

“Plants brought back to life”: An exploration of female adolescent survivors’ experiences of sexual abuse, healing and resilience

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Abstract

Background: Sexual abuse is a significant issue for adolescent girls in the Philippines. This study explores the experiences of survivors, focusing on their journeys of healing and resilience.

Purpose: This study aimed to investigate effect of mindfulness-based Asmaul Husna on the overall adaptive functioning of individuals with schizophrenia.

Methods: This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study aimed to understand the lived experiences of Filipino adolescent girls who survived sexual abuse through four key questions, namely: 1) How did each participant perceive their experience? 2) What coping mechanisms did they employ to deal with the trauma? 3) How did the abuse impact their self-perception and purpose in life? 4) What symbols or meanings do they associate with their experiences?

Results: The analysis identified six superordinate and sixteen subordinate themes. These included: 1) sense of loss – participants described a deep sense of loss due to the abuse; 2) healing as a process – healing was perceived as a gradual and ongoing journey; 3) supportive environment – supportive relationships played a crucial role in coping; 4) growing faith in God – faith emerged as a significant source of strength; 5) reclaiming the sense of self – regaining a sense of self-worth was a central aspect of healing; and 6) altruism – the desire of helping others emerged as a meaningful way to cope.

Conclusion: The participants’ experiences can be likened to a resilient plant that, despite facing near-destruction, revives with renewed strength. Family dynamics played a crucial role in the girls’ experiences of abuse. A culture of silence and fear emerged as a significant theme in their narratives. Additionally, the ambiguity and conflicting emotions surrounding accountability for perpetrators within close families posed complex challenges. This research provides valuable insights into the experiences of sexually abused Filipino adolescent girls, informing nursing practice. The findings enable nurses to offer culturally sensitive, trauma-informed care and develop targeted support interventions. Incorporating these insights into nursing education will enhance students’ competencies in trauma response, cultural sensitivity, and therapeutic communication with abuse survivors, leading to improved assessment protocols and care strategies.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; female adolescents; healing; resilience

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a complex and pervasive global issue that requires extensive research across multiple dimensions. Despite an increase in reported cases of sexual abuse in recent years, experts believe that the actual prevalence of CSA is likely underreported. This underreporting is largely attributed to the significant emotional challenges victims face when considering disclosure (Boumpa et al., 2024). CSA occurs in various

settings, with perpetrators including family members, partners, peers, and strangers.

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a severe form of abuse that exploits a child's vulnerability for the sexual and emotional fulfillment of one or more persons deemed as having authority or may be physically stronger (Carandang, 1996; Protacio-Marcelino et al., 2000; Srgoi, 1989; Shapiro & Domniak, 1990, as cited in [Brilliantes-Evangelista, 2013](#)). [Parks et al. \(2001\)](#) characterized CSA as a form of sexual oppression, highlighting the correlation between CSA and oppressive dynamics. They further posited that oppression is intertwined with societal forces and structures that perpetuate a culture of patriarchy and heterosexism. As such, it is imperative to confront and challenge the cultural and societal underpinnings of sexual abuse.

In the Philippines, rape is the leading form of child sexual abuse, followed by incest and inappropriate touching. The Council for the Welfare of Children reported a 33 percent incidence rate for incest in 2016. The 2016 Philippine National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children found that 17.1 percent of surveyed children aged 13 to 18 had experienced some form of sexual violence ([Council for the Welfare of Children & UNICEF Philippines, 2016](#)). The study, which involved 3,866 participants, also found a 13.7 percent prevalence of sexual violence in homes among the same age group. For girls, the most common perpetrators were brothers, stepbrothers, and stepsisters. The study also highlighted a low disclosure rate of sexual abuse despite the high occurrence among respondents.

CSA victims often face severe psychological and behavioral issues throughout their lives, such as depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, dissociation, somatization, anxiety disorders, PTSD, psychotic and schizophrenic disorders, and suicidal tendencies, among others ([Boumpa et al., 2024](#); [Haffejee & Theron, 2017](#)). CSA during adolescence can lead to emotional expression difficulties, altered self-perception due to guilt and shame, feelings of distrust, and isolation ([Robinaugh & McNally, 2011](#); [Roth et al., 1997](#); [Yehuda et al., 2001](#)). According to [Fonagy \(2003\)](#), the trauma suffered by CSA children has been observed to impede the development of self-agency.

However, the impact of CSA varies according to some studies. Some victims do not develop PTSD or behavioral issues ([Collishaw et al., 2007](#); [Domhardt et al., 2015](#); [Marriott et al., 2014](#); [McElheran et al., 2012](#)). Resilience can mitigate CSA's impact ([Luthar et al., 2000](#)). Positive internal attributes like perseverance, self-efficacy, and relationship competence can foster positive adaptation ([Himelein & McElrath, 1996](#); [Lev-Wiesel, 2000](#)). Supportive relationships and therapy can also aid recovery ([Arias & Johnson, 2013](#)). However, further research is required to understand survivors' healing processes from CSA. Some individuals respond differently to the impact of CSA. Some victims may not experience PTSD or other behavioral problems

due to their naturally high resilience – however, positive internal attributes such as perseverance, self-efficacy and relationship competence decline.

