



Unseen Struggles, Silent Strength: Lived Experiences of Female Victims of Domestic Violence in Leyte

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Abstract

Domestic violence remains a pervasive social issue that profoundly affects women's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. This study explored the lived experiences of female victims of domestic violence in selected barangays of Palo, Tanauan, and Tolosa, in the province of Leyte, Philippines focusing on their (1) experiences of domestic violence, (2) coping from the situation, and (3) impact of the support programs. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to capture the depth of participants' experiences. Ten female informants were purposively selected through convenience sampling. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and meanings. Seven major themes emerged from the narratives: Deadly Possessiveness, Facing Death, Pain Beyond Bruises, Healing Through Distraction, Accepting the Unacceptable, Relief and Recovery, and The Unseen Struggle. These themes highlighted the complexity of victimization, the resilience demonstrated through various coping strategies, and the mixed effectiveness of existing support programs. Findings underscore the urgent need for stronger family involvement, sustained community awareness, and comprehensive institutional support. Recommendations include: (1) families maintaining close communication and vigilance; (2) Local Government Units (LGUs) ensuring program implementation with logistical support; (3) the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) intensifying public awareness campaigns, establishing reporting centers, and providing hotlines; (4) the Women and Children Protection Desk conducting outreach and education initiatives; and (5) communities being informed about legal frameworks and available services. These measures collectively aim to strengthen protection, recovery, and empowerment of domestic violence survivors.

Keywords: domestic violence, female victims, lived experiences, coping mechanisms, support programs, phenomenological study



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INTRODUCTION

Domestic abuse is often narrowly conceptualized as physical violence; however, it encompasses a broader spectrum of coercive behaviors within marital or intimate relationships. At its core, domestic abuse constitutes any systematic attempt by one partner to exert dominance and control over the other. Both violence and psychological abuse serve a singular purpose: the consolidation and maintenance of power. Perpetrators employ strategies that deliberately undermine the autonomy and resilience of their partners, utilizing mechanisms such as fear, guilt, shame, and intimidation to erode self-efficacy and

perpetuate subjugation (Smith et al., 2023). Importantly, domestic violence is not confined to physical harm but includes sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, and technological actions or threats of actions that influence another person within an intimate partner relationship. These behaviors may intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, injure, or wound someone (Mascolo, 2023). Thus, domestic abuse must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that transcends physical aggression and reflects broader dynamics of coercive control. Recognizing this complexity is essential for developing effective interventions and fostering support systems.

The literature consistently emphasizes that domestic violence and abuse can happen to anyone; it does not discriminate. Abuse occurs within heterosexual relationships and same-sex partnerships, across all age ranges, ethnic backgrounds, and economic levels. While women are more often victimized, men also experience abuse, particularly verbal and emotional forms. According to the World Health Organization (2018), approximately one in three women, or 30%, have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner or non-partner. Lifetime estimates of intimate partner violence range from 20% in the Western Pacific to 33% in the WHO African region. Furthermore, about 38% of all murders of women globally are committed by intimate partners, and 6% of women report experiencing sexual assault by someone other than a partner. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) report that 41% of women and 26% of men have experienced violence from an intimate partner during their lifetime (Mascolo, 2023). These statistics underscore the pervasive and global nature of domestic violence as a public health crisis.

Domestic abuse often escalates from threats and verbal assault to physical violence. While physical injury may pose the most obvious danger, the emotional and psychological consequences are equally severe. Emotionally abusive relationships can destroy self-worth, lead to anxiety and depression, and foster feelings of helplessness and isolation. Victims frequently experience diminished quality of life, decreased productivity, and in some cases, mortality (Huecker, 2023). The cumulative effects of abuse extend beyond the individual, influencing family dynamics, community cohesion, and societal well-being. Domestic violence is not caused by a single factor; rather, it emerges from a combination of individual, relational, community, and societal influences. Risk factors include low income, limited educational attainment, unemployment, exposure to adverse childhood experiences, and membership in sexual minority groups. Women with severe mental health difficulties are particularly vulnerable. These

consequences highlight the multidimensional harm inflicted by domestic violence, reinforcing the urgency of addressing both its immediate and long-term impacts.

