

RESEARCH ARTICLE

I am a Survivor: Experiences, Impacts and Coping Mechanisms of Filipino Victims of Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Sexual violence is a catastrophic phenomenon that most women encounter worldwide. However, the stigma surrounding the victims of sexual violence often leads to a culture of silence, causing the number of such cases to be underreported, leading to limited sexual violence-related studies. With this, the goal of this study is to contribute additional information on the experiences of Filipino victims with sexual violence, its impacts, and their coping mechanisms. Ten Filipino women, who were victims of sexual violence, were interviewed in this study. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the gathered data. Themes on their experiences, the effects of sexual violence, and their coping mechanisms were formulated and presented in this study. The study showed that the most common type of sexual violence experienced by the participants was rape. They also reported feelings of fear during and after the abuse. Feelings of shame and guilt were also experienced, which kept them silent about their negative experiences. Experiencing sexual violence can have negative impacts on an individual's total well-being. To cope with these adverse experiences, they sought support from their families and friends. Some confronted their problems and even employed positive reappraisal, while some used avoidance coping.

KEYWORDS:

Coping Mechanism, Gender-Based Violence, Sexual Violence, Sexual Abuse

1 | INTRODUCTION

For several years, the global community has been mindful of the growing number of violence against women, including sexual violence. It has been a global problem and concern which led to the foundation of several governments and non – government organizations implementing various laws and programs to address the problem. Sexual violence can be defined as any sexual act or an attempt to get a sexual act done by the offender with the use of threat, force, or exploiting the victim without their consent which can be in the form of sexual assault, unwanted fondling, or touching of the victim's body parts, voyeurism, indecent exposure, and sexual exploitation (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2010; World Health Organization, 2002). Most of the time, the term "sexual violence" is used interchangeably with "sexual abuse; though the sexual acts committed are similar, but sexual violence is a term used to refer to violence on a global scale (Washington Coalition of Sexual Programs, n.d. Henry, 2018), while sexual abuse is more commonly used when referring to violence against children and youth (Washington Coalition of Sexual Programs, n.d.).

Sexual violence is indeed very distressing and an alarming reality that women experience globally. In fact, despite the efforts of the government to reinforce their movement to solve violence against women, the Philippines is still one of the countries that have an increased number of situations of sexual violence, particularly among women (Bernarte et al., 2018). However, the prevalence of sexual violence is hard to determine because it is often underreported due to the disgrace, shame, and stigma (Philippine Commission on Women, 2009). The victims chose to remain silent because they do not want to cause trouble, leading to a culture of silence at the University of the Philippines Manila, The University of Edinburgh, Council for the Welfare of Children UNICEF, 2016; Philippine Commission on Women, 2009). Cullen (2017) also added that denial, lying, fear, and lack of support are also some factors that can inhibit the victim from reporting the abusive act.

Regardless, there are still numerous reports from various government and non-government agencies stating numerical facts of reported sexual violence among women. In the year 2014, the Philippine Statistics Authority reported that in the year 2016, there were 4,605 cases of violence against women, which includes the following numerical data: 1,897 rape cases, 2,030 cases of acts of lasciviousness, 551 attempted rape cases, 127 incestuous rape (Morales, 2017). In addition, it is also reported in the statistics of crime incidents that there were 380 cases of rape in Region IV-A from January to May 2018, as stated in the online report of the Philippine National Police.

With these growing numbers of cases, it is only noteworthy to study the implications of sexual violence on the victims, particularly the adverse effects of these traumatic events. The traumatic experience of sexual violence can be explained using the Traumagenic Dynamics Model by Finkelhor Browne (1985). The model suggests that the negative experience of sexual abuse can be analyzed in terms of four trauma-causing factors such as traumatic sexualization, which refers to a process in which one's sexuality is formed inappropriately as a result of the abuse; betrayal is when one discovers that someone on whom they were very reliant on has endangered them; powerlessness refers to the process of leaving the disempowering the victim as a result of the sexual abuse; and stigmatization which refers to the negative associations given to the victim. In addition, experiencing these negative events can lead to enormous damaging effects on an individual's overall health (Kiesel 2006 as cited in Olukemi Folakemi, 2015). Exposure to sexual violence can lead to serious physical, psychological, and social difficulties, or worse mental health disturbances might also develop on the victims (Rape, Abuse Incest National Network, 2018; Brooker Durmaz, 2015). According to the World Health Organization (2002), victims of sexual violence are significantly susceptible to developing depression and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In addition, studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between exposure to sexual violence, depression (Mondin et al., 2016), and anxiety disorders (Rees et al., 2011 as cited in Neilson, Norris, Bryan Stappenbeck, 2017). However, the degree of impact on the victims varies depending on the coping strategies used by the victims (Rodriguez, 2011).

