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# The Lived Experiences of Social Workers Handling Child Sexual Abuse Cases

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## ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to explore and examine the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. Despite the many existing research studies in relation to social workers handling child abuse cases, the researcher could not find any research study that specifically describes the experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. This led to the aim of this study which is to examine and understand the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. The phenomenological approach of qualitative research was used in this study to allow the participants to express their views and experiences in their own understanding and feelings and interview questionnaire was the primary instrument for data collection. Social Constructivist Theory and Role Theory were used to describe the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases in this study. The findings revealed that child sexual abuse is one of the frightening forms of child maltreatment that has long-term effects which leaves deepest scars on the victims through different sexual acts of violence. The result of the study showed that social workers were one of the helping professionals that ensured the safety and protection of the child after the rescue from child sexual abuse incident. Part of the social worker's responsibilities was to provide interventions appropriate to the needs of the child victim. The study also showed that alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse can be anyone; they can be strangers or people the child knows and trust. The study also revealed that although social workers were trained professionals, they still experienced difficulties in handling child sexual abuses cases in terms of safety issues, struggles, and critical situations. Social workers were prone to experience difficulties in performing their responsibilities in handling child sexual abuse cases. The findings of this study led to a better support system for social workers and awareness programs for the intervention and prevention of child sexual abuse in all child welfare settings. Lastly, support programs for social workers were crafted based on the findings of the study.

**Keywords:** *social work, social worker, child abuse, sexual abuse*

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## INTRODUCTION

The term 'lived experience' refers to personal knowledge gained from direct experience that would not ordinarily be apparent through observation or via representations constructed by a third party who has not 'lived' it through the eyes of those who were in the situation (O'Leary, P. & Tsui, M., 2022). All individuals have unique and varied lived experiences.

This study aimed to examine and understand the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. Social workers as one of the front liners in the delivery of social protection have personal involvement to situations and they are one of the helping professionals who usually deals with crisis and traumas as they directly interact with individuals. The idea of 'social work' is not easily understood by the public and is often maligned by the media, a profession with an image problem and stigma associated with high profile failings, particularly those involving children (Scottish Executive, 2005; Thompson, 2015). Many people think that anyone can be a social worker because of the perception of the public that social workers are the ones that just deliver relief goods during disasters or those charity workers or philanthropists. Many are not aware that it requires a person to pass the Board Examination after taking the degree of Bachelor of Science in Social Work. Thelma Lee-Mendoza, the author of the book *Social Welfare and Social Work (Revised Edition)* stated: The uninformed in our society associate social work with dole-outs or acts of altruism - the giving of material aid to those in need, out of a sense of kindness (Mendoza, 2002,). From humanitarian acts of people, social work has evolved into a discipline that requires specific competencies in order to be of real help to people.

There's a wide range of areas in the Philippines social workers can practice their profession which includes the following sectors: child and family welfare, elderly, women, person with disabilities, persons with mental health conditions, disaster management, community organizing, advocacy and social action. According to Thelma Lee-Mendoza social work practice can takes place in different setting such as corporate, medical/hospital, non-government organization, government organization, residential centers, religious institutions, military, community-based projects, and educational setting. Social Works is a profession that is practiced independently or as a part of a team in many different fields - health (medical social worker, psychiatric social worker); education (school social worker); labor and industry (industrial social worker); corrections (court social worker, probation worker) and community development (community organizer) among others (Mendoza, 2002).

One of the most disturbing and challenging social concerns that social workers handle in the field practice of social work is child sexual abuse cases. According to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) in 2010-2011 cases of child abuse reported to them nationwide was sex abuse (DSWD-Policy Development and Planning Bureau, 2011). Child sexual abuse case has been existing for a long time now despite the government's effort to prevent it.

Social workers working in child welfare organizations have significant roles in the prevention, investigation and intervention with alleged child sexual abuse cases in order to protect children from further harm. As social workers engaged in providing social services to children especially to the victims of child sexual abuses, they are also exposed to potential risky situation. This risk includes negative reactions such as safety threats, harassments, intimidations and other difficulties social workers encounter while handling child sexual abuse cases. Negative reactions are usually from the unsupportive family or relatives which affect the process of providing interventions to the victims as well as their decision to seek help. Unsupportive reactions can deter future help-seeking, undermine self-efficacy, and reinforce feelings of self-blame and isolation (Ahrens, 2006; Ullman and Filipas, 2001).

Examining the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases is important as no specific study in this nature which provides stories of experiences of social workers couldn't be found. This study reveals information of how social workers make meaning of their daily experiences while carrying out legally mandated obligation to rescue and protect children and how they cope with various challenges and difficulties they encounter. There are circumstances and critical incidents that social workers experienced while performing their jobs which includes violence and other potentially dangerous events.

The objective of this study was to analyze the stories of social workers handling child abuse cases in a non-government organization and identify the types of safety skills training and academic backgrounds that prepared them for the job.

### **Nature of Child Sexual Abuse**

In understanding child sexual abuse, it is helpful to examine the different factors related to it such as the victims, alleged perpetrators, and its effects to the victims. The term child sexual abuse has several definitions. The World Health Organization defined child sexual abuse as the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children who are – by virtue of their age or stage of development – in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim. (World Health Organization, 2006)

Based on the definition of the World Health Organization, child sexual abuse involves minor who lacks development physically, mentally, and psychologically to fully understand sexual activities. As minors, they can't fully discern that their rights as children are violated when they are involved in unwanted sexual activities. Child sexual abuse also involve adult or older children who uses power or authority over the victims. Child sexual abuse includes rape, sexual harassment, acts of lasciviousness, demeaning sexual remarks, involving the child in pornography, child prostitution, and other sexual violence acts. Sexual violence against children includes unwanted sexual

activities involving children committed by perpetrators with elements of force, threats, or taking advantage of victims who are not capable of giving consent.

According to the World Health Organization, the perpetrators of child maltreatment may be parents and other family members, caregivers, friends, acquaintances, strangers, others in authority – such as teachers, soldiers, police officers and clergy, employers, health care workers, other children (World Health Organization, 2006). Alleged perpetrators can be anyone that the child knows, or trust and incidents of child sexual abuse can happen anywhere - homes, schools, churches, parks, and any other private or public places even in poor, uneducated communities, or high-class communities.

### **The Effects of Child Sexual Abuse**

Child sexual abuse is a horrific experience and its effects to the victims' development are very concerning. According to Gupta (2020), in some cases the physical effects are temporary; but the pain and mental trauma a child suffers leaves a long-term impact. Gupta (2020) identified the following effects of child sexual abuse: (1) fear, (2) self-harm, (3) sexual health, (4) emotional and mental harm, (5) guilt and shame, (6) post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), (7) impaired brain development, (8) physical health, (9) difficulties during adolescence, (10) abusive behavior, (11) interpersonal relationships, and (12) intimate relationships.

Also, Harracksingh, R. & Janagan Johnson, E., (2022) identified post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), decreased academic performance, isolation, depression and emotional scarring as effects of child sexual abuse to victims. Based on the research, there seems to be a link between avoidance forms of coping and symptoms associated with PTSD such as withdrawing from others, emotional numbing, and trying to forget the abuse, which can also lead to re-victimization (Harracksingh, R. & Janagan Johnson, E., 2022).

Additionally, these adverse effects include an increased likelihood of depression, anxiety, fear, guilt, substance and alcohol abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation (Fedina et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021 as cited in Litzinger T. (2021).

Furthermore, according to Reena (2021) child abuse has consequences on the physical health of the child. The effect of child abuse can be very harmful and long lasting. In cases of sexual abuse of girl children, girl children suffer from chronic pelvic pain. Brutal child abuse results in genital injuries such as hymen laceration or damage to the genital organs of the victim girl and urinary retention. Additionally, children subjected to corporal punishment show a greater tendency towards aggressive and risky behavior. Children run away from home, lie and commit crimes because of aggressive and risky behavior. Children who experience physical abuse or neglect and sexual abuse have less academic success. Abused children are become addicted to drugs, alcohol. Lastly, child abuse has a psychological effect. It includes low self-esteem, depression, and relationship difficulties. Physical and sexual abuse children

suffer from personality disorder, depression anxiety and other psychiatric disorders. Child abuse destroys the entire psychology of the child. This pushes him into deep emotional distress. These may also include bed wetting and sleep disorders. A child who is abused has a sense of guilt. The child begins to blame himself, holds himself responsible for everything that happened (Reena, 2021).

### **Responsibilities of Social Workers**

Social workers play various important roles in the prevention, intervention, and protection of children. It is important for social workers handling child sexual abuse cases to be knowledgeable about its nature and effects to be successful in providing proper interventions to victims. They must know how to recognize symptoms of child sexual abuse and know how to identify and respond to suspected cases of child sexual abuse. Social workers are essential in preventing and handling child sexual abuse cases. Alongside taking care of the victims in the assurance home, social workers help revamp their lives and make them independent (Grinnell, Gabor, & Unrau, 2016).

In the study conducted by Franken, Joane (2019), she identified the responsibilities of social workers when alleged child sexual abuse is reported. It is the priority of the social workers to assess the safety of the child; determine the incident of abuse and identify appropriate intervention for the child. One of the responsibilities of social workers is to ensure that the child victim is safe then prepare all the necessary documents to file a report to the proper authorities. Also part of the responsibilities of social workers to orient the child and the supportive family in eventual court proceedings. In connection with this, the social workers are also responsible in providing immediate counseling directly or through a professional counselor.

