

Inner Strength and Coping Strategies of Women Victims of Domestic Violence in Cebu City, Philippines

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Abstract

This study focused on the inner strength and coping strategies of women who were victims of domestic violence. A case study method that utilized purposive sampling, interviews, observation, and focus groups was employed to explore the experiences of three women survivors of domestic violence. The findings revealed that they adopted creative strategies to survive by utilizing their inner strength, leading to successful adaptation to difficult situations, and finding meaning amid abusive relationships through their cherished hopes and dreams of “pag sinabtanay” (peace), “panag-hiusa” (reconciliation) and “matarong ang kinabuhi sa mga anak” (to better the lives of their children). Furthermore, their stories revealed the reasons why they chose to stay in the abusive relationships, namely, (a) the need to protect their children, (b) economic need (lack of shelter and financial support), and (c) strong emotional attachment with their abusive partner who was intermittently kind, and promised that the abuse would never happen again. The women victims’ inner strength stemmed from the need to ensure their children’s security and their faith in God.

Keywords: *Domestic violence, inner strength, survival, hopes, dreams*

Introduction

Violence against women is a global pandemic. The World Health Organization’s European Region (WHO, 2013, reported that 1 in 4 women have experienced sexual and/or physical abuse from an intimate partner. Domestic violence has been regarded as of little significance in most Third World countries. Such violence involves verbal, physical, economic, emotional, or sexual abuse. It happens regardless of race, status, religion, income, and education levels. Most abusers (85%) are men (UN, 2019).

In the Philippines, it has been reported that 1 in 7 married women experience physical violence, and 8% experience sexual violence from their husbands (OECD, 2022). Although the Philippine government has legislated and enforced protective laws since 1987, domestic violence victims still find it hard to leave their partners or spouses. Weak social services and the absence of community and local government programs contribute to the phenomenon. Most women find it challenging to identify if their marital relationship is based on equality or control.

The magnitude of the problem in Asia and the Pacific cannot be overstated. Partners for Prevention, a United Nations program dedicated to preventing violence against women in Asia and the Pacific, conducted a survey of approximately 10,000 men in six Asian countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia, the People’s Republic of China, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Sri Lanka. Many Asian Development Bank urban transportation projects are increasingly being designed with violence prevention features such as effective lighting in and around rail, bus, and metro stations, separate and safe waiting areas, separate carriages for females, panic buttons in trains, and, in some cases, separate queues for men and women. In Nepal, police from women’s police cells, prosecutors, and advocates were trained in women’s legal rights and how to deal with violence against women more effectively. In Pakistan, the Access to Justice Program assisted in the establishment of women’s police cells, the recruitment of more female judges, and the introduction of a Sexual Harassment Bill. In the Philippines, the justice sector reform program trained the Philippine National Police on how to handle cases of violence against women. On a broader policy level, a regional technical assistance project assisted in the strengthening of regional and national legal frameworks to combat human trafficking in Southern Asia (Asian Development Bank, 2017).

Literature Review

Violence against women stems from a system based on male dominance, which guides practices, behaviors, institutions, and norms while compounding the "female experience" (de Souza Santos et al., 2022). Steiner (2009) also noted that perpetrators create an illusion that the victim is the dominant partner. Intimate partner violence leads to approximately two million injuries and 1,300 deaths every year in the United States (Brown et al., 2009). Barnett et al. (1997) pointed out that violence between intimate partners can result in negative outcomes, such as murder, reactive assault, physical illness, neurological, cognitive, and emotional changes, anxiety and physical or emotional deprivation. Abuse is often exceptionally traumatic for victims in a romantic relationship, leading to stress reactions, increased absences from the workplace, and the need for find safety by hiding their scars and pains. Maltreatment negatively impacts the victim's job, career, and economic independence (Brown et al., 2009).

Inner Strength

Inner strength is a very vital aspect of the abusive relationship in order to survive (Davis, 2002). Dunn (2005) described inner strength as a desire for dignity, yearning for good, or the will to live. Strategies are learned and enhanced. Understanding the inner self (reflection), values, and beliefs give meaning in life to the women victims and healing from their experiences of abuse. Spiritual wellbeing gives them hope and meaning when nurtured in caring relationships with other people. The abused women's experiences enforce trust and belief in themselves (Post-White et al., 1996; Davis, 2002).