While extensive research has been conducted on the impacts of sexual abuse on survivors ([Boumpa et al., 2024](#); [Collin-Vézina et al., 2013](#); [Collishaw et al., 2007](#); [Maniglio, 2009](#); [Osmeña & Barrera, 2021](#)), there is a significant gap in the study of healing and resilience, particularly in adolescents who have experienced CSA. The existing literature emphasizes the necessity of focusing on female adolescents, considering the role of gender in increasing vulnerability to sexual abuse and its potential influence on resilience ([Dartnall & Jewkes, 2012](#)). The social construction of gender - including gender-biased roles, social inequality, cultural and parental practices, and inadequate legal systems - significantly heightens women's and girls' susceptibility to abuse and impacts their help-seeking behaviors ([Haffejee & Theron, 2017](#)).

There have been notable studies conducted in the Philippines on CSA and child resilience, and this research builds upon and integrates findings from these studies. [Bautista et al.'s \(2001\)](#) seminal work identified fourteen resilience themes among Filipino children who experienced various forms of abuse. The current study expands on several of these themes, particularly focusing on spirituality, social support, and the ability to construct meaning from the experience. [Calma-Balderrama's \(2009\)](#) quantitative research on resilience factors in sexually-abused pre-adolescents and adolescents provides valuable foundation for the current study. While [Calma-Balderrama](#) identified verbal ability, spirituality, and adult support as resiliency factors, the current study offers rich qualitative data on how these elements manifest in the lives of the participants as female adolescent CSA survivors. The narrative approach employed by [Osmeña and Barrera \(2021\)](#) in their study of female Filipino CSA survivors is complemented by this research using IPA approach. Their identification of three narrative types (tragic resistance, rescued slave, and, heroic saga) provides a framework for understanding these diverse ways to conceptualize their experiences. The current study builds on this by exploring how these narratives influence survivors' coping mechanisms and long-term resilience development.

The study by [Karen Anne C.Q. \(2024\)](#) on the effectiveness of logotherapy-based interventions for promoting posttraumatic growth among Filipino adolescent CSA survivors offers valuable insights into potential therapeutic approaches. While the current study does not focus on specific interventions, the findings on resilience and coping mechanisms can inform the development of culturally appropriate therapeutic strategies.

The study's focus on female adolescent CSA survivors addresses a specific gap in the literature, complementing broader studies on child abuse by [Bautista et al. \(2001\)](#), research on male survivors by [Pestaño \(2016\)](#), and Filipino youth resilience by

Casillas (2022).

The current study delves into the experiences of sexually abused Filipino adolescent girls, exploring how adversity from sexual abuse may foster resilience. The research focuses on 1) the participants' experiences, 2) their coping mechanisms, 3) the meanings they assign to their experiences, and 4) the influence of their CSA experiences on their self-perception and sense of purpose.

This study holds particular significance for the nursing profession as it provides insights into the experiences of sexually abused Filipino adolescent girls, which can inform more culturally sensitive and trauma-informed nursing care approaches. Understanding their coping mechanisms and resilience development can help nurses better support similar patients and develop targeted interventions.

The findings of this research can be integrated into nursing education programs to enhance

students' understanding of trauma response, cultural competency, and therapeutic communication with adolescent sexual abuse survivors. This knowledge can lead to improved nursing assessment protocols and more effective care strategies for this vulnerable population.

Materials and Methods

Design

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to describe and interpret the phenomenological data and information on the lived experiences of Filipino adolescent girls who have been sexually abused. Through in-depth interviews, the study provides rich descriptive accounts of their experiences. An idiographic presentation and interpretative approach were used to make sense of the phenomenon and derive meanings from the participants as they gleaned from the critical life

Table 1. Participants' Profile

Participant/age	Age at the time of abuse	Number of times abused	Perpetrator	Shelter/Center
Melissa, 17	9, 13, 17	Multiple	Mother/prostitution, priest, uncle, uncle's unidentified companion	Religious
Audrey, 16	16	Once	Partner of stepsister	Religious
Deny, 14	10	Multiple	Father	NGO
Nica, 15	10	Multiple	Step-grandfather	NGO
Janice, 15	11	Multiple	Uncle	NGO
Hapi, 14	13	Multiple	Pimp, sex trafficking	NGO
Jewel, 18	12, 17	Multiple	Two uncles	LGU

Table 2 Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
Experiencing the sense of loss	Loss of sense of self Betrayal of trust Feelings of ambiguity and ambivalence
Healing as a process	Past the painful stage Still fighting
Having a supportive environment is important	Support from friends, family, and others. Caring and enabling environment
Growing faith in God	God has a plan. God listens and makes the burden light.
Reclaiming the sense of self	Overcoming fear to act Overcoming fear of stigma Experience made them strong and independent. Reclaiming dignity
Wanting to help girls like them (Altruism)	To give comfort and inspiration Pay forward. Mobilize resources

event as propounded on by Reid et al. (2005) and Smith (2004). The study provides an understanding of healing and resilience after child sexual abuse, underscoring crucial factors that enable survivors to adjust positively. The data were collected between July and November 2020.

