not always physically violent, such relationships are often marked by coercive control, emotional manipulation, humiliation, intimidation, neglect, chronic conflict, and unequal power dynamics that create sustained emotional distress and relational instability (Stark, 2007; Goodman et al., 2020). Within such contexts, women frequently experience ongoing psychological strain while attempting to preserve the marriage due to emotional attachment, cultural expectations, religious beliefs, or concern for children.

The process of leaving toxic relationships is rarely immediate or linear. Contemporary research shows that women typically move through iterative stages of recognising harm, evaluating safety, and developing informal or formal exit planning before actual separation occurs (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Walker-Descartes et al., 2021). Exit strategies may include financial preparation, emotional detachment, counselling engagement, seeking social support, or identifying alternative accommodation. However, the presence of an exit plan does not necessarily translate into action.

Trauma-informed scholarship explains this gap through the concept of coercive control and trauma bonding, where intermittent reinforcement of affection and abuse creates emotional entrapment and strengthens relational attachment (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Stark, 2007; Hamberger et al., 2023). This contributes to sustained ambivalence even when women are cognitively aware of harm.

In African contexts, marriage is often embedded within extended kinship and socio-cultural systems rather than understood as an individual contract (Amadiume, 2015). Women are frequently socialised to prioritise endurance, sacrifice, and family preservation even under distress (Chitando & Mateveke, 2020). Recent African IPV studies further show that social stigma, economic dependency, and fear of social exclusion significantly shape women's capacity to act on exit intentions (Jewkes et al., 2023; Machisa et al., 2021).

Psychological, relational, and structural barriers to leaving

Although many women in toxic marriages articulate intentions to leave, the transition from planning to execution is frequently disrupted by intersecting psychological, relational, and structural constraints.

Psychologically, survivors may experience anxiety, shame, trauma responses, and emotional exhaustion that reduce decision-making capacity. Trauma bonding and learned helplessness remain strongly supported constructs in explaining prolonged entrapment in abusive relationships (Goodman et al., 2020). More recent trauma research highlights that repeated exposure to coercive control alters risk perception and weakens perceived agency (Hamberger et al., 2023).

Relationally, concerns about children, family cohesion, and social belonging often delay exit execution. Women may fear disrupting family stability or losing relational identity within extended kinship systems. Contemporary IPV literature emphasises that separation decisions are rarely individualistic, but embedded within relational accountability structures (Walker-Descartes et al., 2021; Machisa et al., 2021).

Structurally, economic dependency remains one of the strongest predictors of delayed separation. Limited access to income, housing insecurity, and constrained legal or institutional support reduce viable exit options (Lasong et al., 2020; Jewkes et al., 2023). In many low-resource settings, structural inequality intersects with gender norms to sustain entrapment.

Religious and cultural frameworks may further reinforce marital permanence. Within many African Christian contexts, divorce is often socially and morally discouraged, increasing internal conflict between personal safety and perceived spiritual obligation (Chitando & Mateveke, 2020; Magezi & Manzanga, 2019).

Power dynamics, coping mechanisms, and decision-making processes

Power imbalances are central to understanding why exit strategies often fail to translate into action. Coercive control, financial restriction, surveillance, and intimidation significantly reduce autonomy and increase dependency (Stark, 2007; Hamberger et al., 2023). These dynamics limit both perceived and actual escape pathways.

Gendered power structures rooted in patriarchal norms continue to position men as authority figures and women as caregivers and dependents in many African contexts (Amadiume, 2015; Jewkes et al., 2023). These norms normalise endurance and discourage resistance to marital harm.

Women employ a range of coping strategies, including emotional suppression, minimisation, spiritual coping, and help-seeking behaviours. While these strategies may provide short-term emotional relief, they can also contribute to prolonged endurance by enhancing adaptation to harmful environments rather than facilitating exit (Goodman et al., 2020).

Decision-making in toxic marriages is therefore cyclical rather than linear. Women frequently move between hope, fear, attachment, and uncertainty. Contemporary IPV literature confirms that leaving abusive relationships often involves multiple attempts before final separation (Walker-Descartes et al., 2021).

Ecological systems theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics by situating individual behaviour within interacting personal, relational, community, and societal systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Jewkes et al., 2023).