Coping Response and Adaptive Strategy

There are diverse strategies of coping in response to abuse as experienced by battered women. Avoidance often leads to negative impact-like depression, while problem-solving and seeking social support have positive effects (Amirkhan, 1990, as cited in Swan & Snow, 2006).

Over time, abused women tend to develop a wider range of inner resources to deal with difficult experiences. Common strategies involve improving resilience and social resources. Taking the initiative to save money provides for the opportunity to escape, while maintaining a sense of humor, and keeping a strong faith in God (spirituality) functions to protect some women. All in all, utilization of a social support system, sense of humor, spirituality, and the feeling of hope permits women victims to survive, endure, and disassociate from an abusive partner (Lazarus, 1993; Lu & Chen, 1996; Davis and Ruth, 2002). Those women who lack financial income find that a shelter is the best alternative in times of crisis (Panchanadeswaran & McCloskey, 2007, as cited in Sullivan, 2012).

Hopes and Dreams

Hope relieves victims of domestic abuse from the fear of failing, being denied, or experiencing other setbacks so they can fight for the future that they envision (Boden, 2013). When the victims are feeling sad or depleted, hope is a force that keeps them from losing confidence (Kwan, 2010). There is a definite link between self-esteem (the feeling of liking oneself, competence, and confidence), self-regulation (control and discipline), and dispositional optimism (i.e., agency and pathway) (Ferrari et al., 2012). They displayed a personal faith and belief that God could change their partner in response to their love, thus allowing them to keep the family intact for the children.

Social Support

All women are vulnerable to abuse regardless of circumstances. Hence, it is "common sense" to find help (Brown et al., 2009). McShane (1979) discussed the need for a wide variety of services, from police protection and legal help to emergency shelter, advice and financial support. Landenburger (1993) and Davis (2002) indicated that the most significant support for abused women was social support that gives them a sense of being connected, as well as providing a positive source of strength. Battered women need assistance with their careers, education, and other pursuits (Brown et al., 2009). Career counseling intervention is thus extremely critical given the increased risk that battered

women face of limited employment or advancement, as well as housing challenges as they try to become economically independent from their abusive partners and provide for their families. Addressing the immediate needs of abused women represents a significant need, including identification of vocational or skill-based training programs and opportunities to leave their volatile relationships (Brown et al., 2009). Most battered women do not get the full benefits that professionals in human service institutions have to offer (McShane, 1979). Abused women represent a unique population with different and specific problems. Unfortunately, in most communities, emergency shelters that are so important for their survival are nonexistent. The seriousness and frequency of abuse, access to personnel, perceived sense of self-efficacy, and sensitive formal support systems may influence the willingness of a woman victim to seek help (Gelles & Harrop, 1989).

Objective of the Study

This study explored the experiences of women victims of domestic violence. Specifically, this study addressed the following domains of inquiry: (a) inner strength; (b) coping strategies, and; (c) the meanings of the experiences of the domestic violence victims.

Methods and Materials

Design. A case study approach was employed as the research design in this study. In this paper, the individual stories of three domestic violence victims were recorded to discover how they found meaning in adversity. Davis (2002) noted that experience is the best avenue of learning in life to inform listeners and the persons themselves.

Study Setting. The study was conducted in an urban barangay in Cebu City, considered the third most populated barangay. An increasing number of the residents live below the poverty line and are transient or informal settlers. Their children are at risk of dengue and other contagious diseases. The locale is known for alcohol and drug abuse and illegal gambling incidents. Residents are also prone to receive eviction notices from the landowners.

