

## PERSPECTIVES OF SEASONED SOCIAL WORKERS IN SUPPORTING ABUSE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES: STORIES FROM THE PHILIPPINES

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**Abstract** – *the study focused on the Perspectives of Seasoned Social Workers in Supporting Abuse Children and their Families in a Philippine setting. This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design based on Colaizzi's data analysis method to elicit participant experiences, better understand, and investigate social workers' perspectives, emotions, and reactions connected to their work with abused children. Moreover, the participants of the study are the ten social workers of the Province of Cebu, this number was determined using data saturation. Likewise, the researchers used a purposive sampling design in which participants were purposefully selected based on their experience of abuse. The study generated four themes, these are: (1) Unveiling Hidden Forms of Abuse, (2) Building Bridges Through Intervention and Support, (3) Cultivating Self-Care and Professional Growth, and (4) Seeds of Change.*

**Keywords:** *Social Workers, Abused Children, Philippines*

### Introduction

Social workers are skilled practitioners who aid individuals, families, and communities facing diverse social issues. Addressing the needs of mistreated or abandoned children is a crucial and demanding aspect of the field of social work. Social workers in Cebu province might be employed by either the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide aid to underprivileged children. The majority of child abuse cases entail social workers evaluating the child's safety and welfare, offering emotional assistance to both the child and their family, organizing services in collaboration with other experts, and championing the child's rights and requirements. Engaging in the task of assisting abused children can be emotionally and psychologically exhausting for social workers due to their frequent exposure to distressing circumstances. They must navigate the delicate balance between safeguarding children's well-being and respecting their families' rights.

Heally and Darlington (2019) found that social workers experienced elevated levels of stress and emotional fatigue as a result of the intricate and demanding nature of their profession. In addition, researchers found that social workers faced numerous challenges, such as limited resources and support, and employed diverse coping mechanisms, such as self-care and seeking assistance from colleagues. These coping mechanisms were crucial in helping social workers maintain their well-being and continue providing effective support to their clients. Furthermore, Iversen, Rod, and Underlid (2013) indicated that social workers who operate in such settings face various challenges. For example, social workers have long been scolded for failing to offer adequate assistance and support to abused or neglected children.

Likewise, social workers face various challenges, such as a lack of resources and support, cultural barriers, and safety concerns, all while driven by a desire to protect children and make a difference in their lives. They encounter challenges such as large caseloads, limited resources, and insufficient training. On the other hand, social professionals were dedicated to their jobs and motivated by a desire to help children. Furthermore, according to Lansangan and Buenviaje (2015)'s research, inadequate training, a lack of resources, and safety concerns were all challenges for social workers. On the other hand, social workers were driven by a desire to help children and were committed to providing high-quality services.

The province of Cebu is home to many abused children. With these perspectives and ideas, as well as the goal of this study, Examining the life experiences of social workers working with abused children is deemed crucial by the researchers, since it provides valuable insights for other social workers and contributes significantly to society. As nurse educators, the researcher anticipates that this study will have a substantial influence on the comprehension of managing maltreated children. By understanding the challenges and successes that social workers face in their interactions with abused children, other professionals in the field can gain valuable insights and develop more effective strategies for intervention and support. This study has the potential to inform policy changes and improve the overall well-being of abused children, ultimately leading to a more compassionate and comprehensive approach to child protection. Likewise, the researcher posits that this study will not only increase awareness but also motivate individuals to take proactive measures to prevent child abuse.

### **Methods and Materials**

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design based on Colaizzi's data analysis method to elicit participant experiences, better understand, and investigate social workers' perspectives, emotions, and reactions connected to their work with abused children. According to Wilson and Hutchinson (1991), hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or lived human experiences. The emphasis was on revealing subtleties and seemingly insignificant components of the interaction that individuals may take for granted daily to build meaning and attain a sense of understanding.