Coping has long been studied to act as a vital factor in understanding the long-term functioning of victims of sexual abuse (Walsh, Fortier DiLillo, 2010). It is defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus Folkman, 1984). Understanding what coping strategies or mechanisms that the victims utilized is necessary to reveal further the reason why the degree of damage to their well-being varies from one victim to another (Rodriguez, 2011). Coping has two forms: a) problem-focused coping strategy, which is used to adapt as well as to solve the causes of stress (Lazarus Folkman, 1984 as cited in Ryan, 2013), and is used when conditions are controllable (Lazarus Folkman, 1984 as cited in Ntoumanis et al., 2009); and b) emotion-focused coping strategy, which is often used to control the emotions caused by the stressful events (Lazarus Folkman, 1984 as cited in Ntoumanis et al., 2009) and also when the threatening or harmful situations are not amenable to change (Lazarus Folkman, 1984 as cited in Mitchell, 2004). In addition, the effectiveness of coping strategies may also vary from one person to another (Ntoumanis et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the review of relevant literature, therefore, suggests that sexual violence is a prevalent and global concern leading to several physicals, economic and psychological impacts to the victims. Nevertheless, the wide-ranging effects of sexual violence to the victims also vary depending on how they appraise certain situations, which leads to how they cope with the said stressful events. Unfortunately, although society has long recognized sexual violence as a problem in our community, there is still a limited number of studies that focus on the in-depth study of the victims' reactions and coping to rape (Lopez, Chua, De Guzman, 2004) most specifically in rural areas where information dissemination about sexual violence is problematic (Rodriguez, 2015). In addition, despite the prevalence of sexual violence in the country, it remains under-reported because of the culture of silence, which could be why there are still limited studies about sexual violence, specifically in rural areas such as in the province of Quezon. Thus, this research aims to provide additional literature about different experiences of the Filipino victims in sexual violence, its adverse consequences, as well as how survivors were able to cope with these adversities.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Research Design

In this study, the researcher used the qualitative research design to explore and describe the experiences, impacts, and coping mechanisms of the victims of sexual violence. Research with a qualitative approach aims to explore and explain the 'how' and 'why' of a certain circumstance or behavior and how individuals behave and function in a certain context. (McLeod, 2008).

Among the qualitative research designs, the researcher used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method that can be used to identify, analyze, organize, and describe themes found in a pool of data (Braun Clarke, 2006). It can also be a useful tool for exploring and studying the differences and similarities among the perspectives of the participants, which can result in patterned insightful responses (Braun Clarke, 2006). This approach was appropriate as it was useful in examining the experiences and insights of the participants on how the presence and absence of social support affected them in coping with their depressive symptoms caused by sexual violence.

2.2 | Participants

The researcher selected the participants of this study using purposive sampling. In selecting the participants, the researcher formulated a list of criteria that must also be met to be included in the study: a) Must be 18 years old and above; b) Must be Filipino and is residing in Quezon Province; c) Must be a victim of sexual violence at the time of interview; d) the incident of sexual violence happened two to five years ago; e) five of the participants must be related with the perpetrator and; f) five of the participants must not be related with the perpetrator.

2.3 | Research Instruments

To obtain the needed information in this study, the researcher gathered the necessary data through face-to-face interviews with each participant. The researcher formulated and used an interview guide that was intended to answer the research questions.

The questionnaire started with demographic questions, then followed by a question that sought to identify the experiences of the participants with sexual violence. The next part is composed of questions that aimed to know the impacts of sexual violence on the victims. The third question was regarding how the victims coped with the negative situation, and the last question was about who and what are things helped them coped with the sexual violence. Three professors validated the questionnaire with a degree in Clinical Psychology or Counseling Psychology. A pilot testing was conducted on a participant to ensure that the questionnaire would be useful to obtain the necessary data.