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research approach developed by Jonathan Smith and colleagues. IPA is firmly rooted in the phenomenological tradition, which focuses on studying experiences from the individual's perspective. However, IPA extends beyond pure phenomenology by incorporating two additional key elements: idiographic and hermeneutics.

Phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl and expanded by Martin Heidegger, emphasizes understanding lived experiences and how individuals make sense of these experiences. IPA builds on this foundation by adding an idiographic focus, which involves detailed examination of each individual case before moving to more general claims. This idiographic approach allows for a deep exploration of personal experiences while also acknowledging the uniqueness of each individual's perspective.

Furthermore, IPA incorporates hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation. This aspect recognizes the active role of the researcher in making sense of the participants' experiences, creating what Smith et al. (2009) term a 'double hermeneutic' - the researcher trying to make sense of the participant, who is trying to make sense of their experience.

In the context of this study on Filipino adolescent girls who have experienced sexual abuse, IPA allows us to delve deep into their personal experiences, perceptions, and meanings attributed to these traumatic events. This approach enables us to capture the essence of their lived experiences in a way that honors their individual stories (idiographic) while also identifying potential shared themes. Simultaneously, it acknowledges the interpretative process involved in understanding these experiences (hermeneutics), recognizing that our understanding is shaped both by the participants' accounts and our own interpretative engagement with their narratives. The decision to use a qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), instead of questionnaires, was based on several key considerations. IPA offers a depth of understanding that allows for rich, detailed exploration of participants' experiences, uncovering nuanced meanings and interpretations that might be missed by surface-level questionnaire data. Given the sensitive nature of sexual abuse, this qualitative approach provides a more flexible and empathetic method of data collection, allowing participants to express themselves in their own words. IPA's idiographic focus aligns well with our aim to understand each participant's unique experience, which is crucial given the complex nature of trauma responses. Additionally, as the experiences of Filipino

adolescent girls who have been sexually abused are not extensively documented in the literature, IPA's exploratory nature allows for unexpected themes to emerge. Finally, IPA's flexible approach enables the capture and exploration of cultural nuances, which is essential when studying experiences within the specific cultural context of Filipino adolescents.

Participants and Setting

We purposefully selected seven participants for in-depth interviews based on the following criteria: 1) a female adolescent, 12 to 19 years old; 2) a survivor of sexual abuse; and 3) currently in the care of a residential facility or a protection center. The primary researcher recruited the participants through her professional networks. Two participants came from a religious order-run sanctuary in Quezon City, Metro Manila. A nongovernmental organization in the Province of Bulacan referred four participants. The Mayor's Office of Quezon City, a local government unit (LGU) in Metro Manila referred the last participant. We gave them pseudonyms in the study to protect their identities. The demographic information summarizes the essential characteristics of the participants.

Data collections

Data were collected through seven semi-structured one-on-one interviews each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The research ethics committee reviewed and approved the interview questions designed by the main researcher. These were informed by the research objectives and the participants' contexts. The intent was to enable participants to share their experiences and stories in their own words. The process began with the researcher introducing herself, including affiliation and contact details. This was followed by a detailed explanation of the study, its objectives, and how the participant's contribution would be beneficial. The assent/consent form was reviewed with each participant, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview or research at any time without justification. The researcher informed the participants that the interview would be audio-recorded, with their permission sought. Any questions from participants were answered. The participants were asked about their current age, the age at the time of abuse, the identity of the perpetrators, and the frequency of the abuse. The interviews were conducted at facilities where participants receive care to provide privacy and a safe environment for sharing. However, due to COVID-19 community quarantine restrictions, one interview was conducted at a participant's home when access to the Quezon City Protection Center was limited.

Data analysis

The researcher analyzed the data following the steps recommended by Smith et al. (2012) for conducting IPA. These steps included 1) reading and re-reading, 2) making explanatory, descriptive,

linguistic, and conceptual notes, 3) developing emergent themes, 4) seeking connections among emergent themes, 5) moving on to the next case, and 6) identifying patterns across cases or levels of interpretation.