Domestic violence has long been recognized as a violation of fundamental human rights. Early human rights law enacted by the United Nations, such as the International Bill of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), articulate a state's duty to protect rights commonly violated in domestic violence cases, including the right to life, physical and mental integrity, equal protection of the laws, and freedom from discrimination. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which entered into force in 1981, further guarantees these rights. In 1992, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women adopted General Recommendation No. 19, explicitly interpreting gender-based violence as a form of discrimination that inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men. This marked the first time a human rights treaty was officially interpreted to prohibit violence against women, thereby embedding domestic violence within the global human rights discourse.

In the Philippines, domestic violence remains a significant issue, with recent data showing that approximately one in five women (17.5% in 2022) experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse from intimate partners (Espinosa, 2024). The Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act (RA 9262) of 2004 provides legal remedies and safeguards against various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, psychological, and economic abuse. The Magna Carta of Women (RA 9710), enacted in 2009, further promotes the rights and empowerment of women, ensuring equal opportunities and access to resources. The government also provides medical and psychological care through Women and Children Protection Units (WCPU) in public hospitals, alongside residential centers and halfway houses

operated by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Despite these legal and institutional mechanisms, survivors continue to face barriers such as stigma, lack of awareness, and the absence of absolute divorce, trapping many in abusive marriages.

While national statistics provide a broad picture, they often fail to capture the lived realities of women in local provinces such as Leyte. In many regional communities, deeply rooted cultural norms and traditional family structures create a “culture of silence” that discourages victims from reporting abuse or seeking help. Local economic struggles and community beliefs further influence whether women feel safe disclosing their experiences. Although RA 9262 and related laws are clear on paper, their implementation at the barangay and municipal levels remains uneven. Support programs may lack resources, cultural sensitivity, or adequate training to address the specific needs of survivors in rural contexts. This disconnect between national policy and local practice underscores the importance of examining domestic violence not only as a legal or statistical issue but as a lived experience shaped by cultural, economic, and social realities. Leyte provides a critical case for understanding how domestic violence manifests in provincial settings and how survivors navigate limited and scarce support systems.

Despite the existence of international conventions and national laws, there remains a critical gap in understanding the lived experiences of female victims of domestic violence in Leyte. Much of the existing literature focuses on prevalence rates, legal frameworks, or national-level statistics, but less attention has been given to how survivors in provincial contexts experience, interpret, and respond to abuse. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of female victims of domestic violence in Leyte, with particular attention to their (1) experiences of domestic violence, (2) coping from the situation, and (3) impact of support programs. By foregrounding survivor narratives, the research

aims to illuminate the ways in which cultural norms, economic conditions, and institutional practices shape the realities of domestic violence in local communities. The objectives are to document these experiences, analyze the adequacy of existing support mechanisms, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of domestic violence in provincial contexts.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both academic discourse and practical interventions. Academically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on domestic violence by situating survivor experiences within the specific cultural and socio-economic context of Leyte. It advances theoretical discussions on coercive control, gender-based violence, and human rights by grounding them in lived realities. Practically, the findings can guide policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders in designing culturally sensitive and locally responsive support programs. By highlighting the disconnect between national policies and local implementation, the study underscores the need for interventions that are not only legally robust but also socially and culturally attuned. Ultimately, the research affirms that abusive behavior is never acceptable, regardless of the perpetrator's identity, and that individuals have the right to feel valued, respected, and safe within their relationships. In amplifying the voices of survivors, this study seeks to foster greater awareness, advocacy, and action against domestic violence in Leyte and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gendered Nature and Statistical Prevalence of Violence. Domestic and family violence is fundamentally a social problem rooted in gendered relations. While both men and women can be victims or perpetrators, data consistently shows that women and children are overwhelmingly the victims, while men are predominantly the perpetrators. Australian statistics indicate that a woman is murdered by a partner or former partner every week (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Similarly, in the United States, the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) report that 41% of women have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime (Mascolo, 2023). For practitioners, this statistical prevalence reinforces the necessity of a gendered lens in clinical practice, though it often leaves a gap in services for men and the LGBTIQ community (Walsh, 2018).

