

Meanings and Experiences of Survival Among Filipino Women Survivors of Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Most research focuses on the negative effects of violence on women, but not enough attention is given to potential positive outcomes. By understanding the importance of this perspective, it is essential to highlight the resilience and empowerment that can emerge from such experiences. A comprehensive, semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 Filipino women survivors of abuse to bridge this gap in the existing literature. This study explored the detailed experiences of these women, aiming to understand the deep meanings they associated with their overall survival journey. Results from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of qualitative data revealed that moving forward is reinforced by identifying sources of strength and a genuine acceptance of reality. Moreover, the findings established that women have the potential to harness resources and support from various spheres, including social networks, spirituality, employment, and even social media, to regain their empowerment. In the early phases of coping, the women primarily dealt with their emotional distress and sought instant relief. Over time, they were able to transcend their traumatic experiences, viewing their survival journey as a test of character, a journey of empowerment, affirmation and submission to God's purpose, a story brimming with hope and new possibilities, and a transformative shift in their perspective on marriage.

Keywords: Coping strategies, Filipino women, the journey of survival, the meaning of survival, women empowerment, women survivors of abuse

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INTRODUCTION

The state recognizes the role of women in nation-building and shall ensure fundamental equality before the law of women and men, as enshrined in the 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, Article 2. This provision is an important declaration recognizing women as indispensable in the affairs of the state. However, being a woman can be a double-edged sword, considering that some of her rights are not protected.

Violence against women is prevalent in all societies and has been identified as a global phenomenon. The World Health Organization (2024) and European Institute for Gender Equality (2022) estimate that 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a partner or non-partner at some point in their lives. The ramifications of this have harmed their lives and their children, posing a significant threat to society's well-being (Lombard & Mcmillan, 2013). This age-old issue and reality have gained urgency (Garcia-Moreno & Watts, 2011) because of the significant work of women advocates and survivors in shedding light on the issue (Crann & Barata, 2019).

Violence against women has long persisted in the Philippines (Bautista, 2023; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018; Valdez et al., 2022), where the patriarchal family structure and cultural expectation of wives' submission to their husbands (Bernarte et al., 2018; Estrellado & Loh, 2016; Gregorio & Arguelles, 2020) make Filipino women particularly vulnerable.

Numerous studies have explored the types of abuse (Komaruddin, 2019), their impact on women's physical, emotional, and psychological health, and the factors contributing to violence (Abbas et al., 2023; Ahmad-Stout et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2018; Batool et al., 2016; Christaki et al., 2023; Clemente-Teixeira et al., 2022; Frank et al., 2024; Masongsong, 2023; Mellouki et al., 2023; Padmapriya & Alagesan, 2024; Sachdeva & Sharma, 2024; Shoib et al., 2022), as well as why women remain in abusive relationships (Brown, 2014; Co et al., 2019; Gregorio & Arguelles, 2020; Labrague, 2022; Superable, 2018; Valdez et al., 2022).

However, limited research exists on how women survivors recover and find meaning in their past abusive relationships, especially within the local contexts. While several studies highlighted the negative effects of abuse on women, such as powerlessness, submissiveness, and defenselessness, there is a gap in understanding the positive outcomes and empowerment that women may experience after escaping abusive relationships.

This study underscores the strength that enabled these women to escape their traumatic situations, contributing to the growing corpus of knowledge on women's capacity for self-liberation and social empowerment. Moreover, this research can help the community better understand the complexities of transitioning from victim to survivor, fostering empathy and encouraging others to find the courage to break free.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory aims to discover how people interact within systems and potentially provide solutions to confronting and eliminating oppressive systems and structures. Feminist theory takes into account the lived experiences of all individuals, with a focus on oppression. While there is no consensus on where feminist theory fits as a theory or paradigm, disrupting oppression is a central tenet of feminist work (Arinder, 2020).

Feminist theory's fundamental principles are sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, diversity, and choice. There are systems and mechanisms in place that discriminate against individuals with these characteristics, as well as against equality and equity. Critical paradigm research needs the premise that truths can be disclosed by exploring the existing conditions in the current social order. More importantly, this exploration can raise awareness of oppressive structures while providing spaces for various voices to speak for themselves (Egbert & Sanden, 2019). Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (Hooks, 2000).