The researcher transcribed all the audio-recorded interviews. Each transcription was verified for accuracy then read and re-read three times before beginning to take notes and make initial comments. This process helped the researcher recall specific interview details and gain a sense of the participant's state of mind during the interview. It also allowed for careful attention to the language participants used. When the notes or comments were side by side with the more relevant portions of the transcript, these were transformed into concise and pithy statements. This stage enabled the identification of emergent themes, representing a *"slightly higher level of abstraction"* or *"psychological conceptualization"*, as mentioned by Smith et al. After identifying these themes, the researcher sought connections among the emergent themes and organized them based on conceptual similarities, providing each with a descriptive label. The researcher repeated this process for each transcript (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). To consolidate the emergent themes for each case, a table was created. This facilitated the identification of patterns across cases, leading to the discovery of superordinate themes.

The researcher then began writing the narrative for each case, forming the idiographic presentation. This involved taking the identified themes and writing them up one by one. The theme was written up using extracts from the interview, followed by analytic comments on the important experiential items. Direct quotes from the participants were used to ensure the interpretation was accurate in making meaning from their experiences.

The researcher identified and bracketed emerging themes during the analysis of each case and continued this process until all narratives were complete. The researcher then searched for patterns of meanings (for example, similarities and differences) across the cases to form the emerging insight.

Ethical consideration

The Research Ethics Committee of Miriam College granted ethical approval for the study on June 08, 2020. Participants were fully briefed on the research and gave consent before data collection. They decided to participate voluntarily and were informed they could withdraw anytime without justification.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the quality and rigor of this qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria were implemented throughout the research process. The following strategies were employed to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability:

Credibility

Several measures were taken to enhance the credibility of the findings. Prolonged engagement was achieved through in-depth interviews with participants, allowing for a deep understanding of their experiences. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts and initial interpretations with participants to verify accuracy. Peer debriefing sessions with the research adviser and panel members helped challenge assumptions and refine interpretations. Triangulation was implemented through the use of multiple data sources, including interviews, researcher's reflective journal, and field notes.

Transferability

To facilitate transferability, thick descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and study settings were provided. Detailed accounts of the participants' experiences and the research process enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. The selection criteria and recruitment process were thoroughly documented to provide context for the study population.

Dependability

An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting all methodological decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical steps. The research adviser and panel members reviewed the research process at various stages to ensure consistency and thoroughness. Regular consultations with the research team helped maintain the stability of the findings over time.

Confirmability

To establish confirmability, the researcher maintained a reflective journal documenting personal insights, potential biases, and decision-making processes throughout the study. The audit trail included raw data, analysis products, process notes, and personal notes, allowing for transparency in how conclusions were reached. The research adviser and panel members reviewed the analysis process to ensure findings were grounded in participants' experiences rather than researcher bias.

Results

Please remember the following information regarding the participants in the study:

seven adolescent girls were interviewed in-depth. Their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1. At the time of the study, they were under the care of a residential facility or protection center operated by a religious congregation, nongovernmental organization, and local government unit. To protect their identities, they are referred to in the study using the pseudonyms Melissa, Jewel, Audrey, Nica, Janice, and Hapi. All the participants come from low-income households. The topics of the in-depth interviews

covered different aspects of the phenomenological experience, namely, 1) recounting the abuse, 2) coping strategies and sources of support, 3) impact on identity and purpose, and 4) meanings and symbolic interpretations. The superordinate and subordinate themes are shown in Table 2. Six superordinate themes emerged from the interviews: 1) Experiencing the sense of loss, 2) Healing as a process, 3) Having a supportive environment is important, 4) Growing faith in God, 5) Reclaiming the sense of self, and 6) Altruism.

The metaphor of a dying plant being brought back to life captures the emerging insight of this study. The shared experience of the participants emphasizes two important facets. The first is the sense of loss associated with the abuse, and the second is the journey of overcoming this adversity to reclaim their lives. Their collective story is captured by the symbolism of a dying plant, that given the right care and environment, aspires to blossom with renewed optimism and vitality.

Superordinate theme 1: Experiencing the sense of loss.

This theme indicated the sense of loss experienced by the participants as victim-survivors of CSA, which can be likened to a death-like loss. This manifested in several ways, captured in the three subordinate themes. First, the violation of their bodies destroys their sense of self. Second, the abuse often comes from trusted family members or adults, compounding the loss with a profound sense of betrayal and grief. Finally, the complex family dynamics and societal norms surrounding CSA create feelings of ambiguity and ambivalence, making it difficult to confront and make perpetrators accountable.