Historical Context and Evolutionary Advocacy.

The phenomenon of "battered women" is not new; it is rooted in centuries of societal norms where physical abuse was used to prevent spouses from leaving. Institutional responses began to formalize in the late 19th century, notably with the 1885 establishment of the Chicago Protective Agency for Women and Children. This organization pioneered the integration of legal aid, court advocacy, and personal assistance, marking a significant shift toward viewing domestic abuse as a matter for public intervention rather than just a private family issue (Roberts, 2002).

Physiological and Long-term Health Implications. Beyond immediate physical injury, survivors of violence face severe long-term health risks. Research identifies significant correlations between domestic abuse and chronic conditions, including cardiovascular disease, endocrine dysfunction, and neurological symptoms (Stubbs & Szoeki, 2021). These findings suggest that primary care for survivors must be specialized and tailored to address the physiological mediators of trauma, highlighting the need for long-term clinical studies to inform healthcare protocols.

Cultural Norms and Socio-Structural Barriers to Help-Seeking. Cultural frameworks often serve as the primary obstacles to seeking safety. In many contexts, such as Kyrgyzstan, the social construction of marriage and the roles of family members (e.g., mothers-in-law) work to normalize abuse (Gioia, 2016). Common barriers identified across literature include:

1. **Shame and Stigma.** Fear of being identified as "battered" or the perceived "shame" of divorce (Kaur & Garg, 2008).

2. **Systemic Failure.** Lack of confidence in the legal system and police interventions, which survivors often find unaccommodating and unhelpful (Gioia, 2016).
3. **Internalized Blame.** Victims may suffer in silence due to the belief that they deserve the abuse or to protect "family secrets" (Kaur & Garg, 2008).

Economic Vulnerability and the "Threatening World". Economic dependence is a central mechanism used to trap women in abusive relationships. Without the financial means to sustain themselves or their children, many survivors are forced to remain in a "threatening world" (Baloushah et al., 2019). The inability to access housing, childcare, and independent finances, combined with economic hardships like unemployment, often forces a choice between continued abuse or absolute poverty (Kaur & Garg, 2008; Gioia, 2016).

Recommendations for Community-Based Intervention and Advocacy. Addressing Violence against Women and Children (VAWC) requires a multi-level strategy that moves beyond the individual to the community (the barangay level). Effective intervention strategies include:

1. **Educational Awareness.** Conducting consultative assemblies to increase awareness of the consequences of violence (Olobia, 2023).
2. **Economic Empowerment.** Implementing livelihood projects to ensure women have the financial participation necessary to provide for their children.
3. **Institutional Protection.** Requiring local leaders to enforce strict safety measures and fostering inter-community respect for women's rights.
4. **Psychosocial Support.** Providing counseling to help survivors navigate the complex emotional and practical hurdles of leaving an abusive environment (Baloushah et al., 2019).

METHODS

Design. This study employed a transcendental phenomenological design, guided by the framework of Moustakas (1994). Transcendental phenomenology emphasizes the primacy of participants lived experiences rather than the researcher's interpretations. Central to this approach is the process of bracketing, wherein the researcher deliberately sets aside personal biases and preconceptions to view the phenomenon from a fresh perspective. Following Moustakas' methodological steps, the study identified the phenomenon under investigation and gathered data from individuals who had directly experienced it. The interview guide facilitated the collection of rich, descriptive accounts. These narratives were then analyzed through systematic reduction, beginning with the identification of significant statements and culminating in the clustering of these statements into themes. The analytic process produced both textural descriptions (detailing what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (explaining the conditions, contexts, and settings in which these experiences occurred). Finally, these elements were synthesized into a composite summary that conveyed the essence of the phenomenon, capturing the shared meanings across participants' accounts.