Feminist theories emphasize the empowerment of women as a way of liberating them from abusive relationships. Women empowerment refers to enhancing women's social, economic, political, and legal positions to ensure equal rights, opportunities, and decision-making abilities, consequently leading to their self-worth, dignity, and autonomy (Jain, 2023; Princy, 2023; Reshi & Sudha, 2022; Sen et al., 2023).

Women empowerment entails women's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability had been previously denied them (Malhotra et al., 2009).

Breaking off an abusive relationship is a difficult process that typically involves several attempts and stages (Childress et al., 2021). At the onset, victims attempt a variety of strategies to address their circumstances (Bermea et al., 2020). Women often decide to leave when they reach a turning point—a critical event or a moment of realization where the situation becomes unbearable (Basilio et al., 2022; Heron et al., 2022; Sani & Pereira, 2020).

The type and quality of support from formal and informal sources, provided during and after the separation, have been recognized as important factors influencing the decision to stay or leave (Ekström, 2015; Notko et al., 2022; Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2020; Taket et al., 2014). Personality characteristics (Estrellado & Loh, 2013), access to external resources (Barrios et al., 2021), obtaining a protection order (Buchbinder, 2020), survivor-centered interventions (Cattaneo et al., 2020), support from family, friends, and related organizations (Abulon, 2014; Baholo et al., 2014; Okedare & Fawole, 2024), and forming a new intimate relationship (Ko & Park, 2020) impact the likelihood of successfully leaving significantly. Furthermore, demographic factors such as age (Keeling et al., 2016), ethnicity (Heron et al., 2022), education (Mariam, 2014; Zhou et al., 2021), and occupational status (Ben-Porat & Reshef-Matzpoon, 2023) play

a crucial role in influencing the decision-making process.

Scholars and practitioners have explored the role of religion (Pertek et al., 2023) and faith-based organizations (Bowland et al., 2012; Braganza et al., 2021) in shaping the experiences of gender-based violence. Religious beliefs and communities offer women meaning, support, and safety within intimate spaces (Landman & Mudimeli, 2022; Pertek et al., 2023). This spiritual framework enhances survivors' psychological resilience by fostering hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and overall psychological well-being (Murphy & Anstiss, 2022).

METHODS

This study used a phenomenological inquiry approach to examine women's survival experiences of abuse. The phenomenological approach best captures people's perspectives and curiosity about their lives or practices because it is more concerned with comprehending how individuals interpret their experiences, create their worlds, and give meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Furthermore, phenomenology is a qualitative approach that seeks to explain the meaning of the lived experiences of individuals (Moran & Mooney, 2002). For this study, the phenomenon of survival was culled out through describing and understanding the lived experiences of women survivors. The phenomenon was

elicited based on their own experiences of survival and the meaning they attribute to their entire experience of moving on with their life and starting a new chapter. In the conduct of phenomenological methods, a researcher must be in direct contact with the phenomenon itself, assume that he/she does not know the phenomenon but wishes to, and use methods that will portray human experience in experiential terms (Seamon, 2000).

Data saturation of women's experiences of abuse was reached by Participant 10. Hence, the study utilized ten (10) participants (Table 1). While both men and women can become victims of abuse, women seek treatment more often because men must first overcome internal and external obstacles (Galdas et al., 2005).

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The major tool was a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Journal writing was also used to supplement data collection. During this procedure, the researchers' insights and reflections were written to bracket out preconceived assumptions and opinions about the phenomenon being studied. The researchers used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine participants' personal stories and narratives meticulously. The researchers elaborate on the experiential themes, combined with the researchers' critical analysis, which describes double hermeneutics in interpretative phenomenology.