Based on the study of Franken, Joane (2019), if the child victim is in danger, there's a possibility of removing the child from home and be placed in safe shelter. In the Philippines, residential care remains to be the primary response to child abandonment, neglect and abuse. Residential care, or care provided in any non-family-based group setting, such as places of safety for emergency care, transit centers in emergency situations, and all other short and long-term residential care facilities including group homes, is only one of the many forms of alternative care (Save the Children, 2011).

Victims of child sexual abuse are mostly admitted to non-government or government residential centers for protective custody, case management and proper intervention. Along with caregivers and other residential staff, social workers lead the case management of the admitted victims as the case manager. Case management is a procedure to plan, seek, and monitor services from different social agencies and staff on behalf of a client. The management of child abuse cases is multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary (police, prosecutor, judge, lawyer, social worker, medical doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, barangay officials, among others) working together as a team to provide appropriate protection, legal and social services to the child victims of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. From processing the official admission of the victim to the



residential center to planning interventions to address the dysfunctional areas of life of the victim are some of the responsibilities of a social worker handling child sexual abuse cases (Committee for the Special Protection of Children, 2016).

In addition, as mentioned above, social workers are also responsible in assisting the victim through the court process. The Committee for the Special Protection of Children (CSPC) developed the protocol for the case management of child victims of abuse, neglect and exploitation. It includes the roles of the social workers before and during trial. One of the responsibilities of the social worker is to orient the child on what to expect inside the court and who they are meeting inside the court like the judge, prosecutor, defense counsel, court interpreter, court stenographer, and other court staff. Court orientation can be done by enrolling the child to a "Kids Court Program" if available. It is also the responsibility of the social worker to arrange a meeting between the child and the public prosecutor or the private prosecutor before the scheduled hearing so that the child can have time to know who is representing her case and be comfortable. The social worker also serves as the guardian and accompanies the child in attending court hearings in the absence of the biological parents or relatives. Coordination with the court social worker and the public prosecutor for any information and intervention is also part of the roles of the social worker (Committee for the Special Protection of Children, 2016). These centers seek to increase multi-disciplinary coordination in sexual abuse investigations, provide an independent, child-friendly environment for forensic interviews, and increase children's access to medical and therapeutic services (Jones *et al.*, 2007). Social workers also need to work together with other stakeholders, such as parents, guardians, school authorities, local administrators, and the government (Amadi & Karani, 2021).

Furthermore, submission of any documents relevant to the case and any documents required by the court is also the responsibility of the social worker. These documents include social case study report, progress reports, child's authenticated copy of birth certificate, medical certificate, and psychological evaluation report. There are also times when a social worker is being subpoenaed by the court to testify in favor of the child as corroborative witness (Committee for the Special Protection of Children, 2016).

Also, the social worker is responsible for maintaining communication with the court and prosecutors to monitor the status of the case and for important matters relevant to the case. And lastly, social worker's role is to help the child and family understand court process and procedures (Committee for the Special Protection of Children, 2016).

### **Difficulties Social Workers Encounter**

In the study of Franken, Joane (2019), challenges of social workers in dealing with child sexual abuse were identified. This challenge includes high caseloads and shortage of social workers; inadequately trained professionals working with child sexual abuse; and compassion fatigue in social workers. Social workers encounter difficulties

in responding to child sexual abuse cases because of high caseloads they handle. According to Franken and Joane (2019), when caseloads are high, negligence of cases are unavoidable due to lack of time of the social workers to investigate and assess the incident of the abuse. Additionally, inadequately trained professionals working with child sexual abuse leads to the inconsistent provision of appropriate intervention to the victim of child sexual abuse. Franken, Joane (2019) stated that aside from work-related difficulties, social workers also experience personal challenges in handling child sexual abuse cases. Being exposed to the trauma of child sexual abuse victims, social workers experience emotional numbness and also fears for their own safety. Social workers' professional work in handling child sexual abuse cases affects their personal life. Based on the study of Franken, Joane (2019), being paranoid, overprotective, fear, and risk of compassion fatigue are some of the results of difficulties social workers encounter in handling child sexual abuse cases.

### **Support for Social Workers**

According to the study of Franken, Joane (2019), supervision is one of the supports needed by social workers to be able to manage child sexual abuse cases and it is also a chance for them to enhance their knowledge and skills. Aside from supervision, supportive peers and co-workers are also valuable for social workers because it is easier for them to express themselves to fellow workers and colleagues. They don't only bond with supportive peers and co-workers but also receive guidance and advice from them.

### **The Functions, Values, and Principles of Social Work**

Social work's professional identity is guided by social work values and ethics and its distinct role in practice rather than being influenced by the institutional or organizational context (Banks, 2016). Social workers must be aware of their professional functions, values, and principles to become competent in performing their responsibilities as social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. In the book *Social Welfare and Social Work Revised Edition* of Thelma Lee-Mendoza, she identified the functions, values and principles of social work. Functions of social work are restorative/curative/remedial as well as rehabilitative, preventive functions and developmental functions. The curative aspect of social work seeks to remove factors which have caused the breakdown in the person's social functioning. Preventive functions of social work involve the early discovery, control, and elimination of those conditions or situations which may have a harmful effect on social functioning. The aim of the developmental function of social work is both to help the individual to make maximum use of his own potentials and capacities as well as to further the effectiveness of available social or community resources (Mendoza, 2002).

As a helping profession, Social Work has principles that guide social workers as they perform their roles and functions. Social work principles are statements of what to do and what not to do in social work practice. In the book *Social Welfare and Social*

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Work Revised Edition of Thelma Lee-Mendoza, principles of social work were identified as follows: acceptance of people as they are; participation of the client in problem-solving; self-determination as a right of the client; individualization of client; confidentiality; worker self-awareness; and client-worker relationship (Mendoza, 2002).

Furthermore, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) outlined the core values of social workers that they need to embrace through the profession. The core values of social workers are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationship, integrity, and competence. Each core value has ethical principle which all social workers should aspire to. The ethical principle for service is to help people in need and to address social problems. Challenge social injustice and work for social change on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed people is the ethical principle of social justice as core value of social workers. The core value of social workers in relation to the dignity and worth of a person has ethical principle that social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person. In addition, social workers recognize and value the importance of human relationships. Social workers consider clients as partners in the helping process and seek to strengthen relationships among people to enhance the well-being of individuals and communities (NASW, 2008).

Also, social workers behave in a trustworthy manner, upholding the mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the social work profession. Social workers are expected to work with honesty and responsibly, promoting ethical practices in their workplace. Lastly, social workers practice within areas of competence, continuously developing professional knowledge and expertise (NASW, 2008).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The aim of the study was to explain the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases through the application of Social Constructivism Theory, and Role Theory.

### **Social Constructivism Theory**

The proponent of Social Constructivism Theory is the Soviet Psychologist Lev Vygotsky. The social constructivist theory contends that learning and comprehension are inherently social and that an individual acquires knowledge through cultural activities and the use of what Vygotsky called "tools of intellectual adaptation" (memories, mnemonics, and mind-maps), as opposed to having knowledge rooted in the individual (Abderrahim, L. & Gutiérrez-Colón Plana, M., 2021). Through the use of these tools, which differ between cultures, "thought, learning, and knowledge are not just influenced by social factors but are social phenomena" and "cognition is a collaborative process," thought, learning, and knowledge become social phenomena.

According to Abderrahim & Gutiérrez-Colón Plana (2021) for Vygotsky, cognitive development is the outcome from exposure to external factors and social interaction is vital with development established by learning. Vygotsky saw learning and development have dynamic and complex connection, that an interrelationship existed between them.



Additionally, according to Boyland (2019) as individuals live in the world of their personal reality each interprets that reality in their own way leading the researcher towards building a diverse and complex socially constructed landscape that profiles the collective experience in terms of individual knowledge, actions and beliefs, and personal experience: without any sense of universality.

The research goal was to describe and understand the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. Social Constructivist Theory is significant to the study as it highlighted that reality is constructed, not discovered. The theory suggests that people construct their own reality based on their own experiences. Through the lens of social constructivist theory, social workers have active roles in their own experiences and make meaning from their experiences. Cultures and social interactions have impacts to social workers' lived experiences. As social workers perform their professional responsibilities they usually interact with their clients, fellow social workers and other professionals, and the organizations where they are affiliated. The connection of social workers within their environment and other external factors influenced their lived experiences.

Furthermore, social constructivist theory also supports the idea that the reality constructed by social workers can be recognized through their beliefs and thoughts in relation to the social work principles of individualization, participation, self-determination, confidentiality; worker self-awareness; and client-worker relationship. Additionally, as there's no single view of the world in social constructivist theory, the construction of knowledge is not limited, and it guides social workers in fulfilling their mission to enhance the social functioning of their clients.

## **Role Theory**

Role theory, through a drama therapy lens, originated through a few major theorists throughout history, such as William James, Charles Cooley, George Herbert Mead and Ralph Linton. Role theory operates under the idea that human beings are naturally role takers and players (Ramsden & Landy, 2021).

The term role refers to the socially expected behavior prescribed for a person occupying a particular status or position in a social system. Social norms for a particular position provide guides for the attitudes, feelings, and behavior that are permitted, expected, or prohibited for the individual in each role. These norms differ from culture to culture and have important implications to you as a social worker.

The following are among the concepts relating to role: (1) Status: refers to one's rank or standing in group based on the kind of job he holds; (2) Norms: refers to rules and standards of behavior that come from a group or society, and may apply to individuals or to groups; (3) Role set or role clusters: an array of roles that any one person maybe occupying at any particular time; (4) Role complementarily or reciprocity: role positions are usually paired, e.g., parent-child. The theory is that some reciprocity of expectations between role partners is needed if a system is to enjoy some stability and integration; (5) Role conflict: this occurs when there are conflicting expectations

because the person occupies two or more positions simultaneously; (6) Role incongruity: a situation in which one's own perception of one's role is defined differently from the expectations of significant others in the system or the environment.