Setting. The study was conducted in three municipalities of Leyte Province: Tanauan, Palo, and Tolosa. They were identified as research sites due to their geographic coverage and the continued prevalence of domestic violence cases. Reports from the respective Municipal Social Welfare and Development Offices (MSWDOs) confirmed that incidents of domestic violence remain persistent in these areas, thereby justifying their selection as the study's setting. Within these municipalities, specific barangays were purposively chosen to provide contextual diversity. In Palo, the selected barangays included San Joaquin, Cavite East, Tacuranga, Cavite West, and St. Scholastica Village. In Tanauan, Camire, San Victor, and Salvador were identified, while Opong and Magsaysay Street were chosen in Tolosa. These

sites provided a representative cross-section of communities where domestic violence cases have been documented.

Informants. A total of ten (10) informants participated in the study through in-depth interviews. Of these, five were from Palo, three from Tanauan, and two from Tolosa. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, guided by clearly defined inclusion criteria: (1) female survivors of domestic violence, (2) cases formally reported to the appropriate authorities, (3) separation from their abusive partners, and (4) having at least one child. Recruitment emphasized voluntariness and self-determination, with participants invited based on their willingness to share experiences, accessibility to the researcher, and relevance to the study's objectives. This approach ensured that the informants were not only representative of the phenomenon under investigation but also well-positioned to provide meaningful insights into the lived realities of domestic violence survivors in the selected municipalities.

Instrument. A semi-structured interview guide served as the primary data-gathering instrument for the study. The guide was meticulously developed to ensure that questions were clear, relevant, and capable of eliciting rich qualitative data. Prior to administration, the instrument underwent screening and evaluation by the research panel to establish content validity and appropriateness. The interview guide was organized into four sections. The first section contained preliminary questions designed to ascertain the personal circumstances and eligibility of the informants. The second section focused on their lived experiences as victims of domestic violence, while the third explored their coping strategies and navigation of current circumstances. The final section examined the perceived impact of support programs available to them.

The semi-structured format was deliberately chosen to provide flexibility, enabling informants to respond in ways that reflected

their comfort and perspectives. This approach facilitated deeper exploration of their narratives and ensured that the interviews captured both individual experiences and broader thematic insights. All participants were female survivors of domestic violence, selected from the study's identified municipalities.

Data collection. A formal transmittal letter was submitted to the appropriate authorities to secure permission for the conduct of the study. All requirements were submitted to the Ethics Committee, which subsequently issued protocol approval. Upon approval, interviews were conducted with the informants in the language most comfortable to them and scheduled according to their availability. Informed consent was obtained through signed consent forms, which clarified that participation was voluntary and limited to the purposes of the study. At the outset of each session, the researcher introduced herself and explained the objectives of the interview.

The interviews began with questions on the informants' personal background, followed by inquiries into their experiences of domestic violence, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of support programs. To ensure accuracy, an audio recorder was used during the sessions, and transcripts were later produced for both interviews and focus group discussions. The study was confined to women survivors of domestic violence residing in the municipalities of Tanauan, Palo, and Tolosa, Leyte.

Data analysis. The researcher used the Colaizzi's method to extract, organize, and analyze the data. The seven-step procedure of this method provided the analysis on the experiences of the subjects. Each transcript was read and re-read multiple times to allow the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences. From these documents, significant statements pertaining to the phenomenon of domestic violence were extracted and recorded on separate sheets, with specific page and line numbers noted for accuracy. The researcher then formulated meanings from these

significant statements, ensuring that each interpretation remain grounded in the survivors' own accounts.

Following this, the formulated meanings were sorted into categories and clusters of themes, which ultimately revealed the core themes. These findings were integrated into an exhaustive description that captured the textural and structural reality of the participants' experiences in the selected municipalities. From this integration, the researcher described the fundamental structure or essence of the phenomenon. Finally, validation of the findings was sought from the research informants to compare the descriptive results with their actual lived experiences, ensuring the study's conclusions were a true reflection of their reality.