2.4 | Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher conducted a pilot test to test whether the methodology, research instruments, and data analysis procedure could answer the research problems accurately and with adequate information. The first participant was oriented and was given informed consent. After obtaining the informed consent, the researcher scheduled the interview properly. Responses during the interview were recorded, and then afterward, the participant was debriefed about the interview and the study. The participant was given a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

The data gathered was transcribed and coded by the researcher. After this, the researcher evaluated the research instruments and information gathered then proceeded to recruit more participants.

The researcher recruited participants through referrals. The researcher also sought assistance from the concerned government institutions. Each potential participant was briefed about the nature and purpose of the study. Those who were interested were given informed consent and were scheduled for an interview.

The interview proper was done at the convenience and availability of the participants. All responses of the participants were recorded and were kept confidential. After the interview, the researcher debriefed the participants regarding the interview and the study; and gave a token for their participation.

2.5 | Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the gathered data by first transcribing it and then by evaluating it with the help of two other coders. Both coders should have obtained at least a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology or Counseling Psychology and have also experience in doing qualitative research. In analyzing the data, the researcher followed the six steps in thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarizing with the data through repetitively reading the transcript.
2. Generating initial codes by organizing the data systematically.
3. Search for possible patterns or themes.
4. Review the themes by continuously modifying and developing the initial themes.
5. Define and naming the themes by identifying what the patterns are all about.
6. Producing a write-up or a report that presents the data's findings and interpretation often with sufficient evidence and supported by research.

After doing the six-step process, the researcher gave a copy of the transcribed interview to the two coders, which they read and analyzed separately. The two coders generated possible codes and themes. Once they were finished, the researcher scheduled a meeting to discuss the identified themes from the data set. The initial themes were discussed to establish inter-rater reliability. There were similar themes produced, but the coders also made varied themes. The coders and the researcher presented related literature to support their generated themes. After the discussion and a series of rationalizations, the researcher collated and organized the agreed themes and sent copies to the two coders for approval. Once an agreement was established, the researcher proceeded to make a detailed presentation of the themes and analysis of the data.

2.6 | Ethical Consideration of The Research

In conducting this research, the researcher was mindful of the ethical considerations concerning conducting this research. First of all, in recruiting the participants, the researcher forwarded all the necessary letters to the Department of Social Welfare and Development to seek assistance in the recruitment process. Referral from colleagues, friends, and family relatives was also used by the researcher to gather participants. Once the researcher already has the list of potential participants, the researcher contacted all of them through phone calls, sending text messages, and their social media accounts - if they have any. After getting a response, the researcher visited the potential participants at their respective homes to establish rapport and to seek their approval to participate in the study. Once they agreed, the researcher set a schedule for the interview proper. The researcher also initiated to accompany all the participants from their homes to the venue of the interview and vice versa. The researcher also sought the approval of the participants' family relative and/or significant other to be interviewed as part of the triangulation process.

Second, before the interview proper, each potential participant went on a briefing process about the nature and purpose of the study. Those who were interested to participate were given an informed consent form. In relation to this, the researcher was also responsible for discussing the contents of the consent forms to the participants, such as the purpose of the research, their degree of participation and for how long, their rights to withdraw at any time for any reason, the potential benefits as well as harm to the participants, their rights to privacy and confidentiality and the feedback of the results. The researcher assured both the participants and witnesses (if there were any) that the information would remain confidential and that the researcher would also take the necessary precautions to safeguard the identities of the participants and witnesses in any recorded information. As such, the researcher used a pseudonym and was careful in discussing in detail the participants' experiences since the topic at hand is sensitive. The interview was held in a neutral, private, and safe setting. The researcher was also impartial but was also sensitive to the traumatic experiences that were brought up during the interview. The researcher consulted for the expertise of a licensed psychologist to aid the researcher in the kinds of scenarios that were likely to be encountered and to also guide the researcher in formulating and properly phrasing the interview questions to minimize harm. The researcher also practiced the art of questioning in a sympathetic and non-judgmental manner.