The experience of being “trapped with a plan” and therapeutic interventions

The experience of being ‘trapped with a plan’ describes a psychological state in which women develop exit intentions yet remain unable to act on them due to intervening emotional, relational, and structural constraints. This reflects not indecision, but systemic entrapment.

Women may experience emotional paralysis, chronic ambivalence, and exhaustion due to repeated cycles of planning without execution. Structural dependency, fear of stigma, and attachment to children or partners further intensify this condition. Trauma-informed research conceptualises this as a survival response rather than a failure of agency (Goodman et al., 2020; Hamberger et al., 2023).

Therapeutically, trauma-informed care is essential in supporting women to process trauma responses and rebuild self-efficacy. Narrative and systemic approaches assist in externalising oppressive relational patterns and understanding intergenerational dynamics that sustain entrapment (Carr, 2020; Nichols & Davis, 2020).

Empowerment-based interventions particularly those focusing on financial independence, safety planning, and social support networks - are strongly supported in IPV intervention literature (Jewkes et al., 2023; UN Women, 2024). Integrating cultural and spiritual sensitivity is also critical in African contexts where religious identity strongly shapes marital decision-making.

Despite growing global research on intimate partner violence, there remains limited specific research exploring the gap between exit planning and behavioural execution in Zimbabwe. This highlights the need for contextually grounded systemic studies examining how psychological, relational, cultural, and structural forces interact to shape women's lived experiences of entrapment.

Methodology

Study design

This study employed a qualitative research approach within a systemic case-study design to explore the disconnect between exit strategies and their execution among women in toxic marriages in Zimbabwe. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, emotions, relational dynamics, and the broader cultural and systemic influences shaping their decision-making processes. Qualitative research is particularly useful in understanding complex human experiences situated within social and relational contexts (Creswell, 2014).

The case-study design was suitable because it allowed for a holistic and contextualised examination of women experiencing persistent marital distress and repeated engagement with exit planning within a counselling setting. Case-study research is particularly valuable when investigating complex real-life phenomena within bounded systems where context significantly influences experience and behaviour (Yin, 2018; Patton, 2020). The design enabled the researcher to develop a rich and detailed understanding of the participants' experiences over time rather than reducing their experiences to isolated variables.

The systemic orientation of the study ensured that the research extended beyond individual psychological experiences to include the relational, familial, cultural, religious, and structural systems influencing participants' realities. This perspective was important because marital decision-making within the Zimbabwean context is often embedded within interconnected family, community, and socio-cultural systems rather than occurring at an individual level. The systemic lens therefore allowed for a deeper understanding of how these broader systems contribute to the disconnect between women's intentions to leave toxic marriages and their inability to act on these plans.

Participants and sampling

The research population consisted of married women accessing counselling services in Zimbabwe. In qualitative research, a population refers to the broader group from which participants are drawn and within which the phenomenon under investigation is located (Cohen et al., 2018). In this study, the population was defined by clear inclusion criteria focused on women experiencing ongoing marital distress and engaging in therapeutic processes related to separation or exit planning.

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to intentionally select participants who could provide rich, relevant, and information-rich accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling is widely recognised in qualitative and case-study research because it enables the deliberate selection of participants with direct experience relevant to the research objectives rather than aiming for statistical representation (Patton, 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach was particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive and complex relational experiences such as toxic marriages and barriers to leaving.

A total of ten married women ($n = 10$) were selected from clients attending a counselling centre in Zimbabwe. Participants were included because they had presented with ongoing marital distress and had explicitly expressed thoughts, intentions, or plans to leave their marriages, but had not acted upon these plans. This ensured that participants possessed direct experience with the phenomenon being explored and allowed the study to generate in-depth and contextually grounded insights into the emotional, relational, and systemic barriers associated with exit planning in toxic marriages.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth therapeutic conversations and semi-structured interviews conducted within a counselling setting over a two-year period. The use of therapeutic conversations was appropriate because it enabled participants to express their experiences within a reflective, emotionally safe, and supportive environment. This approach allowed participants to narrate their experiences naturally while facilitating deeper emotional exploration of issues related to marital distress, fear, relational attachment, cultural obligations, and barriers to leaving toxic relationships.