Ethical Consideration. The study adhered to established ethical standards, with informed consent serving as the cornerstone of participant protection. A comprehensive consent form was developed to outline the study's purpose, potential benefits and risks, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of confidentiality. Access to research data was restricted exclusively to the principal investigator, in accordance with the confidentiality clause, thereby safeguarding participant identities from disclosure to faculty members, panelists, local government officials, or other external authorities. To further ensure the integrity of the findings, corroborated observations from student researchers were systematically incorporated into the data analysis. This collaborative verification process minimized the risk of bias, misrepresentation, or fabrication of data. Through cross-referencing and triangulation, the research team upheld the accuracy and trustworthiness of the results, ensuring that the final analysis authentically reflected the lived experiences of the participants.

RESULTS

From the responses provided by the informants, three powerful themes stood out: Deadly

Possessiveness, Pain Beyond Bruises, and Facing Death. These titles reflect the raw reality of the fear and psychological weight they carried. Regarding how these women managed to get by day-to-day, the coping processes were defined by two themes: Coping Through Distraction and Accepting the Unacceptable, which speak to the difficult mental trade-offs they had to make just to survive. Finally, we looked at the actual impact of the support programs available to them. This was encapsulated by two final themes: Relief and Recovery, which shows the progress made, but also The Unseen Struggle, which reminds us that the journey toward healing is rarely as simple as it looks on paper. Together, these seven themes give us a clear, human picture of the challenges faced by survivors in Palo, Tanauan, and Tolosa.

Experiences of Domestic Violence. The informants shared different experiences of domestic violence that left lasting marks on their lives. Although they faced many challenges, they still managed to find strength and look for positive aspects in their situations. From the responses and significant statements provided, the researcher identified several themes that reflect both their struggles and their ways of coping. These highlight resilience and the importance of networks in recovery.

Theme 1: Deadly Possessiveness: This theme sufficed the experiences of informants of being abused by their partners because of jealousy. Various experiences were expressed by the informants. This is evident in the statement made by Informant 1:

"He was jealous, or maybe I am not sure. He pointed a knife at me. I thought he would kill me. He held my head and pointed the knife at me. I closed my eyes and prayed, thinking this could be my last breath. Because I stayed quiet, he let me go. I did not have any bruises, but he slapped me. It was the first time he did this to me, because before he never hit me. But this time I do not know what he was thinking. We argued because he was jealous" (Participant 1)

Moreover, it was corroborated by the statement made by Informant 5 as she articulated her experience of how her partner beats her because of jealousy. She said:

"We all know that people often show kindness at first but reveal their true colors when they are drunk or become jealous for no reason. When he is drunk, he often hallucinates and accuses me of things I have not done. He slaps me and sometimes beats me, even when he is not drunk. Most of the time, he punches me in the legs so that other people will not notice the marks. He always denies everything when we have conflicts, especially if he is drunk, insisting that he never did those things to me. I do not believe he is not aware of what he's doing, especially since I have so many bruises. Even after we had two children, he has not changed—he continues to hurt me. Even when my siblings are around, he eventually loses his temper". (Participant 5)

Furthermore, statements 1 and 2 were further corroborated by the statement made by Informant 9. She said:

"It is not an easy experience ma'am because when he is drunk, he beats me and then accuses me of having another man. That is his behavior whenever he drinks. Maybe he is just jealous. He talks nonsense to avoid a long argument. There are also times when our children are affected by what he does. He scolds them and sometimes punishes them for no reason". (Participant 9)

Theme 2: Pain Beyond Bruises. This theme sufficed the experiences of the informants who were abused emotionally by their partner. This also explained how they were hurt that goes beyond physical injury. This highlights the emotional, psychological and even spiritual toll of trauma and abuse of the informants. Various experiences were narrated by the informants. This theme was strengthened by the statements of the informants.