Moreover, the participants of the study are the ten social workers of the Province of Cebu, this number was determined using data saturation. Likewise, the researchers used a purposive sampling design in which participants were purposefully selected based on their experience of abuse. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose participants with rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences. This approach is beneficial when studying sensitive topics such as abuse, as it ensures that the participants are willing and able to share their experiences in depth. These are the following criteria for the 10 selected participants: (1) Professional Background, (2) Willingness to Participate, (3) Informed Consent.

The researchers interviewed the individuals in-depth to gather information on their experiences. It produced a vast quantity of interview notes based on voice recordings. The researchers used Colaizzi's Method; the researchers listened to the voice record interviews, which were approved with the consent of the participants, numerous times before proceeding to the formation of meanings and themes. The analysis of the interviews deepened and enriched insights into the social worker's lived experiences, challenges, intervention, coping mechanisms, and impact and rewards in dealing with abused children.

### **Results**

This portion of the chapter presented the different themes as the product of the thematic analysis performed by the researcher. The study generated four themes, these are: (1) Unveiling Hidden Forms of Abuse, (2) Building Bridges Through Intervention and Support, (3) Cultivating Self-Care and Professional Growth, and (4) Seeds of Change.

### **Theme 1: Unveiling Hidden Forms of Abuse**

The study found that social workers encounter numerous types of abuse when working with abused children. Some of these abuses include Sexual abuse, Physical abuse, Emotional abuse, and psychological abuse. These abuses can have severe and long-lasting effects on the children's mental and emotional well-being. Additionally, social workers play a crucial role in identifying and addressing these abuses to ensure the safety and recovery of the children. They are trained to assess the child's needs and provide appropriate interventions, such as counseling or placement in a safe environment. Additionally, social workers collaborate with other professionals, such as law enforcement and healthcare providers, to ensure a comprehensive response to child mistreatment cases.

*"There have been many cases of abuse, some of them psychological, their parents abandoned them, and their relatives did not care. They feel that they have been left alone. There are many types of child abuse." (Informant 2)*

*"There is also that is very crucial, sexual abuse. Although it is not noticeable, many children are in this situation. The worst thing is that it is usually a stranger who abuses, however, according to our current statistics based on our record, there are many cases of incest, meaning their relatives, brothers, fathers, and relatives who are mostly the abusers." (Informant 3)*

### **Theme 2: Building Bridges Through Intervention and Support**

Social workers take a variety of interventions and support measures to address the needs of their clients, depending on the specific circumstances. These interventions may include providing counseling services, connecting clients with community resources, and advocating for their rights. Additionally, social workers may also collaborate with other professionals such as psychologists or medical professionals to ensure comprehensive care for their clients.

**Sub-Theme 2.1: Take Steps When a Case is Reported.** When a case is reported to a social worker, they typically take immediate steps to investigate and assess it. The following were the responses of the participants:

*"The steps that I typically take when a case of child abuse is reported to me, I will make notes, consult colleagues, develop action plans based on procedures, talk to other agencies, talk to the child, and talk to the parent or parents only if it will not jeopardize the safety of the child or young person or compromise a Child Protection or police investigation. These steps are necessary to ensure the child's or young person's safety and to support the parent." (Informant 4)*

*"Yes, if abuses have been reported, this usually also designates information to the barangay. If there are such things, we have VAWC desk officers in every Barangay. So for example, Barangay Lanas is far away, so the first person to be told there is the VAWC desk assigned to the barangay, but it is all confidential. So, they will bring it to the office to be reported, so you report to the office, so you have to interview the client about what kind of abuse he enjoyed or had, so if it is a rape case, child, minor, we will automatically take them to our Women's Children and Protection Desk at the WCPD at the PNP station, like the City of Naga, so the City of Naga and the WCPD will make a referral for me to check there in our pink room in Sotto so I can check if she is there because that is the basis of his medical-legal exam, the medical-legal examination must be established because it is my support for filing the case, oh because if there is nowhere else it can be done so that they will make a referral, then the child to be dropped off at the Crisis Center. So, we are in your custody." (Informant1)*

**Sub-Theme 2.2: Establish Trust and Rapport.** Social workers use communication and interpersonal skills to establish client trust and rapport. They foster a secure and supportive environment where people feel heard, understood, and respected. Social workers can better understand their client's needs, strengths, and challenges by building trust and rapport. This allows social workers to effectively collaborate with clients in developing personalized goals and strategies for improvement. By creating a safe space for open and honest communication, social workers can also help clients explore their emotions and experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of their own situations.