During the interview, there were a lot of instances that the participants cried while reliving their traumatic experiences. Given this scenario, the researcher offered tissue paper to the participants and told them that they could stop the interview for a moment. The researcher also assured the participants that they are not alone and that the researcher understands what they are going

through. They were also told that their feelings were valid. After the participants have calmed themselves, the researcher asked them if they would still want to continue the interview or not. Two of the participants discontinued the interview and asked the researcher to have it rescheduled. Each interview was audio recorded with the permission of the participants and lasted for an hour. The participants' family relatives and/or significant others were also interviewed after the participant. A similar process was also done to the family relatives and/or significant other. The participant was asked to wait outside the room while their family relatives and/or significant other were being interviewed.

At the end of every interview, the researcher conducted a debriefing process with the participants. In the debriefing process, the researcher expressed her appreciation to the participants. The debriefing process allowed the participants to appreciate why they were asked the questions. The researcher asked the participants what they have felt during the interview, which allowed them to internalize and process their emotions. The researcher also sought professional help from a licensed psychologist in the event that the participant wished to be counseled. The researcher also suggested and provided a list of local services and information that can help them in their situation since there were some of the participants whose parents do not know that they were sexually abused. In addition, the researcher acknowledged the significance of their contribution to this study and also acknowledged their courage in disclosing. Lastly, after gathering all the necessary information, the researcher ensured the safety of the gathered data and properly communicated the results to the participants.

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 | Demographic profiles of the participants

The participants were all female aged 18 – 23 years old. The mean age of the participants was 20.7 years ($SD = 1.62$). Four of the participants were from Lucban, two were from Lucena, one from Sariaya, one from Tiaong, one from Tayabas, and one from Candelaria. All of the participants experienced sexual violence at least two years ago. One of the participants experienced sexual violence by two different perpetrators in different years. In addition, one of the participants experienced sexual violence by two different perpetrators in the same year. Five of the participants were abused by the perpetrators who were not related to them, while two of the participants were abused by perpetrators related to them. Lastly, nine participants experienced rape, including incestuous and gang rape, while four of them also experienced sexual harassment making lascivious comments and fondling their private parts.

3.2 | The Traumatic Experiences with Sexual Violence

Sexual violence happens worldwide and has been documented across various cultures, demographics, and even socioeconomic statuses. It is a nightmare that all victims wish they can get away from. Victims went through a lot of negative experiences with sexual violence, so overwhelming that it makes it difficult for them to forget. For instance, based on the participants' responses, they were being threatened while being abused by their perpetrators. Some of the participants even experienced being abused with a knife or a gun pointed at them for them to cooperate with the perpetrator's sexual activities. This experience is consistent with Avegno et al. (2009), stating that threatening the victims often occurs during a sexual assault. Thus, it is common for the victims to experience fears of death during the abuse (Boyd, 2011). Lane (2012) also added that most women express a greater amount of fear during the abuse. They are physically more vulnerable to become a victim and therefore being hurt if it leads to victimization because generally, their physiques are weaker and smaller compared to men. These threats were used to coerce the victims into sexual activities involuntarily (Sebaeng, Davhana-Maselesele Manyedi, 2016). In addition, the majority of the participants also exerted efforts on trying to find ways on how to escape their situation, except for one participant who was drugged by the perpetrator. Resistance through physical struggle can be the victims' way in attempting to dissuade the perpetrators to commit rape (Wong Balemba, 2016). However, despite their efforts to resist and escape the situation, when the victims already felt the threat of harm with the inability to change the situation, the victims feel powerless. According to Finkelhor and Browne (1988), powerlessness is a trauma-causing factor based on the Traumagenic Dynamics Model, which happens when the victims' personal space is invaded and violated, leading to feelings of helplessness and being trapped.