According to Informant 2, her partner fooled her not just once, but thrice:

‘What he did was not just a one-time mistake; he was with another woman three times. I accepted his apology the second time, but after that, I told myself that this was enough. I do not deserve to be repeatedly hurt by him. It has been very hard for me, and remembering these experiences still brings me to tears. When he did this to me, our eldest child was only in Grade 7. At first, it was just gossip, and I did not want to believe it because I wanted to catch them in the act. When I finally caught them, the only strength I had come from my children’. (Participant 2)

Informant 4 also shared her experience. Accordingly, she stated that her partner married another woman and sent her a divorce paper, thus saying:

“He married another woman. While it may be acceptable to remarry, it is not necessary to abandon the original wife. I was deeply hurt when he sent me divorce papers”. (Participant 4)

The experience of having another woman was stated by Informant 8:

“He is not hurting me physically, but he’s always using his phone, and he started seeing another woman. In September last year, he took out a loan without informing me. I suspect he spent the money on the other woman, since he never told me anything about it”. (Participant 8)

Theme 3: Facing Death. This theme also envisioned the experiences of informants during domestic violence when their partner pointed knife and gun on their head. This would explain how they suffered such fear in the hands of their partner. This is apparent in a statement by Informant 1:

“This month ma’am, he was jealous, or maybe something else. He pointed a knife at me. I thought he was going to kill me. He held my

head and pointed the knife. I just closed my eyes and prayed that if these were my last moments, so be it. Because I was silent, he let go of me. I did not have any bruises, but he slapped me. It was my first time experiencing this, because he has never hit me before. But that time, I do not know what he was thinking. We argued because he was jealous”. (Participant 1)

Informant 5 also added how she faced difficulties with her partner by pointing knife at her. This is manifested in the following statements:

“There was a time when he forced me into physical contact, which led to an argument because I refused him. When I do give in, I do so without emotion. There have also been times when he beat my legs and pointed a knife at me”. (Participant 5)

It was further corroborated by the statement of Informant 6 as she faced her situation when her partner pointed a caliber 45 gun on her head.

“He presses my arm when he is angry. He has also tried to use his .45 gun. He pointed the gun at my head whenever I tried to ask him questions. In 2019, when I was pregnant, he got angry just because I accidentally stepped on a chick. He grabbed the gun, choked me, and pointed it at me”. (Participant 6)

Coping from the Situation. Domestic violence profoundly impacted the lives of the informants and understanding their coping process is crucial. The following are the elicited themes that indicated how they navigated the trauma of domestic violence and heal from their unfortunate experiences.

Theme 1: Healing Through Distraction. This theme depicts the role of distraction as a coping process of the informants showing how they employ distraction as a resilience-building strategy to escape their domestic violence experiences.

As told by Informant 5, she was busy working and did not entertain anyone since she prioritized her children and her work:

"I was only busy working. For two to three years, I did not entertain anyone because I prioritized my children and my job. Although I would sometimes hang out with my friends or coworkers and have an occasional drink, most of the time I was busy with work. Since I worked the night shift, I would sleep during the day". (Participant 5)

Informant 7 also keeps herself busy with work. She said:

"I keep myself busy at work. Because I don't have a partner that will give financial support." (Participant 7)

The aforementioned statement of Informants 5 and 7 was further corroborated by statement of Informant 8 as she's keeps herself busy by focusing on her sari-sari store. She said:

"I have my mother who's always beside me, believing in me that I can do it. I focus my time and attention to my sari-sari store and taking care of my children." (Participant 8)

Theme 2: Accepting the Unacceptable. This theme emphasized how the informants heal through accepting their unacceptable situation. They accepted the fact that they had experienced this kind of situation. As told by Informant 5, she learned to accept her situation and told herself that it is a normal situation. She said:

"What he did to me remained a secret. I did not share it with anyone. I just wrote about it in my notebook. For the past three years, I have learned to accept my situation and told myself that it was normal, since I thought I also had my own shortcomings". (Participant 5)

Informant 6 also said that having self-awareness and acceptance has a big impact to. She said:

