

Representation of Familial Abuse and Coercive Control in *Girl in the Basement*: A Psychological Film Analysis

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: March 08, 2026

Accepted: April 04, 2026

Online Published: April 15, 2026

Keywords:

coercive control

familial abuse

film analysis

learned helplessness

psychological trauma

ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of familial abuse and exploitation in the film *Girl in the Basement*. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research analyzes narrative structure, character development, and key scenes to explore how psychological and physical abuse are framed within the family context. The analysis is under qualitative descriptive method and grounded in established psychological frameworks, including the Power and Control Wheel, the Cycle of Abuse, Stockholm Syndrome, and Learned Helplessness, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between the perpetrator and the victim. The findings reveal that the film presents a realistic depiction of psychological manipulation, particularly through the father's use of control, intimidation, and emotional coercion. The perpetrator is portrayed as a complex character driven by an excessive need for authority, while the victim's resilience and survival strategies are strongly emphasized. However, the depiction of physical abuse tends to be sensationalized, and the mother's role is insufficiently explored, limiting a fuller understanding of family complicity and systemic failure. Overall, the film offers a nuanced representation of familial abuse that raises awareness of its psychological impact and underscores the importance of empathy and support for survivors. In other words, it reflects coercive control through conditional permission, aligning with the Power and Control Wheel's emphasis on psychological domination.

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1. Introduction

Movie or film is a type of visual art that uses images and sounds to tell stories or teach people something. Film is a communication medium that has a big influence in shaping people's thinking patterns. Apart from that, films are a means of conveying important messages to society in an entertaining and enjoyable way. Most people watch movies to entertain themselves or to have fun. Movies can vary significantly in emotional tone both overall as a specific genre type but also within a single work.

Movie genres are stylistic categories that organize films based on criteria such as the setting, characters, plot, mood, tone, and theme. A film's main genre category will be based on where the majority of the content lands. A sub-genre is a smaller category that fits inside a particular genre. Often this is a mixture of two separate genres, which known as hybrid genres. Genres and subgenres change over time and are informed by one another. Based on Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary, (1989: 591) Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language defines genre as "a category of artistic, musical, or

literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content. Character, story, plot, and setting are how a movie is constructed. From this construction, the specific theme that is created by the screenwriter and the director can be realized and understood by the viewer. Genre in film can also represent the themes and objectives that want to be discussed in the related film, genre can function as a character pointer of the characters in the film and an overview of the related film such as the psychology and behavior of the character.

Familial abuse and exploitation are pervasive and often underreported problems that can have severe and long-lasting effects on victims. Verbal child abuse is categorized as emotional maltreatment and is characterized by words that demean the child, which are usually followed by neglecting the child, isolating the child from social relationships, or blaming the child continuously. (Bonita Mahmud, "Kekerasan Verbal Pada Anak", *Jurnal An Nisa'* Vol.12 No.2 (2019), H.690.)

Family abusing can be varied based on the situation that caused it, mood and emotions of the perpetrator also be main factor how they abuse. Verbal abuse is abuse that most easily occurs in the home environment, since it is the abuse that is most vulnerable to occur because usually in families still have firmness if physically angry. Verbal abuse is any speech directed at a person that may be considered demeaning, disrespectful, insulting, intimidating, racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist or blasphemous. This includes making sarcastic remarks, using a demeaning tone of voice or using excessive and unwanted familiarity. (Edo Dwi Cahyo, dkk, "Kekerasan Verbal (Verbal Abuse) Dan Pendidikan Karakter", *Jurnal Elementaria Edukasia* Vol.3 No.2 (2020), H.249.)

Experts in the field emphasize the importance of accurate and sensitive portrayals in media to raise awareness and promote empathy. The depiction of familial abuse and exploitation in popular media can have significant social and psychological impacts on audiences, particularly children and adolescents. The 2021 film "Girl in the Basement" is a chilling example of how these themes can be portrayed on screen.

The movie "Girl in the Basement" is based on a true story, inspired by the 1984 case of Elizabeth Fritzl, who was imprisoned by her father, Joseph Fritzl, in the basement of their family home in Austria for 24 years. The film explores the psychological complexities of the perpetrator and the resilience of the victim, offering insight into the dark narrative that inspired its creation. Terry E. Lawson (in Ulum, 2019:174-175) International psychiatrists have formulated a definition of child abuse, and stated that there are four types of abuse in children, namely emotional abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse).