Table 1
Socio-demographic profile of the participants

Participant	Age	Civil status	Religion	Highest educational attainment	Occupation	Number of years not living with the abuser
P1	41	Married	Born Again	Bachelor's Degree	Businesswoman	16
P2	30	Married	Church of the Nazarene	Bachelor's Degree	Accountant	3
P3	50	Married	Roman Catholic	Bachelor's Degree	Administrative Staff	4
P4	35	Married	Roman Catholic	Bachelor's Degree	Instructor	4
P5	41	Married	Roman Catholic	Master's Degree	Instructor	10
P6	23	Single	The Christian Spiritist in the Philippines	Bachelor's Degree	None	11
P7	45	Married	Jesus is Lord Church	Completed Secondary Education	Sales personnel	5
P8	37	Married	Roman Catholic	Master's Degree	Science Research Specialist	15
P9	38	Married	Roman Catholic	Bachelor's Degree	Government Employee	7
P10	57	Married	Roman Catholic	Bachelor's Degree	Motivational Speaker	17

Ethical Consideration

Since the study targeted women survivors of abuse, informed consent was strictly used. Experts in clinical psychology and counseling validated the interview guide to ensure the items were relevant and psychologically safe to administer. The instrument was pilot-tested with one participant not on the final list. To guarantee the utmost confidentiality of the participant's responses and preserve the secrecy of their identities, the researchers adhered to the stipulations outlined in Republic Act No. 10173, otherwise known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012. As such, pseudonyms were

utilized during the transcription process. All interview audio recordings and transcripts were kept in password-protected files on a hard drive that is further secured under lock and key. In an effort to safeguard their privacy, the interviews were held in safe and private locations, far from any potential physical threats. In addition, no visual documentation in the form of videos or photographs was captured.

RESULTS

The findings yielded a survivor pathway toward the women empowerment model (see Figure 1).

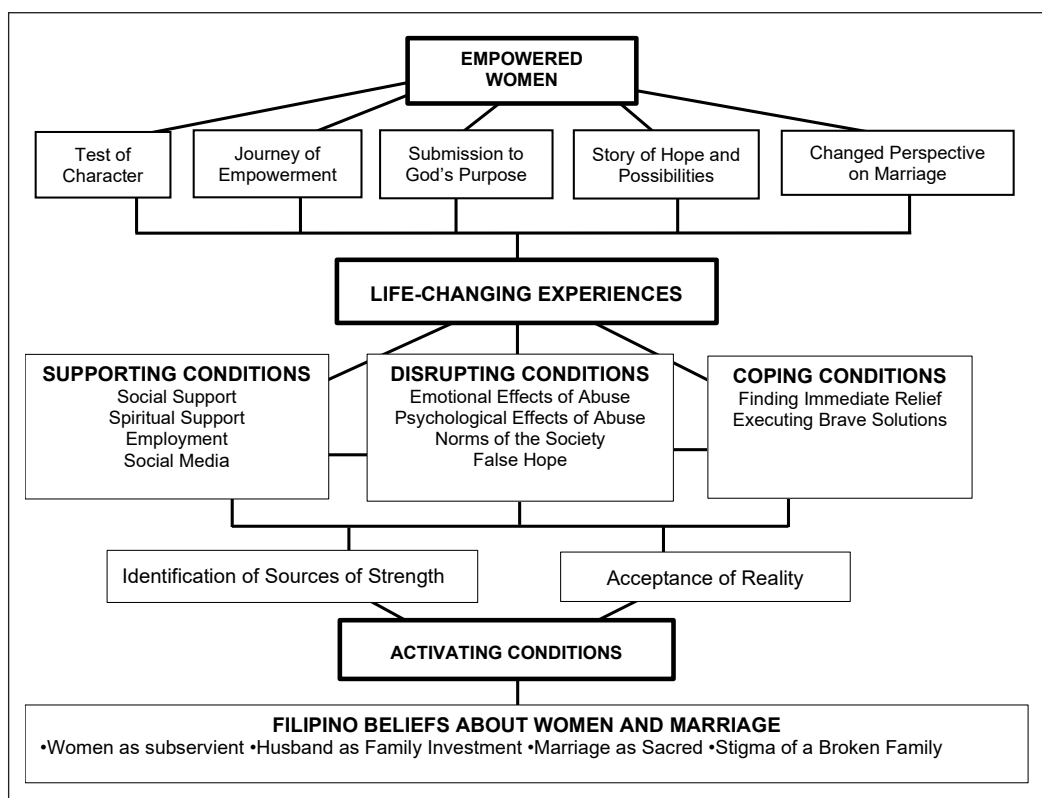


Figure 1. Survivor pathway toward women empowerment model

The model outlines a pathway describing how women reach a stage of empowerment after experiencing abuse. Women survivors exhibited significant courage and took considerable time before deciding to let go and break away, influenced by cultural factors. Cultural beliefs portraying women as meek, obedient, and subservient contributed to their unhealthy tolerance of abuse. Additionally, family members often viewed marriage as an investment that enhanced the family’s status in the community. Women were led to believe that a compliant husband would ensure a happy and comfortable life, as marriage is seen as an honor to the family tree. Moreover, marriage was considered sacred,