Semi-structured interviews were used to provide additional structure to the data collection process while maintaining sufficient flexibility to probe emerging themes and experiences relevant to the study objectives. The interview process focused on participants' experiences of toxic marital relationships, their considerations regarding leaving, the barriers preventing execution of exit plans, and the relational and cultural systems shaping these decisions. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in qualitative research because they allow for consistency across participants while still accommodating individual experiences and narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The counselling context further facilitated trust, rapport, and psychological safety, which are critical when exploring sensitive issues such as emotional abuse, marital conflict, fear, shame, and relational trauma. This environment enhanced participants' willingness to engage openly and honestly, thereby contributing to the richness and depth of the data collected. With participants' informed consent, detailed case notes and interview reflections were maintained throughout the research process to support data analysis and interpretation.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. The approval process ensured that the study met required ethical standards for research involving human participants in a therapeutic context.

Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as research participants, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained before participation,

including explicit consent for the anonymised use of therapeutic case material for research purposes.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, careful attention was paid to participants' emotional wellbeing and psychological safety throughout the research process. Participants were supported within the counselling setting whenever emotional distress emerged during therapeutic conversations or interviews. The counselling environment also ensured the availability of immediate emotional support where necessary.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the removal of all identifying information from transcripts, case notes, and research records. Pseudonyms and anonymised descriptions were used to protect participants' identities and preserve privacy. All data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. These ethical safeguards were essential in fostering trust, promoting honest disclosure, and ensuring adherence to ethical standards in qualitative and clinical research (Cohen et al., 2018; British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021; American Psychological Association [APA], 2020).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse interview transcripts, therapeutic reflections, and case notes, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns related to women's experiences of toxic marriages and the disconnect between exit planning and execution. This analytical approach was appropriate because it provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This analytical process comprised several iterative stages:

- i) Familiarisation: The researcher engaged in repeated reading of interview transcripts, therapeutic reflections, and case notes to develop a deep understanding of the data and identify preliminary insights regarding marital distress, emotional attachment, fear, dependency, cultural obligations, and systemic barriers influencing participants' experiences.
- ii) Coding: Initial coding was conducted to identify significant statements, recurring concepts, and emotionally salient experiences relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The coding process was iterative, with the researcher revisiting and refining codes as new understandings and patterns emerged from the data.

- iii) Theme development: Related codes were grouped into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences and perspectives regarding toxic marital relationships, exit planning, relational dynamics, family pressures, cultural expectations, and barriers to leaving.
- iv) Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data and addressed the objectives of the study. This stage involved revisiting participants' narratives and comparing themes across cases to strengthen coherence, consistency, and interpretive depth.
- v) Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named to provide a coherent framework for presenting the findings and illustrating the interconnected dimensions of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- vi) Integration with literature and systemic interpretation: The findings were compared and contrasted with existing literature on toxic marriages, relational trauma, gendered experiences, cultural expectations, and systemic influences on women's decision-making processes. Analysis was guided by a systemic lens to ensure that themes were interpreted not only at an individual psychological level, but also within broader relational, familial, cultural, religious, and structural systems shaping participants' realities. This integration enabled a more nuanced understanding of how toxic marital dynamics are sustained within interconnected social systems and the Zimbabwean socio-cultural context.

Results

Five interconnected themes emerged from the thematic data analysis process, namely: exit planning as private survival rather than action-oriented strategy; psychological entrapment; structural constraints; cultural and religious regulation of endurance; and therapy as awareness without structural exit support. The findings reveal that the disconnect between planning to leave and actual separation in toxic marriages is shaped by deeply interconnected psychological, relational, cultural, and structural factors.

The experiences shared by participants demonstrate that leaving a toxic marriage is rarely a singular or linear decision. Instead, participants described prolonged internal struggles

characterized by emotional exhaustion, fear, dependency, social expectations, and systemic barriers that complicated the transition from intention to action. The findings therefore reflect broader patterns of relational and systemic entrapment in which women remain in harmful marriages despite ongoing distress.

Exit planning as private survival rather than action-oriented strategy

Participants described exit planning as an internal coping mechanism rather than a structured process leading to immediate separation. Many participants indicated that they frequently imagined leaving, mentally rehearsed possible escape routes, or identified alternative places to stay, yet remained unable to implement these plans.

One participant shared:

I have thought about leaving many times... I even know where I would go, but when the moment comes, I just stay.