The movie's also portrayal of familial abuse and exploitation is particularly noteworthy due to its realistic and nuanced depiction of the psychological manipulation and physical abuse inflicted by the father on his daughter that happen because his daughter always overlook his obeyness that make his father stress, according to Deater-Deckard (in Andriani, dkk, 2019:162) explains parenting stress is a condition of distress experienced as a result of the perception of demands as a parent, stress related to competence as a parent is associated with symptoms of anxiety and symptoms of depression. The film highlights the ways in which the father's controlling behavior and emotional manipulation led to the daughter's imprisonment and exploitation.

This analysis examines the framing of familial abuse and exploitation in the movie, exploring how the narrative and character development contribute to a nuanced understanding

and the researcher also highlight what factor that lead of these complex issues. This analysis will delve into the narrative and character development in "Girl in the Basement" to examine how the film addresses the themes of familial abuse and exploitation. By analyzing the movie's portrayal of these issues, we can better understand the impact of media on our perceptions and responses to these complex problems in real life.

2. Literature Review

The film "Girl in the Basement" poignantly portrays the severe and multifaceted nature of familial abuse and psychological manipulation. To analyze the complexities of abuse depicted in the film, several well-established psychological theories provide a comprehensive framework. This literature review explores these theories, including the Power and Control Wheel, the Cycle of Abuse, Stockholm Syndrome, and Learned Helplessness, drawing on expert insights to understand the dynamics at play.

The depiction of familial abuse in *Girl in the Basement* presents a complex psychological landscape that requires a multidimensional theoretical framework to be fully understood. The film portrays not only the visible acts of confinement and violence inflicted by Don upon his daughter, Sara, but also the subtle and systematic mechanisms of control that sustain prolonged abuse. To analyze these dynamics comprehensively, it is essential to draw upon established psychological theories that explain how power operates within abusive relationships and how victims respond to sustained trauma. The Power and Control Wheel, developed within the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project and widely known as the Duluth Model, provides insight into the strategic use of intimidation, coercion, and isolation to dominate victims. Complementing this framework, Lenore Walker's Cycle of Abuse theory explains the recurring and escalating patterns that characterize abusive relationships. In addition, the concept of Stockholm Syndrome, as discussed by Dee Graham and colleagues, illuminates the paradoxical emotional bonds that may develop between victim and perpetrator under conditions of captivity. Finally, Martin Seligman's theory of Learned Helplessness offers a psychological explanation for the victim's eventual passivity and perceived inability to escape. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide an integrated foundation for examining the mechanisms, patterns, and psychological consequences of abuse as represented in the film.

2.1 Power and Control Wheel (Duluth Model)

The Duluth Model, specifically the Power and Control Wheel, is a foundational theory developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. This model outlines the various tactics abusers use to exert control over their victims, such as coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, and isolation (Pence & Paymar, 1993). In "Girl in the Basement," Don's systematic use of these tactics to dominate Sara is a clear demonstration of this model. By isolating Sara from the outside world, employing intimidation, and manipulating her emotions, Don maintains an oppressive hold over her, underscoring the pervasive nature of his control.

Beyond physical confinement, the film illustrates how control is reinforced through psychological domination and the strategic deprivation of autonomy. Don regulates Sara's access to food, air, information, and even basic human interaction, ensuring that every aspect of her survival depends solely on his permission. This mirrors the Power and Control Wheel's

emphasis on using privilege and economic or material control to establish dominance. His repeated reminders that she must “earn” basic necessities reflect an intentional restructuring of power within the relationship, where authority becomes absolute and unquestionable. Through this lens, the abuse depicted in the film is not merely violent behavior but a calculated system of control designed to strip the victim of independence, identity, and agency.

2.2 Cycle of Abuse (Lenore Walker)

Lenore Walker's Cycle of Abuse theory describes the repetitive and escalating nature of abusive relationships, consisting of four stages: tension building, incident, reconciliation, and calm (Walker, 1979). This cyclical pattern is evident in the film, where Don's interactions with Sara follow a similar trajectory. The tension builds as Don's control becomes more oppressive, leading to abusive incidents. These are followed by periods of reconciliation, where Don might exhibit temporary kindness or make promises, only for the cycle to repeat. This theory highlights the predictability and entrapment inherent in abusive dynamics, as portrayed in the film.

Furthermore, the cyclical structure intensifies over time, as each phase becomes shorter and more volatile, reinforcing the victim's psychological confusion and emotional dependency. The temporary “calm” phase creates a false sense of security, encouraging hope that the abuse has ended, while simultaneously resetting the cycle. In the film, these intermittent moments of reduced hostility or justification serve to blur the boundaries between cruelty and affection, making it increasingly difficult for Sara to anticipate danger or trust her own judgment. This repetitive pattern not only normalizes the violence but also deepens her entrapment, illustrating how the cycle sustains long-term abuse by alternating fear with fleeting reassurance.