Role Theory is significant in the study because it serves as a basis for understanding the experiences of social workers and analyzing the factors that affect their experiences. Social workers play various roles as they handle child sexual abuse cases. Their roles include case managers, counselors, coordinators, enablers, advocates, mediator, and others. These roles of social workers are influenced by different factors such as the behavior of their clients; culture of the community, rules and regulation of their work place and many other things related to their work as social workers handling child sexual abuse cases.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The interest of the researcher on child sexual abuse cases started through professional and personal experiences. The researcher has been working as a residential social worker handling child sexual abuse cases and was confronted with the devastating stories and effects of child sexual abuse. The struggles and sufferings of victims of child sexual abuse were also witnessed by the researcher as well as to the challenges social workers encounter in performing their responsibilities. Social workers play an important role and their responsibilities begin from the time a victim of child sexual abuse is referred for protective custody up to the end of the case and the child is able to recover from trauma.

Social workers are the first persons to respond and manage child sexual abuse cases. In responding to child sexual abuse cases, social workers face risky situations, but their stories are often not heard. If the social workers find that the child victim of sexual abuse is in imminent danger, they coordinate with proper authorities for help in rescuing the child. This is when the social workers face threats from the alleged perpetrators and their family as well as the family of the child victim who usually do not believe the statement of the child victim. The work-related duties of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases exposed them to risk factors such as safety threats, struggles, critical situations and other potential risks.

With this background, the researcher has chosen to focus this study on the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. Real life experiences shared by the social workers provide a clearer picture of what social work jobs and functions entails and may be helpful to those considering a career as social worker catering to children victim of sexual abuse.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. The circle at the center indicates that the focus of the study are the social workers handling child sexual abuse cases in non-government child caring agencies in Antipolo City, Rizal. The lived experiences of social

workers handling child sexual abuse cases are influenced by the dependent variables represented in 5 outer circles. The dependent variables are as follows: understanding child sexual abuse, impacts of professional work of social workers, social workers make meaning of their experiences, support for social workers, and traits of an effective social worker.

In relation to the social constructivist theory, the conceptual framework of the study indicates that social workers construct reality based on dependent variables. These dependent variables are interrelated and have great influence in the lived experiences of social workers. The way social workers make meaning of their experiences is guided by social interactions and not by themselves alone.

Furthermore, social constructivist theory coincides with the conceptual work of the study in a way that is related to the social work practice particularly in the field of child sexual abuse cases. Social workers need to understand the nature of child sexual abuse and all the elements related to it. As they perform their responsibilities, they experience the impacts of their professional work and encounter difficulties. Social workers make meaning through constructing realities out of their own experiences.

Additionally, social constructivist theory and social work are both promoting supporting and helping. As providers of meaningful services, it is also important for social workers to receive support which motivate them to continue with their mission. In this context, based on the first four dependent variables, it develops traits of an effective social worker.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework of the Lived Experiences of Social Workers Handling Child Sexual Abuses Cases

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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study specifically aimed to answer the following:

- 1: What is the interviewee's understanding of child sexual abuse?
  - 1.1: What is the interviewee's understanding of the victim of child sexual abuse?
  - 1.2: What is the interviewee's understating of the alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse?
- 2: How do social workers make meaning of their experiences in handling child sexual abuse cases?
- 3: How do the interviewees describe their professional work in terms of how it impacts their physical health, thoughts, emotions, and socializations?
- 4: How do the interviewees describe an effective social worker who deals with child sexual abuse cases?

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. A qualitative phenomenological approach was utilized in this study because it aimed to understand lived experiences of individuals. This chapter describes the methodology utilized in the study to answer the research questions including research design, locale of the study, participants, and sampling techniques. Additionally, the research instruments, data gathering procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations were discussed in this chapter of the study.

## SCOPE AND DELIMITATION

The focus of this study was on the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases under non-government child-caring agencies located in Antipolo City, Rizal. The researcher of this study could not locate a similar study or literature that discussed the lived experiences of social workers handling child abuse cases.

The participants were limited to 12 currently employed and registered social workers. Another limitation identified in this study was the fact that all the participants were social workers working in non-government child-caring agencies that only catered to children victims of abuse particularly child sexual abuse. The researcher was also employed as a social worker in a non-government child caring agency - the Consider the Lily Foundation Philippines Inc. from the year 2015 to the present. It was assumed that the researcher may have had bias towards the participants from the same institution in the study. To minimize or eliminate researcher bias, the researcher attempted to be as objective as possible.

The result of the study may not generalize the experiences of social workers in all non-government organizations and government organizations catering to child sexual abuse cases.

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## RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Kyungmee Lee (2020) phenomenology is an umbrella term referring to a theoretical perspective that focuses on the direct experiences of individuals rather than external and objective truth. Phenomenology is “derived from the Greek word *phainomenon* which is the present participle of the verb *phainesthai*, to appear, and thus designates what appears to us or the appearing as such” (Lewis & Staehler, 2010,). Rooted in philosophy and psychology, phenomenology is a qualitative research approach which explores the experience of those living a particular phenomenon, leading the researcher to gain a full and deep understanding of the experience as conveyed by the person living the experience first-hand. In contrast to a narrative study which focuses on a single individual, phenomenology describes the lived experience of several people (Creswell, 2007). “*Phenomenology focuses not on what appears, but on how it appears*” (Lewis & Staehler, 2010).

A phenomenological research approach was utilized in the study to obtain relevant information and to allow the participants to express their views based on their own understanding, feelings, and personal experiences. This research approach was applicable for this study because it answered questions regarding personal experiences of social workers and how they make meaning of their experiences. The lived experiences of social workers described through phenomenological research approach in this study also involves the social workers’ thoughts and feelings. The goal of this phenomenological research approach was to explain and enable understanding from the lived experiences of the social workers handling child sexual abuse.

Phenomenological research approach involves a small number of participants. In this study data were collected by the researcher from only 12 participants by facilitating interview questionnaire focusing on the lived experiences of social workers in handling child sexual abuse cases. The responses of the participants guided the researcher in understanding the experiences and the meaning of these experiences.

## LOCALE OF THE STUDY

The setting for this study was in the different non-government child caring agencies in Antipolo City, Rizal where the interviewees were affiliated at the time of the study: (1) The Bethlehem’s Hope Ministries, (2) First Love International Ministries (Philippines) Inc., (3) Christian Compassion Ministries Foundation, Inc., (4) CRIBS Foundation Inc., and (6) Consider the Lily Foundation Philippines Inc. These non-government child-caring agencies are registered, licensed and accredited by the DSWD Regional Field Office IV-A to provide programs and services for the recovery, best interest and welfare of children. Also, these non-government child caring agencies are all residential centers that caters to child sexual abuse survivors referred of different municipal and city social welfare and development office of Rizal.



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## **PARTICIPANTS**

The following are the inclusion criteria for the participants in the study: All the participants are social workers currently employed at different non-government child caring agencies in Antipolo City, Rizal. They all finished the required degree for the profession which is the Bachelor of Science in Social Work with the necessary license from the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC). Each participant has at least one year experience or more in handling child sexual abuse cases in non-government child caring agency to ensure the participants had a thorough understanding of the key topics pertaining to the lived experiences of social workers.

The exclusion criteria for the participants in the study are as follows: The participant is not currently unemployed, a non- graduate of Bachelor of Science in Social Work, no professional license for social workers. If the participant has less than a year of experience in handling child sexual abuse cases, he/she could not participate in the study.

## **Sampling Techniques**

The sample size for the study was twelve (12) social workers consisted of 11 females and 1 male social worker employed in non-government child caring agencies. The participants were specifically selected by the researcher of this study using small purposive sampling to collect data from a small population of social workers having direct knowledge and similar experiences in handling child sexual abuse cases. This sampling strategy is a purposive sampling technique that aims to acquire a sample that has the same and/or similar characteristics (Morris, 2013 as cited in Davis, E. L., 2021).

## **RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS**

Interview questionnaire was the primary instrument for data collection. The researcher communicated and recruited the participants through personal invitation, Messenger Chat, E-mails, and phone calls. The interview was scheduled in advance and based on the availability of the participants. It was conducted inside the Social Worker's office of the institution where the participants are working to ensure confidentiality and where they are most comfortable.

Below are the research guide questions prepared by the researcher distributed to the participants:

### **Establishing Rapport:**

1. How are you doing today?
2. How did you become a social worker?
3. What is your specific job title in the institution you are working with?
4. How long have you been a social worker and how long have you been handling child sexual abuse cases?
5. What do you like about your job as social worker handling child sexual abuses cases?
6. Is there anything that you dislike in your job as social worker handling child sexual abuse cases?

7. What influenced the things you like or dislike about you being a social worker handling child abuse case?

**Primary Guide Questions:**

1. What is your understanding of child sexual abuse as a social worker?
  - 1.1 How would you describe victims of child sexual abuse?
  - 1.2 How would you describe the alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse?
  - 1.3 How would you describe how you deal with the alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse?
  - 1.4 What are your responsibilities as social worker in responding to child sexual abuse cases?
  - 1.5 What are the interventions you have provided for the victims of child sexual abuse?
2. How do social workers make meaning of their experiences in handling child abuses cases?
  - 2.1 What are the difficulties in terms of safety issues, struggles, and critical incidents social workers encounter while performing their duties in handling child sexual abuse cases?
  - 2.2 What are the type of support have the social workers received in handling child sexual abuse cases?
3. How would you describe your professional work in terms of how it impacts your
  - a. physical health
  - b. thoughts
  - c. emotions
  - d. socializations
4. How would you describe an effective social worker who deals with victims of child sexual abuse?
  - 4.1 How would you describe your interaction with fellow social workers who deal with victims of child sexual abuse?