and breaking away from it was perceived as a moral sin. As a result, many women endured abuse to preserve the sanctity of marriage and avoid being judged within the conservative culture of the Philippines, where close family ties are deeply valued. In some cases, women also tolerated abuse to protect their children from the stigma of coming from a “broken home” and to maintain the image of a complete family. These cultural, familial, and societal expectations delayed the decision to move on. However, once women realized they could rely on the affection and support of their family members, they found the motivation to move forward and achieve empowerment.

The support from close family and local organizations played a crucial role in accelerating the women's decision to move on. These supporting conditions were often interconnected with disrupting conditions, and together, they shaped the survivors' journeys. Coping mechanisms emerged as critical elements in their healing process. These supporting, disrupting, and coping conditions contributed to life-changing experiences collectively. Through these experiences, the women found meaning and purpose in their lives, allowing them to rise above their past and emerge as empowered survivors.

Motivations Towards Survival

Identification of Sources of Strength

This theme reflects the recognition of key elements that provide women with the resilience, motivation, and support to overcome challenges and adversity. These sources include personal relationships, such as family and children, as well as spiritual beliefs that offer comfort and perspective. By identifying these sources of strength, the women gained the emotional and psychological support necessary to heal and move forward, altering their trajectory away from abuse.

Nine out of 10 women survivors revealed that their primary sources of strength were their children, family members, and faith in God. As P4 articulated,

I have two young lives who are dependent on me. I wasn't able to find a reason for myself, but I've chosen to live for my kids. (P4)

P1 described how her faith allowed her to reframe the attack and gain a clearer perspective on her situation:

Despite the entire situation, God still orchestrated everything for a purpose; in the end, I realized it was my victory because I am with my child, and I see her as a gift from the Lord. (P1)

Acceptance of Reality

This theme essentially alludes to women's recognition of their unfavorable situation, which became a catalyst for ending the abuse. Upon realizing the futility of trying to change their husband's behavior, they made the brave decision to leave. Reaching a critical turning point, the survivors accepted their reality and recognized that trying to salvage their marriages was no longer viable. P4 recounts her journey of commitment, betrayal, hope, and, ultimately, the moment she decided to move forward with her life.

When I love, I love hard, so the infidelity was so devastating for me. I realized that I needed to move on after I killed hope—hope for reconciliation, hope of him asking forgiveness from me and admitting his mistake, hope of saving my family from being broken, and hope that everything will fall into place. I have learned to accept the reality that these things will never happen. I decided to stop the misery. If they are happy, I told myself, I should be happier. Life must go on! (P4)

The women survivors' acceptance of reality sparked an awakening of the self, marking a turning point in their journey. This awakening involved re-establishing their sense of self, accompanied by the realization that they had the power to change their circumstances. After enduring years of physical and emotional abuse, they ultimately reached a breaking point that empowered them to take control and reshape their lives.

I was in a manipulative relationship. Instead of praising me for being great, he was putting me down, and I believed him even if he told me that he just picked me up from the trash until I got robbed. Instead of helping me, he hurt me. I told myself that it was the last straw. That night, I finally left without bringing anything. (P10)

Personal Coping Strategies

Finding Immediate Relief

During their most challenging moments, women survivors turned to accessible and convenient coping strategies for immediate relief. These short-term solutions provided brief comfort as they endured the abusive relationship. Many participants found solace in intentional, temporary activities that helped them cope, such as detaching from the source of stress, engaging in recreational or solitary activities, and practicing positive thinking. Four women specifically noted that distancing themselves from the source of their stress brought them immediate comfort at the height of the abuse. They shared,

I constantly went home to the province. Simply being home brings a feeling of comfort and security. We don't need to talk things over. Their presence is enough. (P4)

I started to go back to writing. My columns and my creative outputs, like writing, hosting radio shows, producing TV shows, and going back to the radio show for several seasons, were my coping strategies. (P9)