2.3 Stockholm Syndrome

Stockholm Syndrome is a psychological response wherein hostages or abuse victims develop a bond with their captors or abusers (Graham, Rawlings, & Rimini, 1988). This phenomenon can be observed in "Girl in the Basement," where, despite the prolonged abuse, Sara may display signs of emotional dependency on Don. This complex bond is a survival mechanism, as the victim forms an attachment to the abuser in an attempt to cope with the trauma. The portrayal of Sara's psychological state in the film reflects the intricate dynamics of Stockholm Syndrome, illustrating how prolonged captivity and manipulation can lead to a distorted sense of loyalty and attachment.

Moreover, this attachment does not signify consent or acceptance of abuse, but rather a coping strategy shaped by extreme isolation and fear. When a victim's survival depends entirely on the abuser, even small acts of perceived kindness can be magnified and interpreted as care or protection. In the film, Sara's prolonged confinement limits her social reference points, making Don the sole source of authority, interaction, and validation. Such conditions intensify emotional confusion and blur moral boundaries, reinforcing psychological dependence. By portraying this complexity, the film underscores how trauma can reshape emotional responses, revealing that attachment in abusive contexts often emerges from coercion and survival instincts rather than genuine trust or affection.

2.4 Learned Helplessness (Martin Seligman)

Martin Seligman's theory of Learned Helplessness describes a condition where a person feels powerless due to repeated traumatic events or persistent failure to succeed (Seligman, 1972). This theory is particularly relevant to understanding Sara's psychological state in the film. Over time, Don's relentless abuse and control lead Sara to believe that escape is impossible and resistance is futile. This sense of helplessness is a common response to chronic abuse, where the victim becomes passive and resigned to their circumstances, further entrenching the abuser's control.

Additionally, learned helplessness affects not only behavior but also cognition and emotional regulation. Repeated punishment and failed attempts to assert autonomy can diminish a victim's motivation, impair decision-making, and weaken self-efficacy. In the film, Sara's prolonged confinement and repeated reinforcement of Don's authority gradually reshape her expectations about outcomes, leading her to internalize the belief that no action will change her situation. This internalization reinforces psychological paralysis, making compliance appear as the only viable option for survival. By illustrating this progression, the film demonstrates how sustained trauma can systematically erode agency, transforming active resistance into conditioned resignation and thereby solidifying the abuser's dominance.

2.5 Integration of Theories

These theories collectively provide a robust framework for analyzing the psychological manipulation and abuse depicted in "Girl in the Basement." The Power and Control Wheel elucidates the methods of control, while the Cycle of Abuse explains the repetitive nature of the abusive relationship. Stockholm Syndrome and Learned Helplessness offer insights into the psychological impact on the victim, illustrating how prolonged abuse can lead to emotional dependency and a sense of powerlessness. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and effects of familial abuse, as poignantly depicted in the film.

When integrated, these perspectives reveal that familial abuse operates as both a structural system of domination and a psychological process of internal transformation. The abuser's calculated strategies of control create an external environment of fear and restriction, while the cyclical pattern of violence reinforces instability and confusion. Simultaneously, the victim's psychological adaptations—emotional bonding and perceived helplessness—emerge as survival responses to sustained trauma. By combining these frameworks, the analysis moves beyond viewing abuse as isolated acts of violence and instead conceptualizes it as an interconnected dynamic of power, repetition, and psychological conditioning. This integrated approach deepens the understanding of how control is established, maintained, and internalized, highlighting the profound and enduring impact of familial abuse on both behavior and identity.

3. Method

The research in this journal employs qualitative analysis to comprehensively explore the complexities of familial abuse and exploitation as depicted in the case study. A detailed case study analysis is conducted on the real-life events depicted in the film "Girl in the Basement." The case study focuses on the experiences of the victim, her family dynamics, and

the psychological and physical impact of prolonged captivity and abuse. This also involves Film Analysis: A thorough examination of the film's narrative, character development, and portrayal of abuse. Where to study qualitative means approach by quality to some entities, processes, and descriptions that are not checked by measured experimental by quantity. To produce data results, the author does a number of steps Woods, Angela, Nev Jones, Ben Alderson-Day, Felicity Callard, and Charles Fernyhough. "Experiences of hearing voices: analysis of a novel phenomenological survey." *The Lancet Psychiatry* 2, no. 4 (2015): 323-331.