**DATA GATHERING PROCEDURE**

Permission was sought through a formal letter addressed to the respective Administrative Authority of the Child Caring Agencies where the participants were affiliated as well as the individual consent of the interviewees for participating in this study. Participation in the study was voluntary on the part of all interviewees and they were informed of their rights to confidentiality.

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used in this study which allowed the participant social workers to share and describe their lived experiences in relation to handling child sexual abuse cases. Then, a brief description and purpose of the study were given to the participants prior to the interview. Interview guide questions prepared by the researcher prior to the interview were provided to the participants. Demographic questionnaire was administered verbally and recorded by the researcher through note taking.

Additionally, individual interviews were conducted with confidentiality and privacy measures at the social workers' respective offices. The interview was administered

verbally though interviewee was given the option of responding to questions pertaining to the participant's lived experiences in a paper-pencil format. All interview questions were written in English and verbal interview was recorded through note taking with the permission of the interviewees. Interview took approximately 1 to 2 hours or more depending on each interviewees' response style.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Colaizzi's (1978) 7 steps descriptive phenomenological method was used in the data analysis of this study. Colaizzi's distinctive seven step process of rigorous analysis provides a concise and thorough description of the phenomenon under study, confirmed by the participants who lived it.

1. **Familiarization:** The researcher familiarizes him or herself with the data, by reading through all the participant accounts several times
2. **Identifying Significant Statements:** The researcher identifies all statements in the accounts that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.
3. **Formulating Meanings:** The researcher identifies meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements. The researcher must reflexively "bracket" his or her pre-suppositions to stick closely to the phenomenon as experienced (though Colaizzi recognises that complete bracketing is never possible).
4. **Clustering Themes:** The researcher clusters the identified meanings into themes that are common across all accounts. Again bracketing of pre-suppositions is crucial, especially to avoid any potential influence of existing theory.
5. **Developing an Exhaustive Description:** The researcher writes a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced at step 4.
6. **Producing the Fundamental Structure:** The researcher condenses the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. **Seeking Verification of the Fundamental Structure:** The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants (or sometimes a sub-sample in larger studies) to ask whether it captures their experience. He or she may go back and modify earlier steps in the analysis in the light of this feedback.

The data gathered were analyzed by the researcher and coded for concrete themes with its corresponding sub-themes. Meaning units were identified based on the transcript of the interview. Themes defining the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases were identified. The results of the study were evaluated and validated by the experts who have obtained their doctorate degrees and have also experience in doing qualitative research. The evaluation and validations of the results of the study were facilitated through a series of consultation meetings.

## RESULTS

This purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases in non-government child caring agencies in Antipolo City, Rizal. The researcher interviewed the 12 qualified social workers in face-to-face setting for data collections. The interview questionnaires utilized in this study were formulated by the researcher to obtain responses from the participants to address the research questions.

This chapter provides the data analysis, review of the demographics of the participants, presentation of themes, and the interpretation of findings to answer the main research questions of this study.

### Review of the Demographics of the Participants

Twelve (12) qualified social workers were purposively selected to contribute to this research study based on their professional expertise and training backgrounds on the job which they achieved through years of experiences in the field of practice of social work. The 12 participants composed of 11 females and 1 male are all Bachelor of Science in Social Work graduates and have the necessary professional license obtained by passing the licensure examinations. One of them has a master's degree in management major in Public Administration.

The age range of the participants is from 23 years old to 37 years old. The length of their social work service in non-government child caring agency handling child sexual abuse cases is from 1 year to 16 years.

For proper identification, each participant is assigned with a pseudonym from SW1 to SW12 that stands for Social Worker 1 to Social Worker 12. Other personal information of the participants such as full names and residential address were not included in this study to ensure that confidentiality and personal identification of all the participants is protected.

The summary of the demographic profiles of the interviewees is shown below:

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Interviewees**

PARTICIPANTS	AGE	GENDER	PLACE OF WORK	HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		SOCIAL WORK EXPERIENCE	
				Bachelor's of Science in Social Work	Masters Degree in Management Major in Public Administration	Years as Registered Social Worker	Years as Social Worker Handling Child Sexual Abuse
SW1	36	Female	✓	✓		11 years	4 years
SW2	29	Female	✓	✓		6 years	3 years

PARTICIPANTS	AGE	GENDER	PLACE OF WORK	HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT		SOCIAL WORK EXPERIENCE	
				Bachelor s of Science in Social Work	Masters Degree in Management Major in Public Administration	Years as Registered Social Worker	Years as Social Worker Handling Child Sexual Abuse
			Antipolo City, Rizal	✓	✓		
SW3	29	Female	✓	✓		2 years	2 years
SW4	23	Female	✓	✓		3 years	1 yr. & 5 mos.
SW5	25	Female	✓	✓		5 years	2 years
SW6	25	Female	✓	✓		4 years	2 years
SW7	26	Female	✓	✓		4 years	2 years
SW8	29	Female	✓	✓	✓	8 years	2 years
SW9	24	Female	✓	✓		2 years	1 year
SW10	23	Male	✓	✓		3 years	2 years
SW11	30	Female	✓	✓		6 years	6 years
SW12	37	Female	✓	✓		16 years	16 years

### Presentations Of Findings and Discussions

This phenomenological study aimed to gain knowledge of the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. For the presentation of findings, the researcher gathered and analyzed data from the social workers' experiences. Significant themes to answer the research questions of this study emerged after the researcher carefully reviewed all the data gathered.

#### Results:

**Problem 1:** The interviewees' understanding of child sexual abuse.

**Theme 1:** Understanding child sexual abuse.

#### Sub-themes:

1. Definition of child sexual abuse



## 2. Effects of child sexual abuse to victims

## 3. Responsibilities of social workers

### **Child Sexual Abuse**

Child sexual abuse is defined as forced sexual activity perpetrated on a child which can include, but is not limited to, sexual touching, oral and/or genital penetration using a penis, fingers, or foreign objects, and/or non-contact sexual abuse such as exhibition of one's genitals (Pulverman et al., 2018), achieved through manipulation, force, or abuse of power (Shevlin et al., 2018).

The World Health Organization Report on the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention defines child sexual abuse as follows: Sexual abuse is defined as the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children who are – by virtue of their age or stage of development – in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim.

The Department of Justice defined child sexual abuse as the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement or coercion of child to engage in, or assist another person to engage in sexual intercourse or lasciviousness conduct or the molestation or prostitution of, or the commission of incestuous acts, on, a child.

The interviewees define child sexual abuse as sexual violence or any sexual activity performed by an adult or anyone that uses power or authority that can cause harm to a child physically, psychologically, and socially. According to the interviewees child sexual abuse involves sexual activity that a child does not comprehend and does not give consent. Child sexual abuse is a form of maltreatment and sexual violence which is punishable by law.

**SW3** - *“Child sexual abuse is physical, sexual, and psychological maltreatment or neglect of children.”*

**SW9** - *“Child sexual abuse is a form of child abuse that includes sexual activity. When a perpetrator engages with a child this way, they are committing a crime that can have lasting effect on the victim for years.”*

**SW11**- *“Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, unable to give informed consent and is not developmentally prepared for.”*

### **Effects of Child Abuse to Victims**

Victims went through a lot of negative experiences with sexual violence, so overwhelming that it makes it difficult for them to forget (Qing, Karen Anne C., 2021). Based on their exposure to victims of child sexual abuse, the interviewees indicated different effects of child sexual abuse to victims. Social Worker 1 and Social Worker 2 identified that trauma is evident on the victims of child sexual abuse.

**SW1** - *“A child who experienced trauma physically, mentally and emotionally.”*

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**SW2** - *“Low self-esteem. Traumas are evident though you can see them thrive in the long run.”*

Another effects of child sexual abuse to victims are suicidal tendencies or self-inflicting harms. Low self-esteem or low confidence were also stated by the interviewees as effects of child sexual abuse to victims.

**SW3** - *“Visibility of low self-esteem; easily gets frighten, tendency to commit suicide/harming oneself but they are also conqueror once they overcome their fear.”*

**SW5** - *“The victims of sexual abuse experience health problems mentally like feeling unsafe and scared that it would happened again, having a low confidence and low social interactions.”*

Nightmares, afraid to trust, aloof, and depression are also effects of child sexual abuse to victims identified by the interviewees. They also mentioned fear and anxiety, bed wetting, quiet, easily get mad, and trouble concentrating as effects of child sexual abuse to victims.