Being alone and engaging in solitary moments have refueled the depleted energy of women survivors at the time of the abuse. For instance, P1, who was so expressive at the time of the interview, was a living example of the thought that going back to the basics can rejuvenate the mind and the heart. As she disclosed,

I sought the words of God. I discovered books on which I focused my attention. I read self-help and success story books, including online blogs about self-love. Another thing that helped me was writing a journal. I put into writing all of my emotional baggage and the pain that I felt. (P1)

Positive thinking was a significant coping mechanism for P2, helping to alleviate feelings of animosity, anger, and dependence. During her reflective moments, she recognized that maintaining a positive outlook was life-changing and fulfilling. P2 revealed,

I thought about the positive aspects of him, and it made me feel lighter. It changed my life, my whole perspective, and a lot more; there is a lot ahead of me. It is very fulfilling that I do not need to seek the approval of other people or affection from him because I am already complete on my own. I started loving myself. (P2)

Executing Brave Solutions

This domain encompasses courageous, daring, self-renewing, and bold undertakings that are not easily seen as available or convenient alternatives to cope with the situation. These coping strategies are oftentimes seen as difficult choices, but they offer a long-lasting solution to the situation. It confronts the most difficult emotion and/or person who caused pain to the survivor. Hence, it is a brave coping strategy. Included in this domain are thriving initiatives, reaching out, and releasing forgiveness.

P4 was a highly competent woman with a good educational background. She has a good career. With her experience of abuse, she even developed herself and initiated self-development activities that heightened her self-worth and value.

I keep reminding myself that the greatest way to get revenge is for them to see me accomplished and living a good life. I went back to school and earned another degree and license, but I was not allowed any opportunity to advance in my career to slip through my fingers. (P4)

Aside from developing resilience, women have found bold coping initiatives through the exploration of something that they were not able to do prior to the abuse. At some point, women have challenged their abilities and skills and dared to go beyond their comfort zone.

I fixed my life. I found a job to support the needs of my child and parents. I even finished my master's degree, and it is a very great accomplishment for me. I felt like I had proved something when I received my diploma. (P8)

I also have not explored my entrepreneurial side before. Now, I produce a lot of essential oils, blends, and other stuff. I showcased my accessories and oils. I would join tournaments and concentrate so much on that. (P10)

The gradual discovery of their abilities and the opportunities to realize them became evident in the actions of these women survivors. During the time of abuse, several survivors found strength in reaching out to others, a challenging path due to societal expectations that women remain quiet, submissive, and self-sacrificing out of fear and dependence on the abusers. Stigma, often exacerbated by a patriarchal culture that encourages victim-blaming, has traditionally kept women silent. However, this study revealed that many survivors courageously broke this cycle by reaching out, speaking up, and seeking support. This

step significantly boosted their confidence and provided relief.

I told my family everything; there was no way of covering him up this time, and the feeling of heaviness within was lessened. (P4)

Forgiveness also emerged as a notable coping mechanism. Although less frequently employed, forgiveness has a profound and lasting impact on those who embrace it. For these women, the act of forgiveness offered a therapeutic release, allowing them to heal. Some women shared brief testimonies about how extending forgiveness positively affected their lives:

I started to learn how to forgive. I no longer feel any emotional burden. (P2)

When I forgave him, my hatred for him disappeared. (P5)

Meanings Attributed to the Experience of Abuse

Test of Character

This domain describes the development of character, which would not manifest otherwise if the abuse had not happened in their lives.

P4 is a woman with a strong disposition who is independent and driven in her goals. When an unlikely circumstance came into her life, she confidently handled it with strength. She remarked,

Whatever life throws at you, confidently catch and hold it, but just for a moment; don't let it stay long. Gain enough

strength and throw it back more forcefully and hastily. (P4)

P9 has chosen to be a single parent for seven years now, and she is confidently playing this role because of her innate tenacity and determination. Her experience further tested her character and even brought out acceptance in the process of going through it. In her own words, there was profound peace when she said,

God will not give us burdens we cannot bear, so it is a way to put our character to the test. I've come to embrace and accept it as a phase that I have to go through in my journey as part of my personhood since no one's story is the same. This is an important part of my story. (P9)