"It was so painful. I lost my dignity as a woman... I felt my world crumbling, hope had slowly slipped away... I felt like I lost my life. I lost my motivation to go to school. I would just be staring blankly into space." (Melissa, 17 years old)

"I was so sad when it happened to me, especially the first time my uncle raped me. It pained me that I stopped going to school for a year." (Jewel, 18 years old)

"It's so painful. I feel so devastated. I'm no longer clean... I think about it all the time because my uncle said it so. He said I'm dirty just like any other prostitute." (Janice, 15 years old)

"It is difficult to accept, and it is painful that my father did that to me... I didn't think he could ever do that to me... There are times I want to die, take my own life because of what happened." (Deny, 14 years old)

"I thought of putting my uncle in jail, but I am worried for my two young cousins. No one will look after them and send them to school. Their mother left them. What if they ask why I sent their father to jail? I don't know what to tell them." (Melissa, 17 years old)

This superordinate theme delves into the profound sense of loss experienced by victim-

survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA). The theme is characterized by three key aspects that intertwine to create a complex emotional landscape. Firstly, victims often experience a deep loss of self, describing feelings of diminished dignity, self-worth, and identity due to the violation of their bodies. Secondly, the abuse, frequently perpetrated by trusted family members or adults, compounds this sense of loss with intense feelings of betrayal and grief. Lastly, the complex family dynamics and societal norms surrounding CSA create a sense of ambiguity and ambivalence, making it extremely challenging for victims to confront the abuse and hold perpetrators accountable. These interrelated aspects collectively contribute to the overwhelming sense of loss that permeates the experiences of CSA survivors.

The participants' quotes vividly illustrate these experiences, highlighting the devastating impact of CSA on their lives, including disrupted education, suicidal thoughts, and struggles with self-image. The theme also touches on the complicated decision-making process victims face when considering reporting their abusers, especially when familial relationships are involved.

Superordinate theme 2: Healing as a process

This theme revealed healing as a continuous journey for the participants as CSA survivors. While some feel they have overcome the most painful aspects, recovery remains a work in progress. Two distinct subordinate themes surface from the participants' narratives relating to healing as a process. Most participants expressed they have moved past the painful stages of their experiences, suggesting healing has begun. On the other hand, some articulate a sense of an ongoing struggle to overcome the hurt and pain inflicted by the abuse.

"Hmmm... it's like, I'm somewhat past the painful stage. It is not as painful as before... I feel I'm safe here. I'm not afraid to be near men. Nothing bad will happen now that I'm in the shelter... I'm no longer staring blankly into space, not talking to myself. I can now do things I'm supposed to do, like doing the chores. I think I have improved, I'm back to my hobbies." (Melissa, 17 years old)

"Unlike before, I don't get so emotional anymore when I recall the experience. But I can say I'm only partially healed because the case is yet to be decided by the court. I still have some trauma, but I'm trying to move on." (Jewel, 18 years old)

"Uhhmm... I'm still hurting a lot... I don't know, but I'm learning to fight... because they're helping me fight." (Janice, 15 years old)

This superordinate theme explores the ongoing journey of healing experienced by CSA survivors. The narratives reveal two key aspects of this process: some participants feel they have progressed beyond the most painful stages, while others continue to struggle with the aftermath of their abuse. This theme highlights the non-linear nature of healing,

showing that recovery is a gradual and individual process. The participants' experiences align with previous research on the various stages of healing from CSA, demonstrating both the progress made and the challenges that persist. Their accounts provide valuable insights into the complexities of recovery and the importance of continued support throughout the healing journey.

Superordinate theme 3: Having a supportive environment is important.

This theme indicated the importance of supportive environments in healing and recovery. As Melissa alludes to the plant's revival and the importance of proper care from people around, "I am just like the dying plant that was cared for. No one would think it can survive, but it did!" Two key subordinate themes emerged, the significance of social connections, and the nurturing condition provided by the shelter.

"They would always comfort me each time I was abused and beaten up by my father. They were always there for me, encouraging me to fight and never give up... They said I should only think about my studies... I should be strong. They say I'm smart and I can do it. That's why I'm trying to be strong." (Deny, 14 years old)

"It was my teacher who helped me. At first, I was afraid to tell her what was happening when she asked me, but she told me to trust her. She told me not to be afraid." (Janice, 15 years old)

"The sessions help me release my emotions. I want to talk to someone to pour out my feelings, it makes me feel a lot better... to not give up on life. My friends here in the shelter and Sister Dina tell me I can walk past my experience. They give me encouragement and support, and that's why I believe I can do it. I will rise above my sad experience." (Melissa, 17 years old)

This superordinate theme emphasizes the crucial role of a supportive environment in the healing and recovery process for survivors of abuse. It highlights two key aspects: the importance of social connections and the nurturing conditions provided by shelters. The theme is illustrated through powerful testimonials from survivors, demonstrating how encouragement from friends, teachers, and shelter staff has been instrumental in helping them overcome their traumatic experiences and find strength to move forward. These supportive relationships and environments have been pivotal in fostering resilience, providing emotional release, and instilling hope for a better future among the survivors.

Superordinate theme 4: Growing faith in God.

This theme indicated the role of faith in the lives of the participants, especially in their healing after the abuse. Two subordinate themes emerge within this. First is their belief in a higher plan, which gives them hope and optimism. This belief helps them make sense of their difficult experiences and become

hopeful for the future. The second theme is their idea that their prayers are heard, which gives them comfort.