Sampling and Participants. According to Yin (2002) in a multiple-case study, having three to four distinct cases for comparison is the most that can be realistically handled by the researchers, and the most commonly used sampling technique is criterion-based purposive sampling. The richness of information obtained from qualified participants is more important in qualitative research than the number of participants. The abuse victims, purposively selected, were identified as Aida, Lorna, and Fe (not their real names), and recruitment was dependent to the availability of willing participants. The participants' suitability was validated based on the National Coalition against Domestic Violence (NCADV, 2022) checklist. The women came from impoverished families. Aida was aged 32 and had only completed the seventh grade. Lorna, aged 35, finished junior high school, and Fe was 39 and had just an elementary level of schooling. All women had common-law relationships with their partners, had at least five to six children birthed at one-year intervals, and had no stable income. The women relied on odd jobs such as manicures, pedicures, household chores, and massage for income; their partners had no regular incomes. The following significant characteristics were identified. Participant families featured part-time (manual laborer activity) or unemployed husbands, combined family income was below the poverty line, anxiety and stress were evident due to lack of economic security, spousal disagreement occurred over parenting, verbal aggression was frequent as was alcohol use, and the family was not part of an organized religion.

Data Gathering. Before conducting this study, the researchers sought the consent of the participants by asking them to sign an informed consent form to express their voluntary participation in the study. The researchers made sure that their identities were kept confidential by assigning pseudo-names. During the actual interviews, participants answered demographic and descriptive questionnaires in peer and reflective sessions conducted by the research team. Peer therapy sessions and a focused group discussion were conducted during the second round of data gathering, where the participants described their self-awareness and shared their dreams. To establish rapport, food was offered to facilitate meaningful conversations with participants by having lunch or dinner with them. Multimedia tools were used to orientate participants to the data-gathering process. Audio and video

recorders, journals, and record sheets were used for data gathering. A selective highlighting approach was employed to isolate themes. To validate responses, triangulation was conducted. The data collected were treated with the utmost confidentiality. Data were investigated using thematic content analysis and NVivo Qualitative Software.

Results and Discussion

In this study, an attempt has been made to find transcendent meaning why abuse victims choose to stay with their partners despite violent encounters. This was accomplished by further description of their individual strategies for survival, inner strength, social support, and the personal dreams that helped them to deal with the abuse.

Strategizing for Survival

The mothers manifested various strategies for survival as shown in Table 1. The victims had different reactions and perspectives of the abusive situations. Creative avoidance as a strategy was revealed in the case of Fe. She and her children prepared an “evacuation bag” that was ready to be carried when her husband went berserk. They identified a specific meeting place in case they were separated. Instead of facing the perpetrator, Fe chose to avoid further violence with her children.

Table 1 *Strategies for Survival*

Significant Statement	Formative Meanings
["Molayas na lang mi kung mag wild...."] We will run away when he becomes wild.	Escape from harm
["Mobakwit sa laing balay..sa akong mga amiga...."] We will evacuate to another house, to my friends'.	
["kay wala may choice ate, wa may lain kapuy-an, so mouli nalang mi balik kung mahuwasan... pero sunod semana napud naa nasad...."] Since I don't have a choice and we do not have a house to live in, we have to go home when he becomes sober.	Helplessness, lack of choice
["ako te gukdon man naku siya te. mao na siya mudagan siya kay og onsa akong ma punitan ilabay man naku niya..."] I would chase him. He will run because I will throw anything I can pick up.	Ability to fight back
["Naa mi bag gi andam para sa pag layas... kung mag 'maoy' mo layas mi unya mag kita lang mi sa 'jeep' nga guba. Adto mi motago sa ilalom, og adto ra sad mi matulog."] We have prepared a bag to be brought whenever we will run away. If he becomes wild, we will run away and meet each other at the agreed place—the junked jeep where we will hide and sleep under it.	Creative avoidance
["Mag-buho sa salog para adto mi moagi kung lansangan sa ako bana ang pultahan...."] We will make a hole on the floor so we can use it as passage whenever the main door is fastened with a nail by my husband.	

The case of Aida was different. She had the ability to fight back after she experienced injuries when her partner threw large stones that hit her breast. Aida talked back and threw things at her partner. Her past experience of physical pain made her brave enough to face her abuser. Lorna justified staying in her abusive relationship because she did not have any choice. She went back when the partner was sober. Lorna preferred avoidance, while Aida preferred retaliation as a means to stop the abuse. Fe, on the other hand, preferred to use humor to forget her pains.