**Depression.** Child sexual abuse leads to depression which is the most common long-term effects of child sexual abuse. Depression is a serious medical condition in which a person feels very sad, hopeless, and unimportant and often is unable to live in a normal way (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

**SW9** - *“They avoid being alone, frightened of people or person they don’t know. They were having nightmares, bed wetting and might harm themselves.”*

**SW7** - *“They don’t trust people easily and also have difficulty in identifying and controlling their emotions. Sometimes some of them have nightmares.”*

**SW8** - *“They are afraid to trust other people especially when their perpetrator is their blood relatives. They are aloof and quiet and always observe their environment/surrounding. They easily get mad when someone triggered their trauma.”*

**SW4** - *“A victim of child sexual abuse is often aloof to men, lacking of confidence, have negative thoughts specially suicidal thoughts, with feeling of fear and anxiety and have a tendency of trouble concentrating since they have been either physically, emotionally and sexually harmed by someone and was being taken advantage of at a young age of 18 years and below.”*

**SW6** - *“Quiet/aloof/easily get upset/afraid of the opposite sex/has strength that need to be developed.”*

**SW10** - *“The signs of child sexual abuse can be physical and/or emotional which can range from “too perfect” behavior, depression and unexplained anger.”*

Despite all the negative effects of child sexual abuse, the interviewees described the victims to have positive outlook in life after they were given appropriate interventions. Social worker 2 sees the victims able to thrive in the long run. Social worker 3 sees the victims as conquerors once they overcome their fear brought about by the abuse. For social worker 11 and social worker 12 victims do not remain as victims of child sexual abuse. With their strength and the desires to start anew they can become survivors of their negative experiences as they go through the process of healing.

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**SW11** - *“A victim can become a survivor once he/she begins to seek help or when or she begins to help himself/herself.”*

**SW12** - *“A child who is a victim of sexual abuse is seen as vulnerable but as they go along the process of healing, you can see through them their strength, and the spirit of desire for a new beginning.”*

### **Responsibilities of Social Workers**

According to Mendoza (2002) there are 3 major functions of social work which is the restorative/curative/remedial/rehabilitative functions; preventive functions; and the developmental functions. To protect and empower, assist in filing case and in court hearings; counseling, encourage, advocate, case management, and coordination are the responsibilities of social workers in handling child sexual abuse cases identified by the interviewees. All of these responsibilities mentioned by the interviewees have restorative, preventive and developmental aspects. Protecting a victim of child sexual abuse includes protecting their privacy as an individual and maintaining the confidentiality of their case.

Social worker 1, Social Worker 2, and Social Worker 3 narrated that their responsibilities in handling child sexual abuse includes protecting and defending the victims from further abuse and empowering them to understand that what happened to them is a violation of their rights. It is the duty of the social workers to ensure the safety of the child by providing a safe family environment within the shelter. Removing the child away from the alleged perpetrator and the place where the incident of abuse happened is a priority to avoid further abuse.

**SW1** - *“I was able to protect them, empowered them, explained to them that what happened to them is a violation of their rights and there is a justice system that can defend them.”*

**SW2** - *“I am able to protect children who can’t protect themselves. I am able to defend them.”*

**SW3** - *“Provides safety/protection from further abuse or neglect, empowering the survivor of child sexual abuse.”*

Also, part of the responsibilities of social workers in handling child sexual abuse cases is to assist the victim through the legal process from the preparation of all the documentary requirements of filing cases to the preparation of the testimony of the victim to be able to give accurate details in court. It is important to ensure that the child victim is fully ready physically and emotionally before going through all the legal/judiciary process. To avoid the re-traumatization of the child, it is the responsibility of the social worker ensure that by the time the the child gives her statement regarding the abuse it will involve multidisciplinary approach so that the child will not need to repeat her story repeatedly. Helping the victim prepare for court appearances includes giving them ideas on what to expect inside the court. Legal process is very tiring and could also cause re-traumatization to the victims of child sexual abuse. To be able to file formal charges against the alleged perpetrator, the victim needs to repeat over and over

again the incidents of abuse to be able to come up with the required judicial affidavits and sworn statements. Legal process includes reporting to the Philippine National Policewomen and Children's Protection Desk (PNP WCPD), Medico-legal Examinations, Preliminary Investigations with Public Prosecutors, and testifying in court. Facing all these different people - the police officers, the medico-legal doctor, public prosecutors, defense lawyers, and other personnel in relation to the legal process is traumatizing not only to the victims but also to the social workers handling the case. One of the important duties of the social worker to assist the child in going through this process.

**SW2** - *"Assist them during court hearings, prepare them for their testimony, stand as the complainant when families are not supportive, and of course empower them to speak up."*

**SW11** - *"Prepare and assist children and family in court hearing/filing cases."*

**SW4** - *"Assisting the client in filing a case against the perpetrator as well as attending court hearings are some of the common duties we should exercise."*

The responsibilities of social workers to provide counseling, encouragement, and to advocate for the victims of child sexual abuse have restorative and developmental aspects. Restorative in a way that the social workers are guiding the victims to overcome all the effects of their negative past experiences and developmental in a way that social workers are helping the victim in developing skills particularly on learning how to protect themselves. Victims of child sexual abuse are often intimidated due to harassment of the alleged perpetrators and most of the time, victims are afraid to talk about their ordeal especially when their own family do not believe them. In situations like this, the social workers empowers the child by explaining to them that what happened to them is not their fault. What happened to them is a violation of their rights and the alleged perpetrator needs to be convicted.

**SW6** - *"Counseling and giving courage to the child in pursuing justice."*

**SW7** - *"Provide encouragement as well as help the client in problem solving. Also one of the strength of the child in pursuing justice."*

**SW8** - *"Encourage my clients to pursue their case and fight for justice. I like about handling child sexual abuses cases is when I'm doing counseling session with my clients."*

**SW10** - *"I am glad that I can advocate for children's rights and educate their families on sexual abuse."*

The interviewees also identified case management and coordination as responsibilities of social workers in handling child sexual abuse cases. Case management is securing, implementing, and monitoring services needed by a client. The social worker's role is to oversee and coordinate client's services as the case manager. Case management also involves the social worker's assessment of the client's need and planning interventions appropriate to the needs of the client. Social worker 11 narrated that its part of her responsibilities to coordinate with government offices and the referring party to avail services for the best interest of the child.

**SW11** - *"I am the case manager of the child's case - prepare social case study report and other case documentations. Coordination with government offices to avail their services and referring party for better and functioning working relationship in further case management of every child."*

**SW12** - *"I manage na the case folder of the child."*

- **Provide interventions for the victims of child sexual abuse.** Interventions identified by the interviewees includes medical, education, psychotherapy, counseling, stress debriefing prior and after court hearing, help the victims and their family to understand the court process, maintain clients' case folders and ensure confidentiality of the case, multidisciplinary networking, referrals to other service providers if necessary, supervising and fundraising.

**Theme 2** : Alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse

**Sub-themes** :

1. Characteristics of the alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse
2. Dealing with alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse

### **Characteristics of the Alleged Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse**

The interviewees indicated that alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse has malicious intentions and inflict sexual harm to a child. Additionally, interviewees believe that history of being abused themselves and having past unmet needs led the alleged perpetrators to commit abusive acts such as child sexual abuse. Alleged perpetrators are manipulative and will do everything to cover their abusive acts and avoid the punishment of the law.

**Family, relatives, or friends** - It is common to believe that perpetrators of sexual abuse are usually males and strangers. But it is important to note that alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse could be anyone as indicated by the participants. They could be people that are close or known to the victims and people whom the victims never thought could harm them. Alleged perpetrators could be members of the family, relatives, neighbors, and friends as well as respected members of the community like schools and churches. Most cases of child sexual abuse that the social workers handled occurred inside the homes of the victims.

**SW1** - *"A person who a child sees as father figure. It can be friends or neighbors who has malicious intentions to the child."*

**SW6** - *"Acting as a victim; begging the minor to withdraw the case; most of them are family or relatives of the child."*

**Sexually harm a child** - Alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse sexually harms vulnerable minors. Social worker 3 and social worker 4 describe alleged perpetrator as a person that sexually harmed a child. The interviewees also explained that it is termed as *"alleged"* until proven guilty of the crime committed.

**SW3** - *"A person who inflict harm to a child through physical, sexual and psychological."*



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**SW4** - *“An alleged perpetrator is the one that allegedly sexually harmed a child. It is labeled as “alleged perpetrator” since there is still no verdict given by the court to determine whether he/she is guilty or not.”*

**SW5** - *“As I described it, it was someone reported to the authority but has not been proved to be true on the actions being act.”*

**Scary, look innocent, and pretend to care** - Alleged perpetrators use grooming strategies before committing child sexual abuse to their vulnerable victims. They would gain the trust not only of the victims but also the trust of their families. Its the characteristics of the alleged perpetrators to provide attention to the victim that no one would suspect that they are capable of harming a child. The interviewees shared that during court trials, the alleged perpetrators look scary but would appear innocent and pitiful.

**SW7** - *“They look scary and some of them look innocent. Pretend that they care, however, in the first place they ruined the life of the child.”*

**SW8** - *“They look like pitiful and sometimes they are scary.”*

**Denial and toughness** - According to social worker 2 alleged perpetrators would do everything to deny the allegations of child sexual abuse just to avoid the penalty of the law.

**SW8** - *“Of course, denial and toughness, confident that they didn’t abuse the child.”*

**Has history of abused and unmet needs** - Believing in the philosophy of social work that *“Man has inherent worth and dignity,”* the interviewees were trying to understand the alleged perpetrators on a positive side. There could have been reasons of the distorted mindset of the alleged perpetrators that lead them to commit child sexual abuse. Social worker 9 describes alleged perpetrators to be quick-tempered and aside from the history of being abused themselves, they also tend to blame others for their problems, has low self-esteem, controlling, impulsive and highly jealous. Because of these characteristics, social worker 12 suggested that alleged perpetrators need help psychologically, socially, and spiritually.