*"Those children will not open up right away. Adults do not even open up immediately if we do not know the person; what about those abused children? So, the social workers already have a strategy. Our strategy is more on. First, we will ask simple questions until they open up. Questions like 'What are you doing?' 'What is your name?' Those are just the basics, do not directly ask traumatic questions. We will build a rapport with the client by asking simple questions, and then the conversation will engage as we dig down. However, we will explain to the client, especially the children, that 'Inday, what you say to me, will stay between us. If someone else knows, for example, the police, it is for your good. I will not tell anyone else. So, there must be confidentiality if you build a rapport with a client or child. You assure her. Because he/she will be unable to trust you if you tell other people, make the child understand. 'Let us keep it a secret if you open up to me. However, if someone else knows...' but you tell him/her that you will inform the police because they can help him/her take the person who did it to him/her to jail, the person who abused him/her." (Informant 2)*

*You as a social worker must be firm in what you say to him; you are confident to say that the child will gain your trust, right? However, usually in our profession, if there is a victim who is a woman, or a child, you usually do not trust a male social worker because before I was assigned to the Naga in my previous employer, I also handled such cases, so there are still times when their intentions are different. However, there was a little catch, someone said that I was like a bag of words, so I sent those relatives out, then I kept the child, so I interviewed, then I found out that there was abuse between his younger brother. It will depend on the strategy, on the strategies that you will do in the way that your child will disclose, you will disclose, whether you are a female or a male social worker." (Informant 1)*

**Sub-Theme 2.3: Successful Intervention.** Social workers have a proven history of effectively implementing treatments that enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. These treatments frequently prioritize the resolution of societal problems such as poverty, mental health challenges, and substance misuse. Social workers assist individuals in surmounting obstacles and developing the ability to adapt and thrive, by offering assistance, resources, and guidance.

*"The case that I handled is a girl who was abused. She was abused since she was a child, and she was an adult when he was rescued. I was the social worker who handled that case. She was abused at three years old until she became an adult. The saddest part of that case is that it was dismissed because the perpetrator died." (informant 3)*

*"One example is when the suspect who abused the child is proven guilty under the investigation and sentenced to prison. In this case, it would provide justice for the victim and warn other potential abusers. The legal system must take a strong stance against child abuse to protect vulnerable children from harm." (informant 4)*

**Sub-Theme 2.4: Collaborate with Other Professionals.** Collaborating with other professionals is essential in providing the best possible services to clients, including working with psychologists, therapists, medical professionals, and community organizers.: These professionals bring diverse expertise and perspectives that can greatly enhance the quality of care and support offered to clients. By working together, they can develop comprehensive treatment plans, address complex issues from multiple angles, and ensure holistic support for clients' well-being.

*"Just coordinate. You can coordinate a lot with law enforcement. There is a PNP, but you cannot just approach different PNPs. There is also a WCPD (Women and Children Protection Desk) and a PNP in charge. It will not be passed around because we have specific law enforcement to approach." (Respondent 3)*

### **Theme 3: Cultivating Self-Care and Professional Growth**

Self-care and professional growth are crucial for social workers to maintain their well-being and effectiveness. The following themes emerged as their responses were obtained: Managing the Emotional Toll, Self-Care Practices, and Ongoing Professional Development Activities. Managing the Emotional Toll involves recognizing and addressing the emotional challenges that social workers face in their daily work, such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. Self-care practices encompass a range of activities that social workers engage in to take care of their physical, mental, and emotional health, including exercise, mindfulness practices, and seeking support from peers or supervisors. Ongoing Professional Development Activities involve continuously expanding knowledge and skills through attending workshops, and conferences, or pursuing advanced degrees to stay updated with the latest research and best practices in the field.