"The session with Sister Dina and the other girls gave me the insight I should not succumb or give in to negative thoughts. I realized I was strong. I will be able to transcend my sad experiences and my problems. This is God's plan for me... I can feel how I'm loved by the sisters in the shelter. They assure me. I can say this is changing me and is bringing me back to God. I think God wants me to be ok, He gave me Sister Dina." (Melissa, 17 years old)

"Despite what happened, I realized God wants me to see that there's goodness in the world, and me. It's not the end of me. I cannot undo whatever happened, but I can still make something good for myself and others like me." (Audrey, 16 years old)

"I prayed to God for guidance so I can make everything right. Then it just happened! I was able to speak confidently to the judge. At first, I was so afraid, but when I called on to God I did it!" (Nica, 15 years old)

The superordinate theme "Growing faith in God" explores how faith plays a crucial role in the healing process of abuse survivors. This theme is supported by two subordinate themes: belief in a higher plan and the comfort derived from feeling their prayers are heard. Participants' accounts reveal how their faith provides them with hope, optimism, and strength to overcome their traumatic experiences. Their belief in God's plan helps them find meaning in their suffering and envision a positive future. Additionally, the participants express how their prayers give them comfort and confidence, particularly in challenging situations. These experiences of faith contribute significantly to their healing journey and personal growth after abuse.

Superordinate theme 5: Reclaiming the sense of self.

This theme revealed the personal experiences and interpretations of the participants as they strive to re-establish their sense of self or agency, amidst challenging circumstances, captured in the metaphor used by Melissa, "I'm like a plant that is about to die, but persists to survive!" They have had to navigate social and gender norms that foster fear and silence. The narratives surfaced the following subordinate themes from the individual participants: overcoming fear to act, overcoming fear of social stigma, understanding that their experiences have made them strong and independent, and reclaiming their dignity.

"My older sibling was afraid to escape fearing our mother's male companions would hurt us, kill us. It was me who found a way for us to escape... I tell myself every day not to be swayed by fear. I must act so I can lift myself and pursue my dreams." (Melissa, 17 years old)

"I'm a fighter now... I'm no longer affected by what others think of me. I cannot control what they think of me or us, and it doesn't matter anymore."

Jarabe, M.L. T., et al. (2024)

It's not my problem if they're stuck in that thinking. I don't want to waste my energy thinking about that anymore." (Jewel, 18 years old)

"I can say I'm not the weak one anymore. No one can trample on me or violate me anymore. I can handle things now on my own... I tell myself to be strong! To just hold on!" (Deny, 14 years old)

"I would like to finish my studies and prove them wrong. I want to show them I'm not weak or someone they can throw their prejudices to." (Audrey, 16 years old)

This theme explores how participants strive to reclaim their sense of self and agency in the face of adversity. Despite encountering social and gender norms that promote fear and silence, these young individuals demonstrate resilience and determination. They share experiences of overcoming fear, challenging social stigma, recognizing their inner strength, and reclaiming their dignity. The participants' narratives reveal a journey of personal growth, from feeling vulnerable to becoming empowered individuals who refuse to be defined by their past experiences or others' perceptions. This theme highlights the transformative power of resilience and the importance of self-belief in overcoming trauma and societal prejudices.

Superordinate theme 6: Wanting to help girls like them (Altruism).

This theme indicated the participants' desire to help girls like them. This is manifested in three subordinate themes: sharing their stories for inspiration, offering support, and actively fighting against abuse. They see helping others as integral to their healing, transforming their experiences into sources of strength and action.

"I want to share my story to others, to inspire them not to give up on life... I will finish my studies and pay forward. I want to return the kindness by donating to shelters assisting girls and women like me who are victims of abuse. I will tell them not to succumb to fear, not to lose hope and instead re-channel their energies to improving their lives." (Melissa, 17 years old)

"I want to help girls like me who experience abuse. The social workers who helped me are my inspiration. I want to become a social worker someday to help them get the services. As a social worker, I can help them seek justice and fight for their rights." (Jewel, 18 years old)

"I will be the one to comfort them this time. I will share with them my experience. I will tell them they should not be defined by what happened... They'll be able to walk past the abuse, and there will be people who will help them do this." (Deny, 14 years old)

This superordinate theme explores the participants' altruistic desire to assist other girls who have experienced similar abuse. The theme is characterized by three key aspects: the willingness to share personal stories as a source of inspiration, the intention to offer support to fellow survivors, and

the commitment to actively combat abuse. For these young women, the act of helping others becomes an integral part of their own healing process, allowing them to transform their traumatic experiences into sources of strength and positive action. Their testimonies reveal a deep sense of empathy, resilience, and a strong desire to create positive change, demonstrating how they've found purpose and empowerment through their commitment to supporting others in similar situations.

