

Surviving trauma: Resilience of sexually abused victims

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Abstract: This study examined the lived experiences and resilience of sexually assaulted victims in Zamboanga del Norte via a descriptive-qualitative phenomenological methodology. Seven survivors engaged in comprehensive interviews, providing firsthand accounts of trauma and rehabilitation. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic framework, revealing nine emergent themes clustered into three major areas: (1) experiences of sexual abuse, including emotional and psychological effects, diminished trust, and damaged self-worth; (2) coping mechanisms such as social support, avoidance, and self-healing practices; and (3) aspirations involving justice, emotional closure, and personal growth. The findings underscored the essential importance of familial support, communal resources, and personal resilience in the rehabilitation trajectories of survivors. The study underlines the significance of trauma-informed treatment, legal protection, and accessible psychosocial assistance to help victims recover their self-worth and regain their identities. This research underscores that cultivating resilience involves both individual fortitude and systemic interventions customized to the needs of survivors.

Keywords: sexual abuse, resilience, coping mechanisms, trauma recovery

Introduction

Sexual abuse represents one of the gravest infringements of human rights, generating long-term consequences on mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Survivors typically experience shame, remorse, dread, and distrust, which affect their psychological stability and interpersonal connections. Over time, such trauma may affect a survivor's self-concept, identity, and ability to relate meaningfully with others (Poirson et al. 2023; Jarabe & Rahayuwati 2024). Beyond

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individual suffering, these results often cascade into larger societal and economic impacts, especially if support systems are inadequate or access to services is limited (Sardinha et al. 2022).

In a worldwide study, resilience has emerged as a major lens through which recovery from sexual abuse is examined. Resilience is not merely an internal attribute but occurs through the interaction of individual agency, relationship support, and socio-structural resources (Abikou et al. 2025). Recent qualitative research in low-resource contexts underlines how culturally unique coping methods, community participation, and religious or belief systems impact healing trajectories (Jarabe & Rahayuwati 2024; Botero-García et al. 2023). Similarly, trauma-informed therapies patterned in the Philippines, such as mind-body practices in Cebu, demonstrate that localized programming has potential when adjusted to survivors' living situations (Cordisco Tsai 2025).

Despite these gains, important gaps remain. First, much of the resilience literature focuses on metropolitan or high-income groups, leaving provincial and rural survivors understudied. Second, within the Philippines, there is scant descriptive-phenomenological work that highlights survivors' own voices, particularly in regions such as Zamboanga del Norte, concerning how their socio-cultural, economic, and family situations impact recovery. Third, the dimension of hopes for justice, emotional closure, and personal progress has seldom been foregrounded in research of resilience; rather, many works focus on risk factors or symptoms (Abikou et al. 2025; Jarabe & Rahayuwati 2024).

To address these deficiencies, this study adopts a descriptive-qualitative phenomenological approach to evaluate the resilience of sexually abused victims in Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines. Specifically, it strives to capture survivors lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and objectives for healing, justice, and personal growth. By foregrounding survivor narratives in a provincial context, this research contributes both theoretically, refining how resilience is understood in culturally and economically constrained settings, and practically, offering insights for trauma-informed care, policy, and community support tailored to local needs.

Methodology

This study uses a descriptive-qualitative phenomenological approach to evaluate the lived experiences and resilience of sexually attacked

victims in Zamboanga del Norte. Phenomenology was chosen because it enables a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to trauma and recovery (Bacroya& Aranjuez 2025; Alase 2017; Neubauer et al. 2019). Recent applications reveal that phenomenology is highly beneficial in investigating sensitive issues, as it prioritizes the opinions of humans making sense of their daily experiences (Alipoyo 2022; Queiros et al. 2020). Seven survivors were selected through selective sampling based on their willingness to share their tales and engagement in rehabilitation activities. Data were acquired using a researcher-made interview guide authorized by specialists in psychology, criminology, and social work to assure clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity. In-depth, one-on-one interviews were completed in participants' preferred language, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis.