Moreover, immobility was also experienced by some of the participants while being violated. They recalled not being able to move even if they wanted to fight the perpetrator or escape the unfortunate event. According to Möller, Söndergaard, and Helström (2017), tonic immobility is a temporary state of involuntary motor inhibition in response to an overwhelming fearful situation. This type of reaction is usually observed in victims of sexual violence in which they were unable to think, act or react

in those kinds of situations (Lonsway Archambault, 2017). Lastly, two participants mentioned that they experienced enuresis during sexual abuse. In fact, after experiencing urinary incontinence, she realized that her perpetrator was not abusing her whenever she is wet because of the foul smell; that is why she would always urinate on her bed whenever she feels that her perpetrator would abuse her again. It can be explained by Folk and Folk (2018) which stated that our body normally controls our muscles when not overly stressed. However, our muscles can function unsteadily when the body becomes hyperstimulated due to an overwhelming response to stress, which includes involuntary tremors, muscles twitching, and even bladder control problems.

Aside from the negative experiences done by the perpetrators, the participants also experienced negative experiences caused by the people around them. Victim-blaming and being labeled as "damaged goods" are some of the participants' experiences. Some were blamed and told that they were responsible for what happened to them. This can be because a substantial part of bullying among adolescents is sexual by nature (Ashbaug Cornell, 2008). In addition, victim-blaming usually happens because, according to Feldman (2018), people have this deep need to believe that the place they live in is good and peaceful. So, if something bad happens, especially when the perpetrator is related to the victim, it threatens our former belief. Thus, it is difficult for most people to admit that someone related to the victim is capable of rape, therefore the reason that it could not be true (Feldman, 2018; Donovan, 2011). Moreover, it is also too horrific to believe that there may also be a perpetrator near them, and that can threaten their safety, so bullies often lie to project and rationalize their safety (Donovan, 2011). In addition, some participants were teased as being "damaged" and a "prostitute" because of the abuse. They were also ashamed of what people might say and think about them and their families as well. On the other hand, five of the participants were blaming themselves for what happened and claimed that they should have done other things on the day of their abuse so that they did not have to experience those. Some of the participants also expressed different thoughts when it comes to their experience with sexual violence. Most of them were confused about what happened to them and found the negative incident difficult to comprehend, as well as why the perpetrators abused them. This confusing experience can be supported by Roopesh (2015), who expounded that those children who experienced sexual abuse from a trusted and known perpetrator usually felt more confused because their whole idea of sex and of what is right or wrong is not yet fully developed.

3.3 | The Aftermath of Sexual Violence

Being exposed to sexual violence can certainly affect an individual. The vast amount of literature and studies can account for the numerous damaging effects of sexual violence. Consistent with the previous researches, most of the participants in this study reported sleeping difficulties and changes in their eating patterns. Constantly being on guard, thinking something might happen, and fear of having nightmares often results in the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep. This can account for the nightmares, restless sleep, nightly awakenings, threatening feelings, and stress which are being experienced by those who suffered from sexual violence (Steine, et al., 2012; Noll, Trickett, Susman Putnam, 2006). It was also common among the participants their change their eating habits since most of them had a decrease in their appetite to eat which happens because studies show that adverse life events may intensify vulnerability to serotonergic dysregulation following stress, thus being susceptible to disturbances in eating behaviors.

When it comes to the psychological aspect, a number of the participants experienced paranoia and hypervigilance after the sexual violence. They were constantly "on guard" and overly sensitive to being touched by other people, even by their family members. This can be supported by Hardy (2017) which explained that after experiencing victimization, it is plausible that our threshold for threat detection will decrease, resulting in hypervigilance. They expressed becoming more guarded, especially when it comes to socializing with men. Participants also reported feeling depressed, having suicidal thoughts, and some even attempted to commit suicide. Depressive symptoms and suicidal behaviors are two of the most widely studied consequences of sexual violence (Zinzow, et al., 2010; Zinzow, et al., 2011; Lonsway Archambault, 2017; Goldstein, Dinh, Donalson, Hebenstreit Maguen, 2017). One reason for developing depressive symptoms among victims of sexual abuse is their difficulty to describe and communicate their emotions (Saarijärvi, Salminen, Toikka, 2006). Due to this problem in regulating one's emotions, these individuals can have difficulties in promoting their positive emotions and delimiting their negative emotions, both of which have been suggested to amplify the risk for depression (Cole, Michel, Teti, 1994 as cited in Thomas, DiLillo, Walsh Polusny, 2011). Being unable to regulate one's emotions may also include the inability to control behavioral impulses to distress (Gratz Roemer, 2004), which includes engaging in suicidal behaviors (Neacsiu, Fang, Rodriguez, Rosenthal, 2017).