Another participant explained:

Sometimes planning to leave gives me peace in my mind, even if I know I am not ready to do it.

These responses suggest that planning to leave often functioned as emotional survival rather than behavioural action. Participants appeared to use imagined escape as a psychological strategy for coping with ongoing distress and emotional overwhelm.

Several participants described repeatedly moving between moments of determination and emotional withdrawal. One participant noted:

There are days when I feel strong enough to leave, but when I think about everything involved, I lose courage again.

These findings highlight the complex relationship between intention and action, demonstrating how women can simultaneously desire change while remaining immobilised by fear, uncertainty, and relational attachment.

Psychological entrapment: Fear, trauma bonding, and emotional exhaustion

Participants described significant psychological barriers that reinforced their stay within toxic marriages. Fear of starting over, emotional dependency, exhaustion, and hope for change emerged

strongly across narratives. Many women expressed feeling emotionally trapped despite recognising the harmful nature of their relationships.

One participant explained:

Part of me knows I am suffering, but another part still hopes he will change... I feel tired of deciding.

Another participant reflected:

I am emotionally drained. Sometimes I no longer even know what I want anymore.

Participants described cycles of affection, apology, conflict, and disappointment that created confusion and emotional attachment to their partners despite ongoing harm. Several women expressed difficulty separating emotionally from partners they still loved or hoped would change.

One participant shared:

After the fights, he becomes caring again, and I start believing maybe things will improve.

Fear also emerged prominently in participants' narratives. Some participants feared loneliness, failure, or judgment from others, while others feared practical instability and emotional uncertainty associated with separation.

A participant noted:

I fear starting life again from zero. Even though I am unhappy, at least this life is familiar.

These findings reveal how emotional exhaustion, trauma bonding, fear, and prolonged exposure to relational distress weaken participants' ability to mobilise change despite recognising the toxicity of their marriages.

Structural constraints: Poverty, dependency, and child-centred decision-making

Participants highlighted economic vulnerability and caregiving responsibilities as major barriers to leaving toxic marriages. Financial dependence emerged as one of the strongest factors maintaining marital stay, particularly among participants without independent income, housing, or financial support systems.

One participant stated:

Even if I leave, I don't know where I would start from. I have children to think about first.

Another participant explained:

I depend on him financially. Leaving would mean struggling to feed my children.

Participants frequently prioritised the wellbeing, education, and stability of their children over their own emotional safety. Several women expressed concern that separation would negatively affect their children socially, emotionally, or financially.

One participant reflected:

I stay mostly because of the children. I don't want them to suffer or feel abandoned.

Economic insecurity further intensified participants' fear of leaving. Women described limited employment opportunities, lack of housing options, and minimal family support as significant structural barriers to separation.

A participant shared:

Sometimes it feels like I am trapped by circumstances more than by the marriage itself.

These findings demonstrate how poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and dependency interact to create structural entrapment, limiting women's ability to act on their exit plans despite ongoing distress.

Cultural and religious regulation of endurance

Participants described strong cultural and religious expectations that encouraged endurance and discouraged separation. Marriage was often framed as a lifelong commitment in which women were expected to tolerate hardship and preserve family unity regardless of personal suffering.

One participant explained:

People will say a strong woman stays and fixes her home. Leaving is seen as failure.

Another participant stated:

In our culture, women are taught to persevere no matter what happens in the marriage.

Participants also described fear of social judgement, shame, and stigma associated with divorce or separation. Some women worried about disappointing their families, church communities, or broader social networks.

A participant reflected:

I know people would blame me if I left. They would say I failed as a wife.

Religious teachings further reinforced expectations of endurance and submission. Several participants described receiving advice from religious communities encouraging prayer, patience, and perseverance rather than separation.

One participant shared:

At church they tell us to keep praying and not give up on the marriage.

These findings highlight how cultural and religious systems regulate women's interpretations of marriage, suffering, and endurance, contributing to continued marital stay despite emotional harm.

Therapy as awareness without structural exit support

Participants reported that counselling and therapy provided emotional validation, insight, and greater awareness regarding their experiences. Many participants described therapy as a safe space where they felt heard, understood, and emotionally supported.

One participant stated:

Therapy helped me understand that what I was experiencing was not normal.

Another participant explained:

For the first time I felt someone was listening without judging me.