Ethical problems were meticulously observed throughout the study. Informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity were ensured, with pseudonyms offered to mask participants' identities. A trauma-sensitive technique was adopted to prevent re-traumatization, and interviews were performed by a certified psychometrist from the facility to offer professional help. To safeguard data security, all physical copies of transcripts were shredded following examination, and digital files were permanently erased. Thematic analysis, lead by Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflective framework, was applied to find patterns and emergent themes. Credibility was maintained via member verification and peer debriefing, while transferability was secured by extensive descriptions of participants' conditions. This methodological approach, founded in strong ethical standards, increased the integrity and rigor of the study, ensuring that findings authentically represent survivors' opinions.

Results and discussion

This portion comprises the analysis of the data gathered through in-depth interviews with those sexual abuse victims who participated as informants of the research. The data analysis utilized in the research was the theme analysis of Braun and Clarke (2021). The presentation is sequenced dependent on the statement of the problem, with the essence and consequences provided at the end.

In this descriptive phenomenological research, the data were analyzed using theme analysis that highlights the participants' lived

experiences. The researcher actively engaged in the process of horizontalization, where every comment offered by the informants during the in-depth interviews was regarded with equal priority. All important data were then recorded and transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings to ensure accuracy and validity. Through this technique, a thorough record of the informants' words and acts was retained, illustrating the depth and spirit of their experiences.

The second phase entails discovering pertinent remarks from the transcriptions that are directly related to the phenomenon of those sexual assault victims. These remarks were rigorously vetted to ensure they reflected the substance of the participants' experiences. Each remark was then aggregated into intelligible pieces, structured according to relevant topics and concepts. By preserving an emphasis on the people' diverse opinions, the researcher developed a complete description of the phenomenon while deleting repetitious or superfluous content.

Through creative variation, the researcher attempted to uncover the underlying meanings and essences of the experiences described by the participants. This strategy entails analyzing the evidence from different aspects, studying diverse situations, and assessing varying features of the phenomena. Themes and patterns that emerged were blended into a composite description, conveying the core of the experience of the sexual assault victims.

Thematic analysis identified three important groupings of survivors' narratives: (1) experience; experiences of sexual abuse mechanisms chosen; and (3) objectives for healing and advancement. These themes represent both the struggles and tenacity demonstrated by survivors during their rehabilitation journey.

Experiences of sexual abuse

Survivors typically experienced strong emotional and psychological repercussions, including dread, shame, and feelings of worthlessness. One participant commented, "When I see fathers, I get scared... it's very hard to accept, very hard to move on" (P1). These testimonies are consistent with studies indicating that sexual abuse profoundly changes self-concept and relational trust, frequently leading to internalized shame and anxiety (Poirson et al. 2023; Jarabe & Rahayuwati 2024; Wilson et al. 2021; Campbell et al. 2022; Allen & Hensley 2023). Survivors' testimonies emphasize how abuse becomes an assault not

only on the body but on identity and dignity, leaving emotional scars that remain long after the violence happened.

Beyond acute trauma, individuals indicated long-term psychological repercussions such as intrusive recollections, hypervigilance, and depressive symptoms. For example, several survivors claimed that even years after the occurrence, they remained afraid in ordinary encounters. These experiences mirror findings that sexual abuse is strongly correlated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders that can endure for decades if untreated (Dworkin et al. 2021; Finkelhor et al. 2020; Sardinha et al. 2022; LeMoult et al. 2020; Hughes et al. 2023). Particularly in remote areas such as Zamboanga del Norte, poor access to trauma-informed mental health care exacerbates the recurrence of these symptoms, leaving survivors unsupported in their healing path.

Stigma also appeared as a common topic in survivors' narratives. Several participants indicated that revelation typically led to criticism or skepticism from families and peers, which worsened their isolation. One said, "All my relatives didn't believe me, but luckily my mom was there for me" (P3). Recent research indicate that stigma, victim-blaming, and skepticism are among the most harmful secondary harms suffered by survivors, frequently inhibiting them from seeking care (Anderson et al. 2022; Miller et al. 2021; Ullman & Peter-Hagene 2020; Nguyen & Patel 2023; O'Callaghan et al. 2022). In provincial areas, where cultural taboos concerning sexuality remain entrenched, stigma operates as a barrier that encourages silence and restricts access to both justice and healthcare.