"Having self-awareness and acceptance has had a big impact on me. Without self-awareness, you keep questioning yourself, wondering if what you are doing is still right or helpful, so you try to evaluate yourself". (Participant 6)

The aforementioned statements of Informants 5 and 6 were further corroborated by the statement of Informant 8 as she slowly accepted her situation even though it is difficult. She said:

"I slowly accepted our situation even how difficult it is since I still love him. The fact that I can do nothing because he was crazy to his new woman". (Participant 8)

Impact of Support Programs. The support programs extended to the informants played a crucial role in alleviating the difficulties they faced. While some initially struggled with limited resources and uncertainty about how to begin, government interventions provided them with opportunities to rebuild and move forward. These programs not only reduced the burdens they carried but also empowered them to pursue more sustainable livelihoods. The following section highlights themes on support initiatives' life impacts.

Theme 1: Relief and Recovery. This theme depicts the role of the government in supporting the informants to recover from their unfortunate experiences.

As told by Informant 1:

"It is a big help to us, especially to my children who depend on me. I can buy what they need for school and support our everyday expenses. It has also been a great help because, with it, my children and I have been able to survive together". (Participant 1)

Informant 2 also received a support program. She said:

"It is a big help especially when it is payout. We can buy grocery, rice and the things the children need". (Participant 2)

The aforementioned statement of Informants 1 and 2 was further corroborated by statement of Informant 5. She said:

"It was very helpful to my family. It provides the needs of my children and also grocery for our everyday needs. Because of that program, it lessens the burden especially to my children who was the most affected of what happen". (Participant 5)

Theme 2: The Unseen Struggle. This theme highlights the experiences of informants who did not receive the government support programs they had anticipated. According to their accounts, despite their difficult circumstances, no assistance was extended to them. As a result, they faced significant challenges in rebuilding their lives and struggled to establish a new beginning.

According to Informant 4, she approached the office of the MSWD but still nothing.

"I approached the MSWD but as of now still nothing though I make follow up. I'm just waiting since I also need it for the support of children in school". (Participant 4)

Informant 6 also received nothing. Nevertheless, she just searched on YouTube and podcast for her healing. She said:

"I didn't receive anything from their office. For me, what I do to heal, I search in YouTube and also podcast. Even for solo parent benefits I did not receive any. No support system". (Participant 6)

The aforementioned statement of Informants 4 and 6 was further corroborated by statement of Informant 8. She said:

"There's nothing. We only had an interview with the MSWD. They didn't offer me any programs that could have helped me and my children with our expenses". (Participant 8)

DISCUSSION

Employing qualitative research through descriptive phenomenological design, data gathered were analyzed using the seven steps of the Colaizzi (1978) process. Seven (7) themes were able to craft that best represent the lived experiences of female victims of domestic violence and their coping processes.

As for the experiences, the findings revealed a harrowing reality for female victims of domestic violence. The participants described being beaten, falsely accused, and nearly killed due to the "deadly possessiveness" and jealousy of their partners. To be abused by an intimate partner is a deeply degrading experience, often involving life-threatening encounters where knives or guns were used. Beyond physical trauma, the study highlighted the weight of emotional abuse; even those who did not experience physical blows reported the profound pain of infidelity and psychological manipulation.

Moreover, the physical, emotional and psychological abuse the victim experiences are slowly healing. According to Gondolf and Fisher (1998) women experiencing severe abuse develop innovative coping strategies. This explains how women are strong after experiencing such violence from their intimate partners. Despite these traumas, the survivors demonstrated remarkable strength through innovative coping strategies. The healing process involved "coping through distraction" and "accepting the unacceptable." Informants described immersing themselves in work and focusing on their children as a way to slowly distance themselves from the pain. As Thomas Carlyle noted, "work is the best antidote to sorrow," and for these women, staying busy became a survival tool. Eventually, a shift in perspective occurred, a realization that the abuse was not their fault. Many survivors chose to "patch things up" not necessarily to return to the past, but to move forward for the sake of their children and their own peace of mind.