**SW9** - *“They are quick-tempered, has history of being abused themselves, blame others for their problems, have low self-esteem, controlling, impulsive, and highly jealous.”*

**SW11** - *“These persons has unmet needs and trauma since childhood that was not yet addressed and they lack the means to meet those needs which resulted for them to do abusive acts.”*

**SW12** - *“They need psycho-social-spiritual interventions.”*

**Uses power or authority** - One of the characteristics of an alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse particularly identified by social worker 10 is the use of power or authority. It is common that alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse are adults or anyone older than the victims. They can be the biological fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers of the victims. They can also be teachers, church officials and other respective members of the community who holds certain authority. As minors being dependent to

these adult persons and due to the use of power or authority of the alleged perpetrators, victims are manipulated to obey and could not resist to the sexual abuse.

**SW10** - *“The alleged perpetrator is an adult or older adolescent who uses his/her position of power or authority to gratify or satisfy his/her sexual needs at the expense of a minor.”*

### **Dealing with Alleged Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse**

**Professionalism and non-judgmental approach.** In handling child sexual abuse, interaction with the alleged perpetrators cannot be avoided specially if the incident of abuse was not immediately reported to proper authorities and would mean that the alleged perpetrator can still freely do his/her normal life. As professionals, social workers need to balance their roles between the alleged perpetrator and the victims. It is important to remember that the focus of the social worker in handling child sexual abuse is the victim and not the perpetrator. The interviewees said that in dealing with the alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse they still respect them and maintain their professionalism and non-judgmental approach.

**SW3** - *“Establish professionalism and non-judgmental approach”*

**SW7** - *“I casually have conversation maintaining my professional self without involving emotions”*

**SW9** - *“I listen without judging”*

**SW12** - *“As a professional social worker, I calmly observe and analyze their behaviors. I respect them still because I believe that every person has inherent worth and dignity.”*

**Filing Criminal Case.** The priority in dealing with the alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse narrated by the interviewees is to file formal criminal charges against them. After carefully gathering all the necessary evidence in relation to the incident of abuse based on the disclosure of the victim, the social worker will assist the victim together with the non-offending family members to report to the proper authorities as the first step of taking legal actions against the alleged perpetrator.

**SW4** - *“Filing a legal case would be the first thing to do for the alleged perpetrator to put a stop to their crime. By putting them to jail, it will ensure safety not just only for the victim but for those possible victim.”*

In handling child sexual abuse cases, the focus of the social workers is to enhance the social functioning of the victims. One of the interviewees stated that she doesn't deal with the alleged perpetrators but suggested that they also need help psychologically, socially, and spiritually. Another interviewee said that she just deals with the alleged perpetrator silently.

**SW12** - *“We do not deal with perpetrators. But for me, perpetrators need intensive psycho-social-spiritual interventions.”*

**SW1** - *“I deal with silence and a question such as “why”.”*

**Problem 2:** Social workers make meaning of their experiences in handling child abuses cases.

**Theme 1:** Reflections of social workers of their experiences in handling child sexual abuse cases.

**Sub-themes:**

1. Fulfilling
2. Rewarding
3. Empowering
4. Great accomplishment
5. Challenging

### **Reflections of Social Worker of their Experiences**

Social workers' make meaning of their experiences in handling child sexual abuse cases is another major theme that emerged from the responses of the interviewees. Despite all the difficulties and hardships in handling child sexual abuse cases, social workers always leave a long-lasting impact not only in the lives of their clients but also in the lives of all the people surrounds them. The interviewees indicated how social workers find their work meaningful and valuable as follows: fulfilling, rewarding, empowering, great accomplishment and challenging.

**Fulfilling.** Social workers who find meaning and feel valued in their work are the most productive and fulfilled social workers. Interviewees indicated factors why they consider their experiences in handling child sexual abuse fulfilling as follows: advocating social justice; rebuilding the lives of children; child to be transformed positively; and client getting better.

**SW3** - *"It is a fulfilling experience particularly in empowering the child and advocating social justice and child's rights."*

**SW4** - *"Rebuilding the lives of the children and helping them develop and improve their lives are one of the fulfilling things about my job, to see them heal and find light despite their dark past."*

**SW5** - *"As I can describe my experiences in performing my duties in handling abuse cases is hard but fulfilling in a way that I know I will help the child to be transformed positively."*

**SW8** - *"It's hard but fulfilling, especially when you see your client getting better and overcome traumatic experiences."*

**Rewarding.** In handling child sexual abuse cases, social workers are making a difference in the victims' lives. Helping the victims restore themselves from their past negative experiences is one of the most rewarding experiences of social workers. Its rewarding for social worker 6 when survivor of child sexual abuse overcome trauma through the interventions provided by the social workers. For social workers 4, 11, and 12, the rewards from being social workers handling child abuse cases is the learning and knowledge they get from their experiences. Social workers find opportunities through their experiences to become more effective social workers. Social worker 7

stated that the experiences in handling child sexual abuse cases is a mutual benefit for social workers and clients.

**SW6** - *"It is not easy handling child sexual abuses cases but when the survivor overcome trauma through the intervention of social workers, it is rewarding and fulfilling."*

**SW4** - *"Through the experiences that we had, it gave us learning and knowledge that we can use in helping clients especially new ones. Through these, we can be honed for us to know what better and proper interventions to give depending to the client's needs."*

**SW11** - *"I apply every bit of my learning I get from my experiences to become a better and effective social worker."*

**SW12** - *"I learn from the experiences of these children, I gained insights from them and I use these learning to innovate interventions for them."*

**Empowering.** Social workers witnessing the resiliency of the victims of child sexual abuse and being able to recover from their unfortunate experiences is very empowering. Social worker 9 stated that she finds meaning of her experiences as empowering when she can help and empower the victims.

**SW9** - *"That makes meaning of my experiences when I help them improve and empower themselves through the programs and services we offered."*

**Great Accomplishments.** It's a real sense of accomplishment for social worker 3 to see development in the life of a child she handles. Social worker 2 sees the success of her clients her success.

**SW3** - *"Although it is a challenging job, but when you can see that there's development on the child's life, it leave great accomplishment to the social worker's life."*

**SW2** - *"I see my clients' success my success."*

**Challenging.** Without a doubt, to handle child sexual abuse cases is very challenging because of different risky situations social workers' encounter. Social worker 1 emphasizes that a social worker needs to be strong in front of the client even if how heartbroken you can be. The interviewee stated that there's no safe place and everyone can experience abuse. One of the challenges of social workers handling child sexual abuse is hearing everything about the victim's disclosure of the abuse they suffered. And it is a challenge for social workers not to be emotionally affected by hearing all these horrifying child sexual abuse stories to be able to intervene appropriately. For social worker 10, he must be knowledgeable about the nature of the problem to find meaning of social workers' experiences.

**SW1** - *"For me who handle child abuse cases, there's no safe place for our children, everyone can experience abuse in any form. It is hard. You need to be strong in front of your client even you are heartbroken inside because of what she had been through to get the justice she needed."*

**SW10** - *"Working as a social worker for children victims of child sexual abuse is really challenging. For a social worker to make meaning of their experiences in helping sexually abused child, he must have the knowledge about the nature of the problem."*

**Theme 2:** Difficulties social workers encounter and supports they receive while performing their duties

**Sub-themes:**

1. Safety issues, struggles, and critical situations
2. Support for social workers

**Difficulties Social Workers Encounter**

Due to the forensic nature of child sexual abuse, social workers are prone to encounter difficulties in terms of safety issues, struggles, and critical situations.

**Safety Issues.** Safety and security are a serious concern for social workers handling child sexual abuse cases. The interviewees indicated that safety issues include threats, dangers, and harassment social workers receive while handling child sexual abuse cases. Social workers are mostly in risky situations as they work on behalf of their clients in order to receive justice. Social workers being mandated by law to protect children and intervene in any form of abuse also need protection due to the high risk they face as they deliver service to their clients.

1. **Threats.** Usual threats social workers receive are from the alleged perpetrators or their family including intimidation. Threats are becoming more serious when the family of the victims are not supportive. Social worker 1 stated that she needs to change her name in social media as safety precautions. Social worker 12 experience threats from the alleged perpetrators when she accompanies the victim during court trials and there are also times that the alleged perpetrators would appear in the shelter and cause troubles.

**SW1** - *"We received threats from the perpetrator's relatives and family members who are not supportive with the case. I change name in social media for safety purposes."*

**SW 3** - *"Receiving threats from the opposing party."*

**SW 9** - *"In the field of child protection, working with children exposed to abused and neglect, I am exposed to many possible threats from the abusers."*

**SW12** - *"There are threats from the perpetrators or from the family of the perpetrators especially when we escort the children in their court hearings. When the perpetrator learned that the child is under the care of residential facility, they go to the facility and cause trouble. The children feel physically and psychologically unsafe just by merely seeing the face of their abusers."*

2. **Harassments.** The harassments interviewees receive are sometime not necessarily direct to them but to the victims of child sexual abuse they handle.

**SW10** - *"In addition, the child's fear of the abuser and their threats and the fear of repeated harassment are the main obstacles to not disclosing sexual harassment."*

**SW12** - *"Some safety issues I encountered are connected with the safety and protection of the child especially from the relatives of their perpetrator. For an instance, during court hearings the family of the accused would harass the child and the social worker."*



3. **Dangers.** In cases where alleged perpetrators are still at large, the more that the victims and the social workers face dangers. They could be still in the community making it very dangerous for social workers to conduct home visitation to the family of the victims which is part of managing child sexual abuse cases. Alleged perpetrators who are not yet arrested or were able to bail out from jail could also freely attend the court hearings which put them and the victim together in the same place.