**Sub-Theme 3.1: Managing the Emotional Toll.** Social workers face significant emotional demands in their jobs. They often work with struggling individuals and families, which can affect their emotional well-being.

*"It seems normal. I do not get burnout. I got used to it, but there is still stress. Stress does not disappear, but it is manageable if you love your job. Maybe if I burn out, it is not the client or the way I address the client. For me, having issues with your coworkers is more burnout. It is essential to maintain a good relationship with your coworkers. Try to save your mental health. Do not exhaust yourself with work; learn to rest. If you have a failure, like you made a mistake, then improve. Work, Pause, and reflect." (Informant 3)*

*"We must first acknowledge that we have taken on a difficult profession, but we should also realize that we do not bear all the burden on our own. When someone expresses gratitude by saying, "Thank you for helping me with my problem," the victim's appreciation cannot be measured in monetary terms. Being a Social Worker is a satisfying job that requires passion, self-care, and the ability to manage time effectively. It involves helping people and making a positive impact on society. As Social Workers, we understand the importance of taking breaks, traveling when necessary, and looking after ourselves to continue to serve our clients in the best possible way. Despite its challenges, the rewarding feeling we get from helping those in need makes it all worthwhile." (Informant 2)*

**Sub-Theme 3.2: Self-Care Practices.** Social workers must maintain mental, physical, and emotional health while caring for others. This is crucial, as they need to be in a good state to effectively support individuals and communities facing various challenges. Additionally, prioritizing their well-being enables social workers to establish healthy boundaries and prevent burnout, ensuring sustainable and impactful assistance for those in need.

*"Self-care is the best because social workers prioritize self-care activities to maintain their well-being. It includes engaging in activities they enjoy, such as hobbies, exercise, spending time with loved ones, and*

*relaxing. They also prioritize getting enough sleep, eating healthily, and practicing mindfulness or meditation." (Informant 4)*

*"Yes, the most important self-care is one of yourself; the best way is self-care; if you do not have it, do not let it happen. Self-care is essential no matter what profession, whether you have a profession or not, self-care is vital."(Informant 1)*

**Sub-Theme 3.3: Ongoing Professional Development Activities.** Social workers participate in continuing education courses to maintain their licenses and to update and enhance their skills. Continuing education courses provide social workers with the opportunity to stay up-to-date with the latest research, techniques, and best practices in their field. Additionally, these courses allow social workers to network with other professionals and exchange valuable insights and experiences, fostering a collaborative learning environment.

*"To be a social worker is a fulfilling job. Not everyone has the chance to do this kind of work. Others think that when you are a social worker, you pack rice. Those are the things that we do not do. Behind the repacking of rice, we are the one who plans and manages cases. It is better if you can help someone; you will be more motivated to continue to work to help others." (Informant 3)*

*"I am now pursuing a Master of Social Work degree and have done several Public Administration courses. I am dedicated to continuous learning and expanding my knowledge in these fields."(Informant 2)*

#### **Theme 4: Seeds of Change**

Social workers derive fulfillment from contributing to the community and establishing significant connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds. They often find satisfaction in empowering individuals to overcome challenges and improve their quality of life. Additionally, social workers play a crucial role in advocating for social justice and equality, striving to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

**Sub-Theme 4.1: Motivation to Continue Working.** Social workers are motivated by their meaningful impact on clients' lives, the ability to make a positive change in society through their work, and the personal growth and fulfillment that comes from helping others.

*"As a social worker, I believe my role is to contribute to the betterment of society, specifically protecting children who may be struggling or hiding. I fulfill various societal roles, from being a supportive sister to a nurturing mother or grandmother. Ultimately, my goal is to make a positive difference in the lives of those I work with and*

*to play an active part in building a safer and more caring community for all." (Informant 2)*

**Sub-Theme 4.2: Worthwhile Experience.** Social workers derive fulfillment from their role in facilitating the enhancement of individuals' and communities' well-being. They have a vital function in championing their clients' rights and facilitating their access to essential resources and support networks.