Finally, the support programs provided to the victims served as a cornerstone for Relief and Recovery. While the "unseen struggle" of healing remains, the formal and informal help-seeking strategies used by these women were vital. In the Philippines, programs under RA 9262 provide essential services like counseling and financial aid. Informants noted that government assistance was crucial for their daily expenses and their children's needs. As emphasized by Ackerman (2018), progress toward personal goals and the feeling of partnership with concerned agencies provide survivors with the satisfaction and safety needed to truly restart their lives.

Conclusion. This study has been a journey into the difficult and often hidden world of women surviving domestic violence. What stands out most is the painful irony of their lives: despite their best efforts to be dedicated wives and mothers, they were met with a reality of Deadly Possessiveness and threats that brought them face-to-face with death. It's clear from their stories that the "Pain Beyond Bruises" is often the hardest to carry. While a physical wound might heal, the betrayal of a partner's infidelity and the constant psychological weight of being degraded leave scars that are not easily seen by the outside world.

One of the most moving parts of this research was seeing how these women managed to keep going. Their resilience is not just a buzzword; it's a daily struggle. Whether it was Coping Through Distraction by burying themselves in work or Accepting the Unacceptable for the sake of their children, they found ways to survive in environments that felt impossible. However, this study also makes it clear that internal strength only goes so far. Without the actual, hands-on support of government agencies, many of these women would remain stuck in a loop of survival rather than true Relief and Recovery. In the end, these findings tell us that while these women are incredibly strong, they should not have to be strong alone. Recovery begins when safety and support allow survivors to stop fearing the past and envision futures they genuinely desire.

Recommendations. The findings of this study offer relevant insights that may be applied to current institutional practices. These recommendations are directed toward the survivors, their families, and the key institutions responsible for their protection and recovery.

For the Survivors (Victims). It is crucial for survivors to internalize the fact that they are not alone and that the violence inflicted upon them was never their fault. Recovery often requires a profound process of "relearning" and reclaiming one's identity after leaving an abusive environment. Survivors must remain vigilant in recognizing that threats and harm are never acceptable. The most effective course of action is to seek professional assistance in creating a safety plan. As the informants in this study exemplify: "Being a victim is not a choice, but becoming a survivor is."

For the Families. Families should maintain open lines of communication and stay closely connected with their loved ones. It is vital for family members to educate themselves on the subtle signs of domestic abuse. Often, violence remains hidden because it is perceived as a "private matter," but raising awareness allows families to break this silence. By understanding the effects of trauma and knowing where to seek help, families can transform from passive observers into reliable lifelines for those in crisis.

For the Local Government Units (Palo, Tanauan, and Tolosa, Leyte). To ensure the sustainability of protective programs, the LGUs must implement initiatives at the barangay level. This includes identifying at-risk individuals, securing counterpart funding, and providing logistical support, such as materials and transportation for volunteers. Furthermore, the interagency network must be fortified to ensure that survivors and their families receive timely intervention. LGUs should prioritize resources for awareness-building and skills training that empower women to protect themselves, while simultaneously working to shift social norms that tolerate domestic harm. Collaboration across sectors strengthens protection.

For the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Authorities should intensify public awareness campaigns to prevent violence before it starts. The establishment of accessible reporting centers and 24-hour hotlines is essential for providing immediate crisis intervention. Beyond immediate relief, the DSWD must ensure the strict enforcement of laws protecting women and children (such as RA 9262). Every complaint should be tracked and investigated thoroughly. Collaborative networking with local stakeholders is necessary to develop new, victim-sensitive strategies that address the unique needs of survivors while also managing the rehabilitation of offenders.

For the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD). The WCPD should expand its reach through community-based education, including seminars, workshops, and the distribution of informative materials. By collaborating with LGUs and non-government organizations, the WCPD can amplify its message of zero tolerance for violence. Essential services, such as dedicated hotlines, trauma-informed counseling, and direct referrals to legal aid and emergency shelters, should be made more accessible to the community.

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