Discussions

The findings of this study illustrate the views and insights of Filipino adolescent girl survivors of CSA on their experiences of sexual abuse, healing, and adaptation. Two important facets are highlighted in the lived experiences of the participants, one is the sense of loss they felt from the adversity likened to a dying plant, and the other is the journey toward healing and reclaiming their lives, thus likening it to the plant surviving with renewed hope and vitality. Seven participants, survivors of CSA aged 14 to 18, participated in the in-depth interviews.

Six superordinate themes emerged from the interviews: (1) Experiencing the sense of loss, (2) Healing as a process, (3) Having a supportive environment is important, (4) Growing faith in God, (5) Reclaiming the sense of self, and (6) Altruism.

The first superordinate theme of experiencing the sense of loss indicated by the participants was primarily linked to the violation of bodily integrity further compounded by the betrayal of trust and shattered relationships. This finding mirrors Miller et al.'s (2006) study which emphasized that victims of CSA undergo a deep sense of loss. This loss is accompanied by psychological trauma and the breakdown of significant relationships, especially when the abuse comes from family members.

In Filipino society, the family, as the primary social institution, imparts crucial cultural values—including respect for parental authority, obedience, and family cohesion (Jocano, as cited in Alampay & Jocsion, 2011). Members are bound by deep respect and gratitude, leading to familial obligations and expectations. Even in dysfunctional families, there is an expectation to uphold the family's cohesion and morality. These cultural values play a pivotal role in understanding child sexual abuse within this context.

Participants conveyed their healing as a continuous journey, some past the most painful stages while others have difficulty progressing. This mirrors Draucker et al.'s (2011) findings that healing from sexual abuse is not a linear process, but a life-long journey influenced by various factors. Each participant's path is unique, often complicated by additional childhood maltreatment and familial dysfunction, including physical abuse, neglect, alcohol misuse, and prostitution, aligning with the findings of previous studies (Ramiro et al., 2010; Saunders, 2003; Williams, 2003). Individual traits

like resilience, humor, and environmental support significantly contribute to their healing processes (Arias & Johnson, 2013; Edmond et al., 2006; Haffejee & Theron, 2019).

Participants stressed the crucial role of supportive networks, including friends and family who believed their stories. This belief and sustained support helped reduce their emotional distress, facilitated understanding of their experiences, and spurred necessary action. In collectivist cultures, informal support networks are often the first point of contact during adversity, more than formal institutions. Fear of stigma or lack of accessible services deters victims of domestic violence, such as sexual abuse, from seeking immediate help. Most participants accessed protective services and safety through these informal networks.

Participants also indicated that the nurturing environment in the shelters went beyond ensuring their safety and protection, it promoted their healing process. They described feeling relieved as though a significant weight had been removed. The shelters fostered their recovery through a range of activities and interventions. These findings indicate that the support the participants obtained from the shelters helped them in their positive adjustment and in looking at life more optimistically, contributing to a healthier sense of self. Findings like these are important in considering resilience development in youth who experience adversity such as sexual abuse (Archer, 2006; Arias & Johnson, 2013; Phasha, 2010). Therefore, support from informal networks and organized institutions contributes to the participants' healing and adjustment. This aligns with resilience research, highlighting such supports as critical to fostering resilience in youth facing adversities (Masten, 2007; Ungar, 2011).

Participants indicated the significant role faith in God has in making sense of their experience. The belief that God has better plans for the participants helps them draw strength amidst difficulty and maintain hope and optimism. Meanwhile, the belief that God listens to them provides comfort. This finding demonstrates the influence of faith on the participants' coping and recovery, emphasizing the connection between spirituality and the healing journey of the survivors. This link between spirituality and the recovery journey is corroborated by various studies (Bogar & Hulse-Killacky, 2006; Draucker et al., 2011; Knapik et al., 2008; Phasha, 2010). These studies underscore the perception and experience of faith or spirituality at every stage of the healing process. As demonstrated by the participants, faith or spiritual awakening is a crucial component of their healing journey.

The fifth superordinate theme captures the personal experiences and interpretations of the participants as they strive to regain their sense of self and agency amidst challenging circumstances. They have had to navigate social and gender norms that foster silence. Their narratives indicated overcoming fear and stigma, understanding that

their experiences have made them strong and independent, and reclaiming dignity. These findings are similar to other studies which suggested that when girls can find meaning, they have less negative appraisals about the abuse experience and can view it differently, thereby minimizing the impact and consequently adjusting in more positive ways (Haffejee & Theron, 2019).