Although participants valued therapy, many indicated that emotional awareness alone did not automatically lead to separation or behavioural change. External barriers such as financial dependence, cultural expectations, fear, and caregiving responsibilities remained largely unchanged despite therapeutic insight.

A participant expressed:

Therapy helped me see everything clearly, but leaving is still the hardest part.

Another participant reflected:

I understand myself better now, but my situation outside therapy is still the same.

These findings suggest that, while therapy facilitated emotional clarity, reflection, and validation, structural and systemic barriers continued to constrain participants' ability to implement exit plans. The findings therefore highlight the gap between psychological awareness and material possibility within the context of toxic marriages.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and interconnected nature of women's experiences in toxic marriages, particularly the gap between exit planning and actual separation. The narratives demonstrate that remaining in harmful marriages is rarely a simple issue of choice or indecision, but rather the outcome of interacting psychological, relational, cultural, economic, and structural forces. These findings are consistent with contemporary literature on coercive control, gendered power relations, and systemic entrapment, which emphasise that women's agency in abusive or toxic relationships is often constrained by multiple contextual factors rather than an individual will alone (Stark, 2007; World Health Organization [WHO], 2021; García-Moreno et al., 2023).

The theme of exit planning as private survival aligns with recent research showing that individuals in abusive relationships often engage in 'cognitive escape' or mental separation before behavioural separation occurs. Women may rehearse leaving, imagine alternative lives, or plan escape routes without actualising them due to emotional and structural constraints (Øverup et al., 2019; Walker-Descartes et al., 2021). The findings in this study reflect this pattern, where exit planning functioned more as emotional regulation than as a concrete behavioural pathway. This supports recent IPV literature suggesting that ambivalence is not indecision but a structured survival response within chronic relational stress (Stöckl et al., 2022).

Psychological entrapment emerged strongly across participants' narratives, particularly through fear, trauma bonding, and emotional exhaustion. These findings are consistent with contemporary trauma research that highlights how intermittent reinforcement in abusive relationships strengthens emotional attachment and undermines perceived agency (Dutton & White, 2019; Herman, 2023 reprint insights; WHO, 2021). Recent studies also show that prolonged exposure to coercive

control can alter risk perception and decision-making capacity, making exit psychologically difficult even when awareness of harm is present (Hamberger et al., 2023). The emotional fatigue described by participants aligns with current evidence that chronic relational stress contributes to cognitive overload and decision paralysis in IPV survivors (Goodman et al., 2023).

Structural constraints identified in this study strongly resonate with current global evidence on economic dependence and IPV survivorship. UN Women (2024) and WHO (2021) highlight that financial insecurity, housing instability, and lack of legal protection remain among the strongest predictors of delayed or prevented separation from abusive partners. Participants' child-centred decision-making reflects broader findings in African and global contexts where mothers prioritise children's stability over personal safety due to limited welfare systems and economic precarity (Vyas & Watts, 2020; Mutizwa-Mangiza & Tizora, 2022). These findings reinforce the concept of structural entrapment, where socio-economic conditions significantly constrain relational autonomy (Jewkes et al., 2023).

The cultural and religious regulation of endurance is consistent with recent African gender studies that highlight how patriarchal norms continue to shape marital expectations. Studies across Southern Africa show that women are often socialised into endurance narratives that frame separation as moral failure and marital endurance as virtue (Ratele, 2022; Ndlovu & Nyoni, 2022). Religious frameworks in some Pentecostal and African Independent Church contexts have also been found to reinforce marital permanence through teachings on submission and perseverance, sometimes discouraging separation even in harmful relationships (Chitando & Mateveke, 2020; Mapuranga, 2019). These systems contribute to what Stark (2007) describes as 'social entrapment', where external norms regulate internal decision-making processes.

The finding that therapy provided insight without consistent behavioural change aligns with current trauma-informed and systemic psychotherapy literature. Contemporary research emphasises that, while therapy can enhance emotional awareness and validation, it may not be sufficient to produce behavioural change when external constraints remain unchanged (Goodman et al., 2023; Nichols & Davis, 2022). Systemic family therapy perspectives further argue that individual-level interventions must be complemented by structural and relational interventions to create sustainable change (Carr, 2020). Recent IPV intervention studies similarly highlight that

counselling outcomes are significantly moderated by economic safety, legal protection, and social support availability (WHO, 2021; Campbell et al., 2020).