P1, who had gone through a seemingly insurmountable experience when she was in a state of abuse, saw that her experience actually pruned her to let go of unnecessary character in her life. She disclosed with conviction,

I believed the Lord had stripped out the unnecessary characters in my life. Just like a catastrophe, there are typhoons that cause a lot of damage, but after that, they get rebuilt and repaired. (P1)

In this domain, women survivors attributed their newfound strength to their experience of abuse. They discovered qualities within themselves—such as inner fortitude, self-assurance, self-discipline, ambition, optimism, and hope—that they had not recognized before. These traits

emerged as they navigated their challenges and became a source of continuous support, allowing them to move forward with resilience and determination.

Journey of Empowerment

This domain highlights empowerment as a journey toward self-realization. Two key themes of empowerment emerged from the women's experiences: empowering the self and empowering others.

For 17 years, P10 endured an abusive relationship, during which she faced the challenges of safeguarding her own life and that of her children, all while seeking solace and joy. The novel "Journey" jolted her back to the present as she related to the protagonist, who managed to break free from an abusive partner, sparking renewed hope. She felt it was her story and found the courage to move on and stand up. She can interpret her experience as having meant "freedom" for her, including freedom from violence, abuse, fear, and the ability to make decisions without considering the repercussions.

When I decided to do things, I would be hit or reprimanded by him. Before, it was always about him. But now, it is about me—my happiness. (P10)

P2 was also hooked on a miserable relationship that robbed her of experiencing genuine happiness. Her experience empowered her to search for it. She remarked,

I realized that we can change our circumstances by choosing to be happy

and by deciding to get out of that situation. A decision is very important. (P2)

Finding the courage within themselves cascaded into reaching out to others to become instrumental and be of value to those who were still in the situation. P9, who was highly pampered by her family as the youngest child, never imagined that she would end up with a man who is financially controlling and mentally torturing. When she finally found herself and started loving more of who she was, her worldview broadened to empathize with those in a similar situation. In her own words, she calmly and humbly shared,

It also made me a more humane person; it taught me a lot about being humane, and since then, I've made it a point to be kinder to people, knowing that they may be going through a really tough time. I became more compassionate by assisting single parents. (P9)

Women survivors now value the empowerment and freedom they have achieved. This sense of empowerment, arising from their experiences of abuse, is the result of years spent in manipulative relationships that restricted their freedom and suppressed their true selves.

Affirmation and Submission to God's Purpose

This theme acknowledges the sovereignty of God's plans and their positive outcomes. It allows women to affirm God's will while navigating the uncertainties of a divine

plan from an all-knowing Supreme Being. Submission involves willful obedience to events beyond human understanding. P1's affirmation is particularly striking when she says:

I became more resilient. I am no longer the person who easily gives up in times of difficulty. I believe it will come to pass. I will definitely overcome this because God has a plan for me. (P1)

P7 clutched onto the promises of the scriptures as her guiding assurance that God's plans were not in vain. She elaborated,

God has a plan for why it happened. It is probably up to us to find what will truly make us happy. It is also God's way of drawing us closer to Him, so we should trust Him. (P7)

In P7's narrative, she described how God communicated with her throughout her journey, influencing her decision not to challenge Him during her quest for survival. She recounted with enthusiasm her realization of this when she said,

I realized God was trying to tell me I could overcome it! You should not feel down! You should not live like that! (P7)

Story of Hope and Possibilities

After leaving the unhealthy relationship, women found meaning in believing in hope with endless possibilities for a brighter future. For most of the women survivors, hope is what sustained their decision to

continue moving on. In hope, they could see the world and experience the things they were longing for. P8 never thought she could reach a state where she could be in a place completely opposite the life she had with her former partner. Projecting a sincere and grateful smile, she elaborated,

Right now, I am living a happy and contented life. My husband and I are civil toward each other even after the annulment. I found a new partner who loves me and accepts my dark past. My new husband and I have a child now. (P8)

Coming from a family where all her siblings did not end up well with their spouses, P9 was shattered and frustrated by facing the same scenario. She hopes to raise her daughter in a family where parenting is shared under one roof. Nevertheless, she regarded this stage as a significant chapter that is not yet finished. She revealed,