Five of the participants also mentioned projecting their anger towards other people. They stated that they frequently disrespected and disobeyed their parents, while two participants mentioned that there were times that they would just feel irritated with their children, who, according to the participants, were the constant reminders of the abuse that happened to them. This

can be because those who became victims of sexual violence's ability to regulate their emotions became impaired after maltreatment, thus an increase in their irritability and impulsivity (Kerig Becker, 2010). Acting out behaviors can also be one way to seek attention from their parents when they feel emotionally deprived (Al Odhayani, Watson Watson, 2013).

Furthermore, the damaging impacts of sexual violence do not end on themselves; it also extends into how victims socialize with other people and how they were treated by others. For instance, data from the participants' responses show some of them were bullied for being raped and even accused them that they wanted what happened to them. Two of the participants also added that after the abuse happened, they became fearful and distrustful, seemingly because their perpetrators are related to them. Most of the time, the perpetrator of sexual violence is someone known or related to the victims, which is why they would at times ask themselves, "Why did it happen?" (Roller, Martsolf, Draucker, Ross, 2009). This sense of mistrust is often a result of betrayal, which happens when the victims are being violated by their family members, as explained in the Traumagenic Dynamics Model by Finkelhor and Browne (1985). Unbeknown to most people, sexual assault was done by perpetrators known to the victims are often more traumatic than committed by a stranger, and because of this, their trust had been violated terribly, which is often why they feel mistrustful of others (Lonsway Archambault, 2017). Other participants isolated and withdrew themselves from their social networks because of their fear of being judged.

3.4 | I Will Survive: Coping with Sexual Violence

The detrimental impacts of sexual violence are long-lasting, but there may be differences with regards to the level of its severity to their well-being. These differences can be understood by studying the coping mechanisms used by the victims (Rodriguez, 2011). Among the coping strategies used by the participants, the most prevalent theme formulated is seeking support from their social networks, such as their family, peers, and colleagues. All of the participants have at least one source of social support which helped them cope with sexual abuse, although it was noted that most of the participants' support came from their family members. According to them, words of encouragement, physical gestures, being loved and cared for as well as their assurance of not leaving the participants helped them cope with their negative experiences. Going out with friends and colleagues also helped the participants since it helped to temporarily forget their negative experiences. Informational support through activities and professional advice and guidance from counselors also aided them in managing the impact of their traumatic experience, thus helping them to cope with the abuse. An overall beneficial impact of seeking social support is that an individual is given the perception that others can provide them resources which may redefine the potential harm posed by the situation and/or boost one's perceived capability to deal with the enforced difficulties ergo avoiding a particular situation from being appraised as extremely stressful (Cohen, 1980 as cited in Baqutayan, 2015). In addition, there is also considerable evidence that individuals who have cohesive social affiliative or social behaviors may moderate the perception of the stressor as well as of the physiological stress response, specifically through the neuropeptide and oxytocin, which may mediate social buffering by decreasing hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal activity thus reducing the stress response (Crockford, Deschner, Wittig, 2017).

In spiritual aspects, it was shown that the majority of the participants sought help from God, particularly to give them strength to surpass these difficulties. Their faith system was also strengthened and made them realize certain lessons, which made them be an inspiration to others. These coping strategies can be supported by Larson (2011) which explained that abused women also need to find themselves again, and to do this, they need to re-establish their family relationships, and more importantly, they need to ask for God's guidance to see if there was a reason why it happened to them. Turning to religion can also be considered as a functional coping strategy where a person believes that God has a plan or purpose for the problem (Cuason, 2009) as well as promoting a more positive outlook about life (Pargament et al, 1998 as cited in Der Peter Pan, Lee, Chang Jiang, 2012). In addition, people have this goal of comprehending and making sense of their lives (Krok, 2015), which according to Frankl can be referred to as our will to meaning (Wong, 2014). Frankl further denotes that religion guides human beings to search for their ultimate meaning in life (Kimble, 2000).