To collect data, the writers need to watch the entire film and then highlight the scene that frame abuse and exploitation that happen during the film. From the data writer divided what makes this family get the abuse and exploitation from their father. After get the scene that show the abusing case we divided into some aspect such as Realistic Portrayal of Psychological Manipulation, Complex Characterization of the Perpetrator, Emphasis on the Victim's Resilience, Sensationalized Depiction of Physical Abuse, and Lack of Exploration of the Mother's Role as those are the main reason that lead to family abusing and exploitation based on the movie. The study aims to highlight what kind of abuse that can happen in family and want to see the film as a media to realize the frightening events in this film. Furthermore, hope it can aware the audience to being harmony in family life.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The findings of this analysis suggest that "Girl in the Basement" presents a realistic and nuanced portrayal of familial abuse and exploitation that might happen in civilization events nowadays, particularly in its depiction of psychological manipulation and the complex characterization of the perpetrator who in this research shown in father character from girl in the basement movie. However, the sensationalized depiction of physical abuse and the lack of exploration of the mother's role in the abuse are notable limitations. The film's portrayal of the father's psychological manipulation and emotional control is particularly noteworthy, as it highlights the ways in which perpetrators use guilt, shame, and fear to maintain their power over victims. This portrayal challenges the simplistic notion of the perpetrator as a one-dimensional monster and instead presents a complex and multifaceted character. The emphasis on the daughter's resilience and determination to survive is also a significant aspect of the film, as it highlights the resourcefulness and adaptability of victims in the face of extreme adversity. This portrayal can help to promote empathy and understanding among audiences, potentially reducing the stigma associated with survivors of abuse. In other words, this finding reflects coercive control through conditional permission, aligning with the power and control wheel's emphasis on psychological domination.

4.2 Discussion

This discussion analyzes the representation of familial abuse and exploitation in *Girl in the Basement*, focusing on how narrative structure, dialogue, and character development construct a multifaceted portrayal of violence within the family sphere. The film presents abuse not merely as isolated acts of brutality, but as a sustained system of psychological domination, emotional manipulation, and enforced dependency. By examining key scenes and

character interactions, this section explores five central aspects of the film: the realistic portrayal of psychological manipulation, the complex characterization of the perpetrator, the emphasis on the victim's resilience, the sensationalized depiction of physical abuse, and the limited exploration of the mother's role. Through this analytical framework, the discussion seeks to evaluate how effectively the film conveys the dynamics of power, control, trauma, and survival embedded within abusive family relationships.

4.2.1 Realistic Portrayal of Psychological Manipulation:

The film effectively portrays the psychological manipulation and emotional control exercised by the father over his daughter, highlighting the ways in which he used guilt, shame, and fear to maintain his power over her. In this discussion phase, several scenes appear as follows:

(Girl in the Basement, 00:13:50)

Sarah : can i go out with my friends

father : well, you asked nicely, yes

Sarah asked permission to her father if she could hang out that night after she had finish with hers father command. Father(Don) in this scene show the empathy from the dialog but in reality, his father didn't really allow it. He gave a gesture of agreement only because Sarah would obey him by going down to the basement and planning to lock him up next. This dialogue shows manipulation by her father so that Sarah feels appreciated for a while but is not.

4.2.2 Complex Characterization of the Perpetrator:

The movie presents a nuanced portrayal of the father, depicting him as a complex and multifaceted character with a troubled past and a deep-seated need for control. This characterization challenges the simplistic notion of the perpetrator as a one-dimensional monster. In this discussion phase, several scenes appear as follows:

(Girl in the Basement, 00:19:35-00:20:25)

Sarah : You can't do this to me

Father : Yes, I can

Sarah : I can't breathe, there is no air

Father : As long as there's power, there's air.....three failed attempts on the keypad shuts the power off, which shuts up the ventilation. I change the code everyday!!!

Sarah : Why you do this?

Father : life is a series action and reaction. choices, consequences. you choose to be disrespectful, and this is your consequences.

Sarah : Help, someone ugh!?

Father : The vent is where you get your air, when i say do, you eat when I say do, you want a blanket, a book, you can have those things if I say you can. Everything that you can get now, every privilege, you will earn!

After couples of days Sarah had spent in the basement. Don show finally show for the first time to maintain Sarah life supplies, early after Don open the door Sarah try to attack Don but with his power Don can handle it, Sarah try to communicate with Don as a daughter himself he ask for the reason why Don do this for her. As the dialog shown Don want himself as parent being fully respected before he want his existennce to be known but in the wrong way he feel so arrogant and pressure his family. The dialog also shown how Don want to be superior and exploit Sarah situation he want to controlled everything he could. It show how creepy he become, his character is so rude even to his own daughter he want controlled Sarah's life and overlook others.