I've come to embrace and accept it as a phase that I have to go through in my journey as part of my personhood since no one's story is exactly the same. This is an important part of my story. Whatever the outcome, whatever happens after this, I really don't know. But I think my story will not be complete without this or having gone through this. It is really part of who I am. But it does not define who I can or will become. I guess I have risen above it. (P9)

Changed Perspective on Marriage

This theme underscores the realization that looking at marriage is not always a bed of roses, as projected in films that women adore and glorify. This changed perspective is anchored on real experiences that others may not be aware of. In the narratives of women survivors, it is apparent that their advocacy for selecting a lifetime partner has significantly changed because marriage is a lifetime commitment. The pain and difficult moments associated with marriage boil down to the decision of whom a woman will commit to marrying. True enough, P3 was so vocal and assertive in her insights about marriage. She discussed,

You should not rush but rather know the man you are to marry well. We actually got married because I got pregnant, but I was not actually ready. You need to know the person really well; otherwise, you will regret it in the end. Once you observe that he is respectful and loving towards his mother, he will surely love his family. My former partner does not show any respect to his mother, including his sibling. (P3)

Similarly, P9's ideals for choosing a partner go back to family preferences that characterize the ideals of a husband or partner. Growing up in a close-knit family where elders always have a 'say' on who they want their children to marry, she said,

Our parents would usually tell us that we should marry someone who is a college graduate and employed at the

same time. A___ might be an engineer, a CumLaude, but what happened to us? (P9)

DISCUSSION

The women survivors identified various motivations for survival. They derive strength from their children and family members, faith in God, and acceptance of reality. Studies show that mothers who prioritize their parental role to ensure the safety of their children (Crawford et al., 2009; Estrellado & Loh, 2014; Sorsa et al., 2023) and aspire to regain control over decision-making (Sukeri & Man, 2017) enhance their resilience. Consistent with previous research (Heron et al., 2022; Miller & Manzer, 2021; Sani & Pereira, 2020), our findings reveal that women leave abusive relationships when they can no longer endure the abuse and become concerned for their children's welfare. Further, faith in God emerged as a significant factor in helping women escape violent relationships, supporting previous studies (Bowland et al., 2011; Gillum et al., 2006; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022) that link faith with optimism. Similarly, Senter and Caldwell (2002) found that women survivors described their feelings for God as deeply emotional, heightened by their struggles and special experiences with the Supreme Being. Acceptance of reality, coupled with the perpetrator's indifference, often served as the final push for women to leave. Warner et al. (2004) support this by showing that reaching a breaking point is what compels a woman to leave her violent partner.

In terms of supportive factors that ignited survival, social support networks, spiritual support, employment, and social media played a pivotal role in helping women rebuild their lives without aggression. Women found empowerment by connecting with others who shared similar experiences and identities. Research (Santos et al., 2017; Skop et al., 2022; Tutty, 2024) has shown that therapy groups for survivors of intimate partner violence offer transformative and positive experiences. Group work with female survivors fosters an empowering space that allows women to reclaim their voices through female-specific support systems. However, survivors also faced significant challenges on their journey to recovery, including the emotional and psychological consequences of abuse and societal norms. Zombil (2017) noted that domestic abuse eroded survivors' self-esteem and exacerbated their sense of isolation. Many survivors felt that their abusers had stripped them of their self-worth. In the Philippines, where strong family ties are deeply valued, the stigma of a broken family is particularly pronounced (Aglia et al., 2024), especially for women who are often expected to uphold familial unity (Raposas, 2008).

Women emerged to be resourceful in utilizing their personal coping strategies to search for immediate relief and take risks in making brave actions. This reflects a key aspect of empowerment theory, which emphasizes the value of taking action to counter feelings of helplessness experienced by members of stigmatized groups. By

taking such steps, individuals can reclaim control and influence over their personal and professional lives (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2021; Montes et al., 2021; Slabbert, 2017). Through this process, women regained a sense of control and mastery over their lives—something they were denied during the period of abuse.