Confrontational coping was also identified in some of the participants. They confronted their perpetrators by actively going to the police station and file a complaint for them to be incarcerated. In addition, few of the participants also considered forgiving the perpetrators as one way to cope because, according to them, it helped them lessen the burden and hatred that they have been feeling for a long time. This is consistent with how Toussaint, Shields, and Slavich (2017) conceptualized forgiveness – which is a cognitive – motivational – emotional experience of lessening negativity and increasing positivity toward the perpetrator in the face of a negative event. It was also hypothesized that forgiveness is related to increased levels of happiness, better mental and physical health, and lower levels of depression (Toussaint, Shields Slavich, 2017).

Avoidance was also seen as being practice by the majority of the participants by spending too much time in leisure activities such as watching movies, doing household chores, reading books, and working just to forget what happened to them. Other participants also stated compellingly dismissing their thoughts or thinking of positive memories just to inhibit themselves from thinking about their adverse experiences. Some engaged themselves in different activities such as church activities and spending too much time at work, and watching online videos. Another theme formulated is positive reappraisal. Positive reappraisal is a meaning-based coping strategy in which an individual reframes or re-evaluates stressful events and their consequences as positive, valuable, and beneficial in terms of personal growth (Kraaij, Arensman, Garnefski Kremers, 2007). Similar to the responses of some participants, they viewed their adverse experiences as trials that made them stronger. There were even four participants who evaluated the negative event as something that happened to them because it has a meaning or a purpose in their lives.

4 | SYNTHESIS OF THE STUDY

This study aims to describe and explore the different experiences of Filipino female survivors in sexual violence, how it affected them and how each one of them coped with their traumatic experiences. To obtain the findings of this study, ten Filipino females were selected and interviewed. The participants were identified through the researcher's networks and with the assistance of different local government institutions. However, the researcher experienced a lot of difficulty in seeking approval from the potential participants in this study. From a long list of potential participants from different cities and municipalities, only ten of them agreed to participate. This only shows that majority of these women are still afraid to talk about their experiences because of the shame that they are experiencing. This phenomenon exacerbates the culture of silence among victims of sexual violence, which is one of the reasons why such cases are still underreported. Each qualified participant was invited to participate in this study by visiting them at their residences or sending them personal messages. Once they agreed, they were briefed and given informed consent. The data were gathered by interviewing the participants and were later transcribed and analyzed.

According to the data, it was found out that the most common form of sexual violence is rape may it be incestuous or stranger rape cases. Threats of physical violence and/or death of the victims themselves or anyone close to them were experienced if the victims did not cooperate with the perpetrators or if they tried to disclose what happened to them. Fear was the common emotion felt by each of the victims – more specifically, fear for their own lives and fear of being stigmatized. They also felt ashamed or embarrassed because of what happened to them. These feelings of shame and fear were also contributing factors why victims did not immediately disclose what happened to them. But despite feeling afraid, they still tried to fight and escape from their perpetrators.

However, these violent experiences of the victims had detrimental consequences on their overall health. Physically, most of the participants experienced difficulties in sleeping, lost their appetite, and a few unexpectedly got pregnant. Psychologically, feeling depressed and engaging in suicidal behavior were some of the most common impacts of sexual violence. They also became hypervigilant, developed paranoia, and even experienced having flashbacks. Some of the participants also claimed to project their negative emotions to others. In terms of their social aspect, most of the participants isolated and distanced themselves from their families and friends because of their fear of being criticized and misjudged, and some experienced being bullied. They also displayed acting out behaviors, especially towards their parents. Furthermore, the victims also developed a sense of mistrust towards others, particularly those who were violated by someone known or related to them.

To deal with these negative effects, victims of sexual violence used different coping mechanisms. Based on the gathered data, support from family and friends helped the victims battle with the adverse consequences of sexual violence. Religiosity also helped the victims cope with the situation by praying and reading the Bible, and through these, they sought meaning and reasons on why these negative events happened to them. Some confronted their perpetrators by taking the necessary legal actions. However, avoidance coping strategies were also frequently employed by the victims. Finally, positive reappraisal was also used by some of the participants by re-evaluating the negative event and seeing the silver linings in these negative events.

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