**SW2** - *“The danger from the outside especially when perpetrators are still at large.”*

**SW4** - *“Being in the same place with them does not assure security since we don’t know what they can do just to win the case or to get it dismissed.”*

**Struggles.** Interviewees identified circumstances in handling child sexual abuse wherein social workers are struggling.

1. **Manifestations and trauma.** One of the struggles participants identified they encounter while handling child sexual abuse cases is when the victims begin to show the manifestation of the abuse they experienced. According to Social Worker 2, manifestations are bound to happen, and social workers need to be prepared because it is something that is not easy to manage in handling child sexual abuse. One of the manifestations of child sexual abuse that victims show as observed by Social Worker 6 is unmanageable behavior and trauma. Escaping from the shelter is also identified by the participants as manifestations of child sexual abuse and it is a struggle for social workers because it is something that needed to be addressed appropriately. To address manifestations of sexual abuse in children, it is important to involve multi-disciplinary approach which means there’s a need to seek other professional help.

**SW2** - *“When manifestation from abuse arise, we have to be prepared because there are things that really bound to happen. The trauma and manifestations I observe from the clients, since it could be very hard to manage and needs immediate intervention and focus.”*

**SW6** - *“Unmanageable behavior of the child after a couple of days staying at the residential center. Some of them escaping and trying to kill themselves.”*

2. **Unsupportive parents and family.** In cases that the alleged perpetrator is a member of the family or relative, most of the families of the victims do not want to reveal the incident of abuse because of fear that their family would be the talk of the town. The family believes that it’s a family problem and they can solve it on their own without involving any law enforcement. Unsupportive parents of the victims are also a struggle for social workers because it is a big factor to slow down the legal process in the victim’s battle for justice. There are mothers or parents who are supportive but in most cases that the alleged perpetrator is the father or the stepfather, the mothers of the victims mostly refused to support the filing cases instead, the mother would support the alleged perpetrator. Factors that contribute to the refusal of mothers or parents to support their children who are victim of child sexual abuse includes the following: (1) Mothers are economically dependent to the alleged perpetrator; (2) Mothers/Parents are in denial that husband or son or any member of the family is capable of committing child

sexual abuse. It is also a struggle for social workers when parents are not in favor of their children to be placed in residential centers where they could receive appropriate interventions.

**SW4** - *“Handling sexual abuse case is hard and not for the weak hearted. One thing that I dislike with my job is meeting the client’s unsupportive parents/family and witnessing how they defended the perpetrator instead of the victim.”*

**SW8** - *“Lack of cooperation from the relatives of the child and referring social worker/party.”*

**SW9** - *“I’m struggling when I know that the family members especially mothers who do not reveal the incestuous act if the abuser becomes aggressive and violent.”*

**SW10** - *“These challenges are rooted in how society views and thinks about child sexual abuse, such as the taboo and the child’s and family’s fear of scandal.”*

3. Workload demands and slow justice system. Handling child sexual abuse cases involves preparations and keeping a lot of documentations which is an additional workload for social workers. It’s a struggle for social workers handling child sexual abuse cases because meeting the deadlines of work requirements are making the social workers unable to focus with the helping interventions for the victims. Aside from that, another struggle is the slow justice system in the country. It is a mandate of the law to expedite court cases involving children but there are unexpected circumstances which cause the delay of the legal process. It’s a struggle for social workers because it could also affect the recovery of the child victim.

**SW10** - *“Workload demands challenges my ability to build relationships with children and families and to undertake work beyond procedural requirements.”*

**SW12** - *“Slow justice system in the Philippines.”*

**Critical Situations.** Interviewees indicated that critical incidents social workers encounter while handling child sexual abuse cases includes attending court hearings and suicidal ideation or trying to kill themselves. When a victim of child sexual abuse is placed in the shelter for protective custody, it is a general protocol to assist the child in the process of filing criminal charges against the alleged perpetrator provided that the child is physically and emotionally ready.

Attending court hearing is critical for social workers handling child sexual abuse cases because it is when they need to face alleged perpetrators and their family. It is when social workers receive all the threats and intimidations especially if the case was not filed directly which means that the alleged perpetrator could not be immediately arrested and has the freedom to also attend court hearings face to face.

Another critical incident social workers encounter when handling child sexual abuse cases is when the victim’s manifest suicidal ideation and self-inflicting harms. Social workers must act immediately to address these manifestations of the victims. Seeking professional help is needed in this kind of situation to be able to help the child.

**SW4** - *“Appearing/attending court cases/hearing would probably be the critical issue we mostly encountered. Not all perpetrators/suspects are locked in jail since some bailed out and can freely attend court hearings.”*

**SW6** - *“Some of them escaping and trying to kill themselves.”*

**SW7** - *“In terms of my current job, some of safety issues, struggles and critical incidents were those clients who attempted to escape and those who successfully escaped and have a court hearing the following week.”*

### **Support for Social Workers**

As professionals working in child welfare, it is essential to support social workers for them to be able to continue what they're doing and avoid being burned out because their job can be very stressful at times. As service providers, social workers deserve to be protected and to receive all the support they need. Aside from mandatory compensations and benefits as well as the direct supervision from their supervisors and mentors, the interviewees identified type of support they receive while handling child sexual abuses cases:

**Organizational Support.** The following are the supports provided by the organization where the participants are currently working: (1) seminars and trainings, (2) psychological wellness and debriefing, and (3) rest and recreations.

**Government Support/Support from Referring Organization.** As partners in promoting child welfare, government office and the referring organization are in agreement to support each other particularly the social workers in hope that it will contribute for the better quality of service delivery to the victims of child sexual abuse. Government support includes financial assistance for the victims, technical assistance, seminars, and training for the social workers.

**SW1** - *“The management give support such as sending social workers in seminars, trainings, and conventions.”*

**SW3** - *“Seminars and trainings; learning materials about fundamental concepts of child sexual abuse and hands on experience in handling the sexual abuse survivors.”*

**SW8** - *“Rest and recreation for the social workers provided by the organization. Support from the referring party in terms of follow-ups, case conferences, home visitations to the relatives while the minor is staying in the shelter.”*

**SW12** - *“We have quarterly wellness sessions and debriefing sessions. We attend training on managing child sexual abuse cases.”*

**SW7** - *“Support from the referring parties both financially or any services.”*

**Problem 3:** The interviewees describe their professional work in terms of how it impacts their physical health, thoughts, emotions, and socialization.

**Theme:** Impact of professional work of social workers

**Sub-themes:**

1. Physical health
2. Thoughts

3. Emotions
4. Socialization

### **Impact of Professional Work of Social Workers**

As one of the members of the helping profession particularly in child welfare, social workers has various important roles. As social workers perform these roles they encounters different experiences which can be difficult and challenging but fulfilling and rewarding as they reflect on it. Professional work of social workers has impact in terms of physical health, thoughts, emotions, and socializations of the social workers.

**Physical Health.** Majority of the interviewees said that their professional work as social workers handling child sexual abuse cases is physically tiring, stressful, and energy draining. When interviewees are overwhelmed, some of them tend to stress eating and eats unhealthy food; and overwork themselves that leads to gaining weight, unable to sleep during the night, and getting sick. Despite all these impacts on the physical health of the social workers, they're still trying to develop self-care, create healthy boundaries, coping strategies just to cope up with the physical demand of their work.

**SW1** - *"I would do stress eating when encountering problem need to be dealt."*

**SW2** - *"The job is stressful, thus I tend to stress eat a lot which I gained weight for the past year. On the other side when I overworked myself, I tend to get sick but not all the time."*

**SW4** - *"The overwhelming feeling would sometimes burdened me physically and would stressed me out."*

**SW5** - *"It is a stressful job and tiring."*

**SW10** - *"When I am stressed and overwhelmed, I tend to eat unhealthy food, which is not a good choice."*

**SW12** - *"Honestly, it is stressful and tiring that's why I need to learn to manage stress."*

**SW3** - *"It drained my energy but I try to establish self care/ healthy boundaries with myself to help me more productive in helping my clients."*

**SW9** - *"Physical exercise is considered as the most effective coping strategies and I also getting enough sleep and eating healthy, watching movies, reading books, and gathering with friends."*

**Thoughts.** Significantly, the professional work of social workers particularly in handling child sexual abuse cases has an impact on their thoughts. The interviewees narrated how their professional work impacted their thoughts.

**Suspicious.** Most of the cases the interviewees manage, the alleged perpetrators are grandfathers, stepfathers, or any members of the family of the victims. So, every time Social Worker 1 sees a grandfather and a child together, she suspects that something wrong could be going on. The same thing goes with Social Worker 4 who thinks that men particularly stepfathers are perpetrators.

**SW1** - *"I became suspicious when seeing a "Lolo" and a young girl are together."*

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**SW4** - *"It affects my judgment towards men especially towards step-fathers. I would often think that most of them would sexually abuse their step-daughters and their actions towards them is not genuine and with malice."*

View things negatively. The interviewees could not see anything positive when it comes to child sexual abuse. Social Worker 2 view things negatively and it makes her more aware and observe her surroundings. The same goes with Social Worker 3 who can't help but think bad things about the abuser but still try to practice the judgmental approach.

**SW2** - *"Sometimes I view things negatively. Even so, I became more aware of my surroundings and observant everything around me."*

**SW3** - *"I can't help thinking bad things towards the abuser but I try to remind myself to establish non-judgmental approach"*

On the other hand, Social Worker 5 considers her professional work as an opportunity to think outside the box.