As women progress towards survival, they attribute various meanings to their experiences, such as tests of character, the journey of empowerment, affirmation and submission to God's purpose, the story of hope and possibilities, and changed perspectives on marriage. These experiences foster significant psychological growth, leading to a stronger sense of self after a life crisis (Dell'Osso et al., 2022). Post-traumatic growth involves positive changes in behavior and personality following a severe life event. The feminist model, which addresses how male violence stems from historical and contemporary power imbalances that perpetuate women's subordination through control and abuse (Li, 2023), guides efforts to support those still in abusive relationships. This model promotes self-determination and female empowerment, recognizing women's agency, strength, and resilience. Consequently, these survivors often become advocates and voices for other women facing abuse.

Many survivors of domestic abuse regarded their spirituality and sense of self within their religious group as essential elements of their identity and experience (Faizah, 2023; Kaufman et al., 2020; Landman & Mudimeli, 2022; Quing, 2021).

They framed their experiences of abuse and healing within the context of their faith, viewing it as a source of strength and guidance. This is consistent with the concept of active hope, which emphasizes the proactive steps individuals take to confront daily challenges—hope is seen as an action rather than a passive state (Johnstone, 2014). This aligns with studies of domestic abuse survivors, who each developed their methods for leaving violent relationships, driven by hope and the desire for independence. Furthermore, the shifts in their standards for choosing a partner reflect the flexibility of personal constructs or schemas as individuals adapt their interpretations based on new experiences. As George Kelly's (Cherry, 2023) theory suggests, these constructs are subject to change as people incorporate new insights into their worldviews.

CONCLUSION

Interventions should always include connecting these women to organizations or significant others like family, friends, and colleagues to strengthen the support system. When providing psychosocial support services, immediate relief has to be provided, and personal coping strategies have to be checked to assist women in exploring available and accessible recreational activities such as sports, spiritual, artistic, entrepreneurial, and solitary reflective activities. The importance of growing self-reliance, forgiveness, disclosure, and reconciliation in individual and community interventions should be incorporated, as

they are useful strategies to bring long-term consequences to women's survival journeys.

Women survivors can be trained to give psychosocial support services to other women survivors of abuse. Front-line responders to women survivors, such as local government officials, police, and social workers, may reconsider their guidelines and policies in order to institutionalize gender-responsive and affirmative activities that support the empowerment of women, such as the reinforcement of women's desks, advocacy campaigns on women's rights, and recognition of women's role in the economic and political spheres of influence.

Implications of the Study

The study contributes to feminist theories by demonstrating how women find positive meanings and personal growth in their experiences of abuse. This challenges traditional feminist views that emphasize victimization and powerlessness. By highlighting survivors' agency in reshaping their narratives and reclaiming strength, the study enriches feminist discourse with new insights into resilience and empowerment. It expands the feminist framework to encompass not only overcoming adversity but also achieving positive outcomes and self-empowerment beyond mere victim status.

The results suggest that cascading life skills and competencies among frontliners that cater to women victims of abuse, like the local government officials, police, social workers, first aid responders, and volunteer groups, are necessary. Training

them in psychological debriefing, supportive communication, and empathic listening is crucial. On a micro level, one-stop-shop services can be activated in the local government units where immediate mental health support is made available, such as mental health first aid, referral services, and therapeutic intervention can be made available to women in distress. Legal services can be made accessible by installing free legal assistance in social welfare agencies so women survivors can be equipped with informed and legal alternatives that are rights-based. Community advocacy groups can initiate advocacy programs about gender violence to educate women on their rights and the different opportunities to save themselves. Platforms like the local media can feature stories of survival among women and also include informative news about protocols for reporting and responding to women's cases of abuse. Moreover, local and national agencies working with women survivors should increase the availability of responsive, inclusive, and comprehensive intervention and recovery programs.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the phenomenon of survival among women survivors of abuse; hence, future studies may delve into longitudinal studies to examine risk factors and positive sustaining factors to document patterns in personal and interpersonal adjustments. Evaluation and impact studies on community services availed of by this population can be conducted to investigate if

these services have contributed significantly to their overall recovery and wellness.

Future research could explore case studies on the quality of relationships among women survivors who decided to remarry after years of being in abusive marriages. Moreover, while this study magnifies women survivors, it also opens doors to understanding the experiences of men who have survived abusive relationships with female partners as abusers. This could provide a more comprehensive view of the dynamics of abusive relationships and offer insights into the support needs of all survivors, regardless of gender.

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