The participants expressed a determination to improve their lives, demonstrating that their experiences with abuse do not define them. They have individual and collective goals, and their forward-looking mindset indicates personal control and self-regulation. The participants envision themselves remaining in the shelters, pursuing their education, and ultimately working towards their dream careers. They also express aspirations to start their own families and help girls who have faced similar situations. These findings align with other studies that highlight the feelings of strength, maturity, hope, and optimism that often emerge in survivors of CSA. They view their experiences as lessons and opportunities for personal growth and change, a chance to reclaim their identities (Himelein & McElrath, 1996; Phasha, 2010).

The sixth superordinate theme revolves around the participants' desire to support girls who have experienced similar situations. Participants' intention to show altruism could be seen as agentic, especially considering their experiences of abuse and subsequent awareness of the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual abuse and other forms of violence. Altruism is often identified as a significant aspect of the healing process. Many studies indicate that survivors of sexual abuse frequently engage in altruism as a response to their experiences (Draucker et al., 2011). As the participants progress in their healing journey, they envision and commit themselves to charitable endeavors.

Strength and Limitation

One of the key strengths of this study is its focus on the cultural context of Filipino adolescent girls who have survived sexual abuse. By addressing a significant gap in the literature that has primarily centered on Western populations, the research enriches our understanding of how cultural factors influence healing and resilience. This emphasis on cultural context allows for a more nuanced exploration of the survivors' experiences, which is crucial for developing effective interventions.

Additionally, the study highlights the intricate emotional journeys of survivors, providing valuable insights into their feelings and responses to trauma. This focus on emotional complexity can inform more tailored and effective interventions that address the specific needs of survivors. The practical applications of the findings are also noteworthy; they extend to various sectors, including social services, education, community interventions, and mental health care. By offering actionable recommendations, the study guides professionals in

developing culturally sensitive and trauma-informed practices that support survivors in their recovery.

Moreover, the research advocates for a holistic approach to recovery by emphasizing the importance of informal support networks and community-based programs. This perspective fosters resilience among survivors by engaging both individuals and their communities in the healing process.

However, the study does have limitations. One primary concern is its generalizability. The focus on a specific demographic—Filipino adolescent girls from low-income households—means that the findings may not be applicable to all survivors of child sexual abuse, particularly those from different socioeconomic backgrounds or cultural contexts.

The sample size and diversity also present limitations; it may lack representation from various geographic areas or experiences related to different types of abuse. A more diverse sample could provide a broader understanding of survivor experiences across different contexts. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study may introduce biases based on participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences. While this approach yields rich, detailed insights, it may also limit the objectivity and reproducibility of findings.

Lastly, the temporal context in which participants' experiences and healing processes are described may be influenced by specific societal attitudes toward sexual abuse or changes in support systems over time. Consequently, the findings may reflect a particular moment that could evolve with changing societal dynamics.

In summary, while this study offers significant strengths in enhancing our understanding of child sexual abuse within a Filipino context and providing practical implications for various fields, it also faces limitations regarding generalizability and potential biases inherent in qualitative research methods.

Implication of the Study

The findings from this study, which gathered insights from Filipino adolescent girls who survived sexual abuse, significantly enhance our understanding of child sexual abuse, healing, and resilience within a cultural context that has been underrepresented in existing research. By highlighting the complex emotional journeys of survivors, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature, particularly as previous studies have predominantly focused on Western settings. This research is particularly relevant for the nursing profession, as it underscores the necessity for culturally sensitive approaches in nursing care for survivors of sexual abuse.

Significance to Nursing Practice

The insights gained from this study can inform nursing professionals on how to better support survivors through tailored interventions that consider their unique emotional and cultural experiences. Understanding the intricate emotional landscapes of these survivors enables nurses to develop more

effective therapeutic strategies that not only address immediate health concerns but also promote long-term healing and resilience. This is vital as nurses often serve as frontline caregivers who can facilitate recovery by fostering a supportive environment.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of trauma-informed care practices. Nurses equipped with knowledge about the specific challenges faced by survivors from low-income backgrounds can advocate for and implement care protocols that are both sensitive and appropriate. This approach can lead to improved health outcomes and empower survivors by providing them with tools to manage their emotions effectively.

While the study offers invaluable insights, it is crucial to recognize its limitations in generalizability. The experiences of participants from low-income households may not reflect those of all survivors of child sexual abuse. Therefore, nursing professionals must remain aware of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their patients to provide individualized care.

The implications extend beyond individual patient care, they also inform broader systemic changes within healthcare settings. By integrating these findings into training programs for nursing students and ongoing professional development, educators can prepare future nurses to engage compassionately and effectively with survivors. This includes fostering an understanding of the role of informal support networks and community resources that can aid in recovery.

In conclusion, this study not only sheds light on the resilience and healing processes among Filipino adolescent girls who have experienced sexual abuse but also serves as a critical resource for nursing professionals. By applying these insights, nurses can enhance their practice, contribute to better health outcomes for survivors, and advocate for culturally competent care within healthcare systems.

Declaration of Interest

None

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during the current study are not publicly available due to the topic's sensitive nature but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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