Violence is extremely confusing for many battered women, and the abrupt removal of their batterer could make their situations all the more confusing (Mills, 1996). Battered women often find it impossible to get the aid they need because of current gaps and inadequacies in the delivery of social services. Shelters for domestic violence victims and other social service agencies are often overwhelmed with crisis intervention services and a lack of financial resources for the development and implementation of comprehensive vocational training programs (Brown et al., 2009).

In the small administrative district from which the women in this study came, the police tended to humiliate and blame victims. A police officer jokingly told Aida to just have sex with her husband to stop the beating. Villares (2018) revealed that utilization of a government mandated 5% Gender and Development (GAD) budget in selected barangays of Cebu City was concentrated on information dissemination, parade T-shirts, and seminars shared by other stakeholders (senior citizens, youth, LGBT, women, and persons with disabilities) Most barangays in Cebu City do not have a responsive GAD program to help the battered wives. A local government GAD liaison officer admitted that some local chief executives and their appointed GAD focal persons lacked awareness in utilizing the funds, or politics interfered with their intended use. For example, when a GAD local needs to accompany an abused woman to court, they have no budget for transportation. The law is expected to provide women with rights and opportunities equal to those of men, but fails to do so.

The difficult situation experienced by the victims led them to create strategies to manage their resilience and social resources (Lazarus, 1993, Lu & Chen, 1996). Davis (2002) described how some women victims believed that a sense of humor helped them not to think so much about the future. They also believed that spirituality (strong faith in God) protected them. Hamby (2014) identified protective strategies employed by battered women as soon as violence has been initiated. Examples of self-defense actions included fleeing the house, calling for help, and luring the perpetrator from a room.

Inner Strength

Feminist and psychological researchers talk about battered women’s survival “after” the abuse, but not often about their inner strength “within” the abuse. Despite being victims of violence, women display tremendous inner strength and courage to survive. They go back to their abusers but carrying a different and stronger self within themselves. Understanding their inner self (reflection), values, and beliefs give meaning in life to the women victims, and healing from their experiences of abuse (Pagelow, 1981).

Figure 1 reveals the qualitative responses of the mothers in identifying their inner strength. The figure highlights the enlarged terms “Mga Anak” (children) and “Bata” (child) as repeatedly shared by the women victims. Amidst struggles and sufferings, these mothers found inner strength from their children. Being nurturing mothers, their love, care, and concern for their children prevailed over their personal desires to leave their husbands and be away from these abusive and traumatic experiences. This implies that their children were the most important deciding factor in their lives. Aida, Lorna, and Fe perceived that they needed to remain with the batterer (husband) as their means of protecting their children. The victims reflected a deep belief in the importance of being a good wife and mother, and willingness to sacrifice personal freedom to conform to the cultural norms that shaped their decisions. Additionally, there are likely many other cultural influences that shape women’s perceptions. Some victims do not want to leave their abusive marriage as they do not wish to compromise their family’s honor and reputation. When asked if they have thoughts of suicide, Aida, Lorna and Fe sternly said “No” or “Never” because of their love for their children.

Figure 1 Inner Strengths Shown by Women Victims



Highlighted also in the figure is the term “Ampo” (Pray). Their faith in God (“pag salig sa Ginoo”) made them more willing to endure so as to keep their families intact, thus ensuring their safety and protection. Spirituality gives balance when nurtured in a caring relationship with other people. It gives a sense of determination, provides meaning, and a reason to live a better functional life (Post-White et al., 1996; Davis, 2002). However, religion can be used as a mechanism of social control. Aida, Lorna, and Fe talked about their domestic violence and showed signs of recognizing that religion was being used to sustain it. They accepted suffering as part of their faith journey. This perception was influenced by the Roman Catholic tradition where Filipinos believe that to “suffer” like Jesus and endure pain is necessary. Panopio and Rolda (2007) described Philippine society as enduring, since Filipinos celebrate tragedies rather than victories as manifested in long Philippine dramas and telenovelas. The wife victims acknowledged that their pain was affected by the church’s explanations for suffering.