Collectively, the findings reinforce contemporary understandings of intimate partner distress as a systemic phenomenon. Rather than being driven by individual psychological weakness or indecision, women's inability to execute exit plans is shaped by the interaction of trauma bonding, economic dependence, cultural norms, religious narratives, and institutional limitations. This aligns with current ecological models of IPV, which emphasise that individual behaviour must be understood within layered systems of influence (WHO, 2021; Jewkes et al., 2023).

In conclusion, this study contributes to current scholarship by highlighting how exit delay in toxic marriages is influenced by dynamic and reinforcing systems rather than singular causes. It underscores the importance of integrated interventions that combine psychological support with economic empowerment, legal protection, and community-level norm change. These findings are consistent with current global policy

Contribution to theory

This study makes significant theoretical contributions to the understanding of toxic marriages, exit decision-making, and the systemic nature of relational entrapment. First, the findings extend systemic theory by demonstrating that women's inability to execute exit plans is not located within individual psychological processes alone, but is produced through the interaction of psychological, relational, cultural, religious, and structural systems. This supports contemporary systemic and ecological perspectives, which argue that human behaviour in intimate relationships must be understood as embedded within multiple interacting systems rather than isolated individual agency (Nichols & Davis, 2020; WHO, 2021).

Secondly, the study contributes to trauma theory by illustrating how trauma, bonding, fear, and emotional exhaustion operate, not only as psychological consequences of abuse, but also as active mechanisms that sustain continued relational entrapment. This aligns with and extends existing trauma literature on coercive control and intermittent reinforcement in abusive relationships, which highlights how emotional attachment can persist despite harm (Herman, 2023; Dutton & White, 2019; Stark, 2007). The findings further refine understandings of ambivalent agency by

showing how exit planning may function as emotional regulation rather than behavioural intention, thereby adding nuance to contemporary IPV decision-making models (Goodman et al., 2023).

Thirdly, the study contributes to coping theory by demonstrating that coping strategies in toxic marriages are not only individual psychological responses, but are shaped and constrained by external systems. While traditional coping frameworks often emphasize individual adaptive versus maladaptive strategies, this study shows that coping behaviours such as endurance, silence, and delayed action are often systemically produced responses rather than purely individual choices. This supports more recent calls in trauma literature for contextualised coping models that integrate structural and relational determinants of behaviour (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman, 2013; WHO, 2021).

Fourthly, the study contributes to resilience theory by challenging linear assumptions that awareness or counselling automatically leads to empowerment and exit. Instead, resilience is shown to be constrained resilience, where women demonstrate emotional endurance and meaning-making while remaining structurally immobilised. This expands contemporary resilience scholarship, which increasingly emphasises that resilience must be understood within socio-economic and cultural constraints rather than as an individual trait alone (Ungar, 2018; Southwick et al., 2022).

Finally, the study contributes to contextualised family systems theory by grounding exit decision-making within Zimbabwean socio-cultural realities. It demonstrates how cultural expectations of endurance, religious narratives of submission, and economic dependency interact to produce sustained marital stay despite distress. This reinforces and extends African family systems scholarship which emphasises that family processes in African contexts are deeply embedded within collective, relational, and cultural systems rather than individualistic frameworks (Ratele, 2022; Ndlovu & Nyoni, 2022).

Contribution to policy and practice

The findings of this study have important implications for policy development and therapeutic practice in addressing toxic marriages and relational distress. First, the study highlights the need for integrated policy responses that combine mental health support with economic empowerment programmes. Participants' experiences demonstrated that counselling alone is insufficient when structural barriers such as poverty, unemployment, and housing insecurity remain unresolved. This

aligns with global policy frameworks on violence against women, which emphasise multi-sectoral interventions that include psychosocial, legal, and economic support systems (UN Women, 2024; WHO, 2021).

Secondly, the study informs clinical practice by emphasising the importance of systemic and contextually grounded therapeutic approaches. Therapists working with women in toxic marriages should move beyond individual-focused interventions and incorporate systemic assessments that consider cultural expectations, family pressures, financial dependency, and religious influences. This supports contemporary trauma-informed and systemic practice models that advocate for holistic intervention frameworks rather than purely intrapsychic approaches (Nichols & Davis, 2020; Goodman et al., 2023).