*"It is always a rewarding experience when we are recognized for our efforts, but the most significant impact I have made on an abused child's life was when I helped a young girl find her voice and stand up to her abuser. Through counseling and support, she was able to heal and regain her confidence. Seeing her grow into a strong, resilient young woman was inspiring." (Respondent 4)*

*"It is when I worked with a young boy who had experienced physical abuse and neglect. Through consistent support, counseling sessions, and advocacy, I was able to help him heal and develop coping strategies. This experience reinforced my passion for child protection and motivated them to continue making a difference in the lives of abused children." (Respondent 1)*

## **Discussion**

The study yielded that social workers encounter numerous types of abuse when working with abused children. According to Cui et al. (2016), Children are continually neglected and abused emotionally, physically, and sexually. Child abuse and neglect can include physical force, isolation, humiliating punishments, bullying, dangerous acts, ignorance, and rejection. Additionally, child maltreatment is linked to psychological and behavioral issues in childhood and early adulthood, including depression, anxiety, smoking, alcohol and drug misuse, aggression and violence, hazardous sexual conduct, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, overwhelming evidence shows poverty and low income are closely connected to child abuse and neglect (Pelton, 2014) This connection is often attributed to the increased stress and limited resources that families living in poverty face. The lack of access to quality healthcare, education, and social support further exacerbates the risk of child abuse and neglect in these vulnerable communities.

In addition, the study also found that social workers use several interventions and support methods to help clients, depending on the situation. These interventions may include counseling, community resource referrals, and rights advocacy. Social workers typically use emotional support, coping strategies, or cognitive management skills to change clients' behaviors and emotions. ([Boscarino, 1997](#); [Francis, 1997](#)). They may also employ various therapeutic techniques such as motivational interviewing, solution-focused therapy, or cognitive-behavioral therapy to help clients develop healthier coping mechanisms and improve their overall well-being. Additionally, social workers often collaborate with other professionals, such as psychologists or psychiatrists, to ensure comprehensive care for their clients.

Another finding of the study revealed the significance for social workers to uphold their well-being and effectiveness; they must prioritize self-care and professional development. By

prioritizing self-care, social workers can prevent burnout and maintain their mental and emotional well-being. Also, investing in professional development allows them to stay updated with the latest research and best practices, enhancing their effectiveness in helping clients. Research has demonstrated that social workers are very susceptible to experiencing stress and burnout (Acker, 2012; Acker & Lawrence, 2009; Bamber, 2006; Lloyd et. al. 2002) as a result of facing significant professional demands, including excessive psychological strain and work pressure. Additional research has similarly demonstrated that social workers experience job insecurity, conflicts in their roles, limited autonomy, and a lack of social support and rewards (Acker, 1999; Collins, 2008; Gilbar, 1998; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Sánchez-Moreno et. al., 2015; Winstanley & Hales, 2015). According to Brotheridge and Grandey (2002), social work is classified as emotional labor due to the significant emotional demands placed on social workers, which often leads to burnout. This is a result of the constant requests and demands from service users. Additional research has corroborated those social workers experienced elevated levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Hamama, 2012; Winstanley & Hales, 2015) in instances where they had low self-esteem, received low incomes, encountered violence from clients (Littlechild, 2005; Padyab et. al., 2013), and endured compromised physical health (Kim, Ji, & Kao, 2011).

Finally, the study revealed that social workers find joy in helping the community and making meaningful connections with diverse people. They enjoy helping others overcome obstacles and enhance their lives. Studies have shown that social work is highly fulfilling and gratifying (Rose, 2003). Social workers derive considerable gratification from their interactions with clients, exhibit strong dedication, and possess a belief in their ability to positively impact individuals' lives (Eborall and Garmeson, 2001; Huxley et al. 2005).

### **Conclusions**

Social workers play a crucial role in our society by implementing various interventions and support measures to meet the specific requirements of abused children, based on their circumstances. Despite facing various problems such as stress, burnout, and a demanding workload, social workers find joy in their profession by making valuable contributions to the community and forming meaningful connections with individuals from all backgrounds. They frequently derive fulfillment from enabling individuals to surmount obstacles and enhance their standard of living.

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