In the abusive situations illustrated in the lives of the three victims, inner qualities such as strength, endurance, and courage to survive were shown. The abused women’s experiences generated trust and belief in self. People may not notice any changes, but an abused woman may be beginning to identify her own strengths and her situation with clarity (Davis, 2002). As indicated in Viglund et al. (2021), Molony defined inner strength as the capacity to endure adversity and then move forward. The common belief that the victims of domestic violence, who stay in the abusive relationship, are masochistic is wrong. The stories of Aida, Lorna, and Fe revealed the reasons why they chose to stay in their abusive relationships: (a) the need to protect their children, (b) economic needs (lack of shelter and financial support), and (c) the strong emotional attachment with their abusive partners who were intermittently kind, given to erratic violent episodes, but gave promises that it would never happen again. The women victims’ inner strength stemmed from their need to provide for their children’s security and their faith in God. As Fe said succinctly: “ampo lang og salig sa Ginoo” (pray and trust with the help of God). Like Fe, their faith in God as their refuge and solace was their source of strength. These wife victims depended on God to survive.

In order to secure their “survivor” status, the wife victims manifested endurance as their strong inner strength in dealing with intimate partner violence. If a victim was not emotionally strong enough, she could not endure the abuse and pain. Herman (2015) recognized that the women who most successfully recovered were those who found meaning in their own experiences that transcended the boundaries of personal tragic events. In the cases of Aida, Lorna, and Fe, this transcendent meaning was derived from their faith in God and their unconditional love for their children and families.

Social Capital and Support

The factors which contribute to resilience are a combination of the overlapping concepts of informal social support system, religiosity, and hope (Davis, 2002). Data have shown that friends are the immediate source of social support for the victims since they may provide temporary comfort, entertainment, and refuge after abuse. Common modes of entertainment are window shopping, videoke sessions, and drinking. Friends give them positive diversions. Friends also provided domestic assistance by babysitting their children so that the mothers could find odd jobs and earn income. One method the wife victims employed to cope with the abuse was conversational interaction. They talked with other women who had similar experiences as them. Davis (2002) indicated that abused women’s awareness about networking with others with the same social status was one way of coping. The most significant support an abused woman can get is a positive social relationship that gives her a sense of being, strength, and connectedness, while lack of a strong support group might contribute to a negative response.

The strategies adopted by Aida, Lorna, and Fe to find social support are detailed in Table 2. One method of coping (diversion) was by talking about the issues that mattered to them with friends. Aida put her faith in perspective—“What keeps me going? My children and the support I get from friends.” Lorna, on the other hand, resorted to self-isolation, as her socialization was restricted by her partner.

Table 2 Social Support

Significant Statement	Formative Meanings
<p>[“<i>ila ko lingawon kanang maymayan ka nila te. Ingnon ka (sic) nganung magpakamatay man ka anang Dodong? Wala mankay ugma ana niya. Lingaw-lingawon ko nila mag inom-inom, mag videoke.</i>” “<i>Mag Gaisano, mag lakaw lakaw....</i>”] They will entertain me through mall hangout, drinking and having videoke, and give me pieces of advice. They will tell why I should be a martyr to Dodong.</p>	<p>Diversion</p>
<p>[“<i>atong tayma nga wa gyod ko, ako anak upat kabook, gi tagoan nila mabdos ko ani (pointing her baby). Osa kabulan ko naa rako sa among sulod wala gyod koy gawas-gawas abi nilag ga unsa naku sa amoang sulod. Mu ingon day gawas intawn dira. Gidungog ko nila sauna gahikog ko....</i>”] That time that I had nothing, they hid my four children from me. I was pregnant then. For a month, I did not go out of the house and they wondered what I had been up to as I was just inside the house. They would tell me to go out. I even had thoughts of having committed suicide.</p>	<p>Self-isolation</p>
<p>[“<i>kung mag manicure ko sila intawn nagbantay (barkada).</i>”] I will do odd jobs like manicure; they will baby sit my kids.</p>	<p>Domestic support from friends</p>
<p>[“<i>ako mama (Mother in Law) te mu bantay ra sila te labi na og naay mu text manawag “day pahilot mi day.</i>”] My mother-in law will baby sit especially if I am called to do massage service.</p>	<p>Domestic support from immediate family</p>