Participants also noted how family rejection and neighborhood gossip compounded the anguish of abuse. Survivors said that being hushed or ignored by close family intensified their sense of betrayal. These findings parallel regional studies demonstrating that survivors of familial or community-based abuse face compounded trauma because the perpetrators are ingrained in their everyday life (Jarabe & Rahayuwati 2024; Cordisco Tsai 2025; Wamoyi et al. 2022; Choudhary et al. 2021; Adjei et al. 2020). The intergenerational impact is equally profound: when families ignore or downplay abuse, patterns of silence extend throughout generations, making systemic change impossible.

Finally, survivors' testimonials indicated how sexual assault impacted their educational and social development. Several recounted retreating from school or losing interest in friendships because of guilt

and dread. These disruptions align with global evidence that childhood sexual abuse undermines educational attainment, reduces social participation, and increases the risk of lifelong economic vulnerability (Botero-García et al. 2023; Sari et al. 2021; González et al. 2022; Slep et al. 2020; Lindert et al. 2023). The implications consequently extend beyond individual suffering, impacting survivors' possibilities for progress and perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization in provincial contexts.

Coping mechanisms

Despite the intensity of their experiences, survivors displayed varied coping techniques that enabled them to persevere and adapt. Social support regularly surfaced as a significant resource, with one participant commenting, "I am very grateful I arrived here... it feels like I found a family" (P2). Such narratives are corroborated by research indicating that robust support systems—whether from family, peers, or shelters—reduce trauma symptoms and increase resilience (Botero-García et al. 2023; Johnson et al. 2021; Poirson et al. 2023; Hughes et al. 2023; Williams & Smith 2020). Supportive relationships validate survivors' experiences, give safety, and function as protective buffers against the long-term psychological repercussions of abuse.

Alongside social support, several survivors mentioned avoidance or diversion as coping techniques. Some buried themselves in employment, school, or hobbies to avoid disturbing recollections. While avoidance may give immediate respite, research cautions that it might prolong suffering when not accompanied by adaptive coping techniques (Abikou et al. 2025; LeMoult et al. 2020; Ullman 2021; Nguyen & Patel 2023; Allen & Hensley 2023). Survivors' perspectives echo these findings: while diversion helped them manage everyday stress, unresolved trauma often reappeared, underlining the limitations of avoidance.

Other survivors highlighted proactive, self-healing methods such as writing, music, praying, or participating in artistic expression. These personal methods depict resilience as a dynamic process of meaning-making and emotional regulation (Nguyen & Patel 2023; Braun & Clarke 2021; Tedeschi et al. 2018; González et al. 2022; Miller et al. 2021). By recovering control via unique healing techniques, survivors converted their pain into possibilities for growth. Importantly, such approaches are low-cost and accessible, making them especially useful in rural or low-resource contexts.

A handful of survivors also mentioned channeling their anguish into activism or support for others. Some stated a wish to mentor fellow victims or to engage in helpful professions such as social work or counseling. This correlates with findings on post-traumatic development, which implies that survivors typically channel their pain into prosocial activity, advocacy, and community leadership (Tedeschi et al. 2018; Botero-García et al. 2023; Anderson et al. 2022; Wamoyi et al. 2022; Sari et al. 2021). Such adjustments not only help individual rehabilitation but also increase social resilience by ending cycles of silence.

Finally, coping mechanisms were typically formed by cultural and communal circumstances. Survivors in Zamboanga del Norte acknowledged dependence on informal assistance such as extended families, friends, and church leaders, particularly when formal services were absent. Research in comparable situations suggests that culturally grounded interventions, such as community religious networks and peer groups, are vital complements to formal psychological care (Cordisco Tsai 2025; Adjei et al. 2020; Wilson et al. 2021; Lindert et al. 2023; Campbell et al. 2022). These findings underline the need for integrated methods that honor survivors' agency while extending community-based care.

Aspirations for healing and growth

Survivors reported significant wishes for justice and responsibility, describing these as vital for closure and protection of future victims. One participant claimed, "As a victim, I want the government to help me so that those kinds of people never get out of prison" (P1). This approach corresponds with worldwide findings that access to justice is crucial to victim recovery, as it validates their experiences and supports psychological healing (Anderson et al. 2022; O'Callaghan et al. 2022; Ullman 2021; Wilson et al. 2021; Hughes et al. 2023). When legal institutions respond successfully, survivors regain a sense of power, whereas insufficient enforcement reinforces cycles of trauma and terror.