4.2.3 Emphasis on the Victim's Resilience:

The film focuses on the daughter's resilience and determination to survive, highlighting her resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of extreme adversity. The film highlights the victim's resilience in the face of abuse, showcasing her struggles to cope with the trauma and her eventual attempts to break free. This emphasis on the victim's resilience is crucial, as it underscores the importance of supporting and empowering survivors of abuse. **Sara:** *"I'm not going to die down here."* This line expresses Sara's refusal to surrender to her circumstances. Despite prolonged confinement, she asserts her will to survive, demonstrating psychological resistance against her father's control. **Sara (to her child):** *"You're going to have a better life than this. I promise."* This quotation highlights her maternal strength and hope. Even while imprisoned, Sara shifts her focus from despair to protection and future possibility, showing emotional resilience. **Sara:** *"I won't let you control me anymore."* This statement marks a turning point in her psychological resistance. It reflects her growing awareness of her own agency and her determination to reclaim autonomy. **Sara:** *"This ends now."* This line symbolizes her final act of defiance and determination to break free from years of abuse.

These quotations illustrate that Sara's resilience is not only physical but also psychological. Her statements of hope, refusal to surrender, and protective instincts toward her children reinforce the film's emphasis on survivor strength and endurance in the face of extreme oppression.

4.2.4 Sensationalized Depiction of Physical Abuse:

While the film effectively portrays the psychological manipulation and emotional control, the depiction of physical abuse is somewhat sensationalized, potentially trivializing the severity of the violence inflicted on the daughter. Physical abuse is shown throughout the film which is thoroughly directed at Sarah by her father Don, which has an impact on Sarah's mental state. he became more reserved and harsh towards the don. Because she was often physically tortured, Sarah also sometimes showed her temperament to her children. **Father (Don):** *"As long as there's power, there's air... three failed attempts on the keypad shuts the power off, which shuts off the ventilation. I change the code every day!"* This dialogue demonstrates not only psychological intimidation but also physical endangerment. By controlling the ventilation system, Don weaponizes basic survival needs, intensifying the dramatic portrayal of physical threat. **(Basement confrontation scene) Father:** *"When I say do, you eat. When I say do, you sleep."* This statement emphasizes total bodily control,

reinforcing how physical needs are manipulated as punishment or reward. The extremity of this control contributes to the heightened, almost theatrical depiction of physical domination. **(After Sara attempts resistance) Father:** “*You think you can fight me? You belong down here.*” This line underscores the use of force to suppress resistance. The physical overpowering is framed dramatically, reinforcing the intensity of the abuse. **(Later scene showing Sara’s emotional reaction) Sara (crying, distressed):** “*Please... stop.*” Though brief, this plea reflects the immediate emotional and psychological toll of repeated physical abuse.

These quotations illustrate how the film dramatizes physical violence through explicit threats to survival, forceful dialogue, and scenes of domination. The heightened intensity of these moments contributes to the sense that the abuse is portrayed in a sensational manner, while simultaneously showing its profound impact on Sara’s emotional stability and behavior.

4.2.5 Lack of Exploration of the Mother's Role:

The movie fails to adequately explore the mother's role in the abuse, leaving the audience with unanswered questions about her complicity and potential motivations. In this discussion phase, several scenes appear as follows:

Sarah: well, mom said I could go, like, two weeks ago
Father: this is something you didn't wanna discuss with me ?
Mother: I was going to, but I...then
Mother : listen to your father
Sarah: Are you kidding me! you said I could go

Those dialogs show the lack of communication by mother. As it should be mother part in family must be bridge from his husband and their child also. because of that Sarah feel betrayed and not be trusted by her parent.

5. Conclusion

This study synthesizes the findings of the analysis to evaluate the overall effectiveness of *Girl in the Basement* in portraying familial abuse and exploitation. By reflecting on the strengths and limitations identified in the discussion, this section highlights the film’s contribution to raising awareness about psychological manipulation, coercive control, and survivor resilience. At the same time, it considers areas where the narrative could have offered deeper exploration, particularly regarding the portrayal of physical violence and the mother’s role within the abusive dynamic. Ultimately, the conclusion emphasizes the broader implications of media representations of abuse and their potential influence on public understanding, empathy, and social awareness.

It is potential to do future research by adopting a comparative media analysis by examining how different films or series portray similar themes of abuse, coercive control, and psychological manipulation. By comparing *Girl in the Basement* with other abuse-centered narratives, researchers can identify recurring patterns, cultural differences, and varying degrees of realism. This would help situate the film within a broader media landscape and reveal whether its portrayal is typical, exaggerated, or uniquely nuanced.

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