Women with abusive experiences need to be able to communicate their struggles and challenges, as it is through their voices that they can boost their strength, resilience, and sense of empowerment. They need to learn to trust and to believe in themselves so that they can gain insights into themselves. Society has largely ignored the problem of wife-beating. Community services are often not available for battered wives. It is evident that several victims of domestic violence did not receive maximum benefits that professionals in human service organizations had to offer. Since these victims of domestic violence are a unique and marginalized population with specific problems, they must be treated with priority, care, and effective intervention so that society can help them to lead normal lives. Roberts (1996) observed that battered women usually seek crisis intervention only after perceiving a precipitating event referred to as the “last straw.” Because battered women are in continuous peril as long as the batterer knows their whereabouts, it is critical that they are helped in an orderly, structured, and caring fashion.

Unfortunately, lack of cooperation by local police and authorities was evident. There were also poor inter-agency relations and an absence of linkages that could have helped the women victims. In an interview with the Legal Alternatives for Women Center, the lawyers admitted that there was a strong need to empower and enable barangay workers and police officers so that they can more effectively assist women victims in the community. Aside from providing free legal aid and psychosocial intervention to women and child victims of violence, the Legal Alternatives group had been visiting barangays in the city to train public servants in basic paralegal literacy pertaining to women and child violence. As a result, community agencies were emboldened to go further than addressing their more immediate needs (i.e., job training and employment opportunities), and to assist with resources and vocational programs that would help them pursue long-term careers and educational opportunities relevant to their chosen fields of interest. Indeed, victims need strong support and assistance with their careers, educational interests, and pursuits (Brown et al., 2009).

Personal Dreams in Dealing with the Abuse

The keywords “Anak” and “Bata” (child) were repeatedly uttered by the mothers in the interviews (Figure 2). Their significant role as a mother had a strong influence in their dreams for the future. The mothers expressed that they did not have dreams for themselves anymore, but for their children. The violence experienced did not stop their nurturing instincts. Psychological data indicate that, if a person does not have a clear dream about herself, it would imply absence of a personal identity. However, in

(Better lives for the children) help them survive intimate partner violence. The victims' inner strength influences their dreams for their families. They hope that someday their cherished hopes will be realized. Their endurance can contribute to the realization of their hopes and dreams.

Figure 3 *Victims' Hopes and Dreams*



True empowerment for battered women is not achieved by simple obedience to legal, social, and psychological expectations of advocates, health care givers, and the community, but by recognition of the victim's need to reconsider, reframe, and evaluate the meaning of the trauma and of their personal dreams in a supportive environment given a flexible time frame. Instead of looking at domestic violence victims as dysfunctional, families, peers, service providers, policy makers, local leaders, media, and communities should try to understand and appreciate them in terms of their successful adaptation. Institutions therefore need to change their perceptions in order to ensure that battered women in need of services can be genuinely understood. The "blame the victim" attitude has made them accountable for their own abuse. If we could only change our perceptions of these wives who choose to stay with their batterers, then we can discover the source of their strength and gain a deeper understanding of their reasons for staying in the hope of providing interventions to improve their quality of life. If legal, psychological, health practitioners, and communities could reframe their understanding and identify their personal resources as bases for policy formulation and intervention, then that would be enough.

Conclusion

Battered women are the strongest women. They have learned how to survive by utilizing their inner strength of endurance that has helped them successfully adapt to their difficult situations and find meaning in the midst of abusive relationships. This has been accomplished through their cherished hopes and dreams of "pag sinabtanay" (peace), "panag-hiusa" (reconciliation), and "matarong ang kinabuhi sa mga anak" (better lives for their children). The stories of the wife victims examined in this study revealed the reasons why they chose to stay in the abusive relationships were (a) the need to protect their children, (b) economic need (lack of shelter and financial support), and (c) strong emotional attachment with their abusive partners, who were intermittently kind, erratically violent, and then promised that it would never happen again. The women victims' inner strength stemmed from their children's security and their faith in God. The victims' inner strength drove their dreams for their families, hoping that someday their cherished dreams would be realized.

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