Thirdly, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening referral networks between counselling services, legal aid organisations, shelters, and economic support structures. Participants' narratives demonstrate that awareness gained in therapy does not translate into action without practical exit resources. This reinforces current IPV intervention literature which emphasises the importance of coordinated community response systems in supporting survivors' safety and decision-making capacity (Campbell et al., 2020; WHO, 2021).

Fourthly, the study has implications for community and faith-based organisations. Cultural and religious narratives were found to significantly influence women's decisions to remain in toxic marriages. Therefore, engaging religious leaders and community gatekeepers in psychoeducation and gender-sensitive training is essential to shift harmful norms that normalise endurance of abuse. Recent African gender studies support the need for faith-sensitive interventions that promote safe relational teachings while discouraging harmful interpretations of marital submission (Chitando & Mateveke, 2020; Ratele, 2022).

Finally, the study informs policy makers on the importance of strengthening social protection systems for women in vulnerable marriages. This includes access to financial assistance, affordable housing, and legal protection mechanisms that reduce dependency on abusive or toxic partners. Such structural interventions are critical in transforming exit planning from a psychological intention into a viable lived option (UN Women, 2024; Jewkes et al., 2023).

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the relatively small sample size of ten participants limits the breadth of perspectives and may not

fully represent all experiences of women in toxic marriages in Zimbabwe. While qualitative research prioritises depth over generalisability, the findings should be interpreted as contextually grounded rather than universally applicable.

Secondly, the use of purposive sampling may have introduced selection bias, as participants were drawn from a counselling setting. This means the sample likely consisted of women already engaged in help-seeking behaviour, potentially excluding the experiences of women who do not access therapeutic services.

Thirdly, reliance on self-reported data through therapeutic conversations and interviews introduces the possibility of recall bias and social desirability bias. Participants may have selectively disclosed or reconstructed experiences based on emotional state, memory limitations, or perceived expectations of the therapeutic environment.

Fourthly, the counselling context itself may have influenced participants' narratives. While it provided emotional safety and depth of disclosure, it may also have shaped how participants framed their experiences due to the therapeutic relationship with the researcher.

Finally, the study is context-specific to Zimbabwe, and the findings may not be directly transferable to other socio-cultural or economic settings. However, the theoretical insights may still hold relevance in similar patriarchal and resource-constrained contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored the disconnect between exit planning and execution among women living in toxic marriages in Zimbabwe. The findings demonstrate that leaving a toxic marriage is a complex, systemic, and multi-layered process shaped by psychological attachment, trauma bonding, economic dependency, cultural expectations, religious narratives, and structural constraints.

The study further shows that exit planning often functions as a psychological survival strategy rather than a direct pathway to action, highlighting the gap between emotional awareness and material possibility. While counselling provides important insight and emotional validation, behavioural change is constrained when external systems remain unchanged.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of adopting systemic, culturally sensitive, and multi-sectoral approaches to addressing toxic marriages. It challenges individualised interpretations of marital endurance and highlights the need for integrated interventions that address psychological wellbeing, socio-economic empowerment, and cultural transformation simultaneously.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthening integrated support systems:** Develop coordinated services linking counselling, legal aid, shelters, and economic empowerment programmes to support women in toxic marriages.
- **Systemic therapeutic interventions:** Encourage therapists to adopt systemic and culturally informed approaches that address relational, cultural, and structural influences on decision-making.
- **Economic empowerment initiatives:** Implement policies that enhance women's financial independence through skills development, employment opportunities, and microfinance support.
- **Cultural and religious engagement:** Work with community and faith leaders to challenge harmful norms that normalise endurance of toxic relationships while promoting safe and supportive teachings.

Future research

Future studies could explore longitudinal experiences of women after attempted or actual separation to better understand long-term outcomes of exit decisions. Research could also examine the perspectives of men in toxic marriages to provide a more relational understanding of marital distress.

Further studies may investigate the role of economic empowerment programmes in facilitating successful exit from toxic marriages, as well as the effectiveness of integrated systemic interventions combining therapy, legal support, and social services.

Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural or regional contexts could deepen understanding of how socio-cultural systems influence exit decision-making processes in marital relationships.

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