Beyond justice, survivors underlined the necessity of mental healing and recovering peace of mind. For instance, one participant commented, "I don't think about anything else but my own happiness after I overcome everything" (P5). This fits with studies indicating that post-trauma rehabilitation requires restoring hope, self-worth, and emotional stability (Nguyen & Patel 2023; Poirson et al. 2023;

González et al. 2022; Johnson et al. 2021; LeMoult et al. 2020). Survivors' hopes indicate that recovery is not limited to symptom reduction but extends toward establishing lives distinguished by stability, significance, and joy.

Education and professional advancement were also regularly listed aims. Survivors envisioned finishing their courses, obtaining jobs, and earning livelihoods as means to empowerment. One participant remarked, "I want to finish my studies and become a social worker so I can help others like me" (P3). This conclusion replicates evidence that education and work operate as protective factors, helping survivors to regain self-sufficiency and lessen long-term vulnerability (Sari et al. 2021; Botero-García et al. 2023; Campbell et al. 2022; Lindert et al. 2023; Wamoyi et al. 2022). Survivors' career-oriented objectives reveal resilience as not just survival but also transformation into agents of societal change.

In addition, several individuals indicated goals to help others and contribute to their communities. Survivors indicated ambitions to become advocates, mentors, or role models, highlighting that assisting others may convert their pain into meaning. This trajectory coincides with post-traumatic growth research, which documented survivors' tendency to turn trauma into advocacy and prosocial leadership (Tedeschi et al. 2018; Botero-García et al. 2023; Adjei et al. 2020; Miller et al. 2021; González et al. 2022). Survivors' eagerness to elevate others implies that healing is not only an individual journey but a community one with ripple effects throughout families and communities.

Finally, ambitions reflected a larger rejection of victimization and a commitment to action, dignity, and structural transformation. Survivors requested justice changes, greater mental health resources, and societal transformations that combat stigma and encourage survivor empowerment. Research demonstrates that when survivors' ambitions are included in community and policy responses, their resilience leads to larger social transformation (Cordisco Tsai 2025; Anderson et al. 2022; Sardinha et al. 2022; Hughes et al. 2023; Ullman & Peter-Hagene 2020). Survivors' aspirations for the future extend beyond personal recovery, pointing to systemic solutions that enable them to reclaim their voices and influence society's responses to sexual abuse.

Conclusion

This study revealed that survivors of sexual assault experience significant psychological and emotional traumas, including fear, humiliation, and lowered self-worth, frequently worsened by betrayal from trusted persons and community stigma. These events destroy trust, ruin relationships, and produce long-term pain. Yet despite such obstacles, survivors displayed resilience via the assistance of family, peers, and community resources. They adopted different coping techniques such as social support, avoidance, and self-healing practices, while their desires for justice, closure, and personal growth indicated their agency in reconstructing lives destroyed by trauma.

The findings underline the need for trauma-informed and survivor-centered treatments, especially in rural and provincial contexts where access to resources is restricted. Survivors' stories highlight the significance of developing support networks that provide safe spaces, counseling, and protection from stigma. Multi-level interventions must focus on helping survivors to restore dignity, to re-establish self-trust, and to sustain recovery. By presenting resilience as both a personal strength and a communal obligation, interventions can extend beyond addressing wounds to restoring dignity and reinforcing justice.

Based on these data, numerous recommendations are offered. First, local government units, NGOs, and welfare agencies should create crisis response centers that provide legal, medical, and emotional help customized to survivors' needs. Second, schools and colleges should combine resilience-building and mental health programs to promote awareness and prevent cycles of silence and stigma. Third, community-based support groups and family counseling programs must be increased to make survivors feel supported in their healing process. Finally, public awareness efforts should underline that sexual assault is a society issue, not an individual failing, urging communities to assume common responsibility in defending dignity and supporting healing. Through these efforts, survivors can not only rehabilitate but also convert their resilience into a basis for long-term empowerment and social justice.

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