**SW5** - *"Most of the time, it gives me opportunity to think outside the box or being a creative social worker. It enhanced my knowledge as I gather some informations from other professionals."*

**Emotions.** Being exposed to unfortunate stories and events of child sexual abuse in a day-to-day basis, social workers have the tendency to absorb negative emotions which affect them personally and makes them emotionally vulnerable. The most common emotions that emerged among social workers as they handle child sexual abuse are anger, sadness, and fear. Anger towards so many reasons like why child sexual abuse even happening and why it can't just stop. Sadness towards the effects of child sexual abuse to victims; witnessing them suffer because of what happened to them and fear for the safety of the victims.

Social Workers 1 and 10 stated that their professional work caused them anxiety. While Social Worker 5 said that its mentally draining for her to talk to the victims and it breaks the heart of Social Worker 4 to hear all the stories and experiences of the victims. Social Worker 4 also added that she is empathetic towards the victim and apathetic towards the alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse. With all the emotional impacts of the professional work of the interviewees, most of them acknowledge that what they feel is normal and manageable just like Social Worker 2 mentioned. Social workers are learning how to handle their own emotional battles caused by their professional work. Social Worker 5 goes through counseling provided for the staff at her workplace. Social Worker 12 learns how to take care of her own feelings and Social Worker 3 practice calmness during stressful situations.

**SW2** - *"I become anxious to be honest, and easily offended. Stressful emotionally, but I think this feelings are normal and manageable."*

**SW10** - *"I experience anxiety because of the fear of not meeting all the deadlines as expected."*



**SW4** - *“Being exposed to clients’ stories and experiences, it would often soften my heart and it breaks me. My empathy is often towards the victims and I’m often being apathetic to perpetrators and to families that are unsupportive.”*

**SW5** - *“It is mentally draining when doing one on one talks or counseling with the clients specially when they are sharing their life stories and guiding them emotionally. At my work place, they provide counseling sessions to the staff to secure mental health to prevent burnout at work.”*

**SW12** - *“I became emotionally strong. I learned to take care of my feelings.”*

**SW3** - *“When I faced with conflicts/consumed with my feelings, I try to apply the ability to remain calm in my stressful situations.”*

**Socialization.** The professional work of social workers has a direct influence on their socialization. The stories of child sexual abuse they face every day, the victims of child sexual abuse, the alleged perpetrators, the roles of social workers and the workplace are all work-related factors that has impact on the social life of social workers. The following are the impacts of professional work of social workers in terms of socialization emerged from the response of the interviewees: hard to trust and isolate; cautious and vigilant; do not want to talk; socially drained; and good social skills and healthy relationship.

**SW1** - *“I distance myself from people, I am suspicious or don’t trust.”*

**SW2** - *“It’s hard for me to trust, especially to men. Sometimes I prefer to keep my company close and I isolate myself from others sometimes.”*

**SW3** - *“Very cautious and very vigilant to any social gatherings for possible occurrences of child abuses.”*

**SW9** - *“Sincerely speaking, on my off duty, I just watch movies or reading books to clear my mind because I do not want to talk to anyone for sometime.”*

**SW10** - *“There are times that I’m just socially drained, just from the nature of my work. It’s really socially draining even though I’m an ambivert. It keeps me from spending time with people as much as I used to. I noticed the changes.”*

**SW12** - *“I established good social skills.”*

**SW4** - *“Being exposed to different sectors and people, it develops my social skills more. It helps me build healthy relationship with other people especially to those also working for the children.”*

**SW5** - *“I need to be sociable in a way to be approachable, having a positive relationship with co-social workers because they are the ones helping reach the goals in helping the clients. I do learn to be confident in communicating, sharing my thoughts and ideas to my co-workers so we can help better our residential clients.”*

**Problem 4:** The interviewees describe an effective social worker who deals with victims of child sexual abuse.

**Theme 1 :** Traits of an Effective Social Worker

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**Sub-themes:**

1. Aware
2. Respect and acknowledge participation
3. Competent
4. Good working relationship

**Traits of an Effective Social Worker**

To become a professional social worker, it requires standard educational training, skills and competencies. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) through seminars and trainings are also great aid to enhance the skills needed in the professional practice of social work. The traits of an effective social worker shared by the interviewees based on their own experiences are awareness, respect and acknowledging participation; competent, and good working relationship. These traits of an effective social worker is consistent with social work principles.

**Worker Self-awareness.** Awareness is one of the skills of social workers that is needed in the professional practice of social work. It involves being aware of his/her own needs, personal feelings, goals, roles, values, and motives as a social worker. Worker self-awareness means that the social worker is aware that the focus of the professional practice is the client or the person who needs help. Personal issues or unresolved conflicts of the social workers must not affect the delivery of service to the client. According to Social Worker 9, an effective social worker is aware of the best practices, skills, knowledge and values of social work.

**SW9** - *“An effective social worker is really be aware of the best practices, skills, knowledge and values that can be obtained through practice and education.”*

**Respect.** In social work principles respect means accepting people as they are, which involves a non-judgmental approach. Instead of judging the behavior of the client, an effective social worker will try to investigate and explain the reason behind the behavior. This social work principle also means that social workers recognize that every individual has strengths and weaknesses.

**Participation of the client in problem solving.** An effective social worker will not do everything for the client. The role of the social worker is to provide options, guide the client in decision-making; and allow the client to find solutions in every problematic situation.

**SW6** - *“An effective social worker must acknowledge the participation of the survivor in decision making.”*

**SW8** - *“When the social worker respect the opinion and acknowledge their participation, their personal information and their personal challenges is essential to bring a professional and successful social worker.”*

**Competent.** One of the qualities of an effective social worker is being competent. Social Worker 10 describes an effective social worker to be competent in terms of identifying resources of services fit to the needs of sexually abused children.

**SW10** - *“Effective social worker is competent in linking the child and family with other resources that are specialized in rendering services to sexually abused children.”*

**Good working relationship.** The focus of the client-worker relationship is enhancing the social functioning of the client. An effective social worker identifies the difficult areas of the client’s life and will work together with the client in finding possible solutions.

**SW2** - *“A social worker who could walk her client through out the helping process and be able to have a good working relationship with the client. A social worker who is willing to journey with the child to achieve healing and recovery.”*

**SW4** - *“As long as you have the heart and that you work for the client and with the client, you can be an effective one.”*

**SW5** - *“Working on the interventions that is for the best interest of the child.”*

**Theme #2** : Interaction with Fellow Social Workers

**Sub-themes** :

1. Can relate with the experiences of fellow social workers
2. Exhibit good practices

### **Interaction with Fellow Social Workers**

Social Work is a profession that requires collaboration and engaging with other social workers and other profession. Interacting with fellow social workers is important in terms of partnership and helping each other in managing similar cases of child sexual abuse. The interviewees consider their interaction with fellow social workers not only beneficial for their clients but also for them as social workers. The ability to create professional relationships with other social workers is a kind of comfort for the interviewees knowing that they can relate with each other in terms thoughts and sentiments; challenges and issues; experiences and goals. Because they are on the same field, they can share burdens and experiences in a way that they are learning from each other.

**Can relate with the experiences of fellow social workers.**

**SW2** - *“It is good to know that there are people who can relate with what I’m experiencing and share same thoughts and sentiments.”*

**SW3** - *“Very supplementary because we can relate to each other since we are dealing with the same challenges and issues.”*

**SWP4** - *“Interacting with fellow social workers help me broaden my knowledge in dealing with victims of child abuse. It also helps me and comfort me knowing that I have someone I share the same experience and same goal.”*

**SW9** - *“It’s always good to work or interact with social worker with the same field because we can share the burden together.”*

**SW1** - *“When other social workers share their experiences and how they deal with the problem, maybe their methods is applicable in some situation that you encounter and vice versa.”*

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**Exhibit good practices.** Seeing fellow social workers exhibit good practices in handling child sexual abuse cases motivates the interviewees to continue in the field of helping profession. The participants are able to build teamwork and good working relationships with fellow social workers.

**SW10** - *"I have seen their passion and commitment in handling the cases of their clientele. There were many individual examples of social workers exhibiting good practice and a sensitive determination to provide effective support and care for children."*

**SW11** - *"So far, most of the social worker I interacted with are responsive and cooperative with the helping process needed to provide to our dear clients."*

**SW12** - *"They are cooperative and sincere in their works."*

## DISCUSSION

### Findings 1:

Two (2) main themes and five (5) sub-themes emerged in the response of the interviewees in the first statement of the problem of the study. The main themes and sub-themes answered the aim of the current study by describing and understanding the nature of child sexual abuse based on the experiences of social workers.

The interviewees defined child sexual abuse based on their actual experiences and consistent with the definition of the World Health Organization and R.A 7610. Effects of child sexual abuse to victims were also identified by the interviewees based on their experiences. The current study reveals that the victims of child sexual abuse are survivors and conquerors being able to overcome their unfortunate past experiences of abuse. Also, the responsibilities of social workers in handling child sexual abuse cases were identified in the findings of the current study. Additionally, characters of the alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse how to deal with them were revealed in the findings of the current study.

### Findings 2:

Two (2) main themes emerged from the response of the interviewees on the second statement of the problem. Social workers handling child sexual abuse cases make meaning of their experiences as hard and challenging but also fulfilling, rewarding, empowering, and great accomplishment. Its meaningful experiences for social workers being able to advocate for social justice; help rebuild the life of the victims; witness victims transformed positively from the abuse; and overcome trauma. The findings of the current study show the difficulties in terms of safety issues, struggles, and critical situation social workers encounter in handling child sexual abuse cases. The support social workers received while performing their responsibilities was also stated in the findings of the study.

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**Findings 3:**

One significant theme and four (4) sub-themes emerged from the responses of the interviewees for the third statement of the problem. It was stated in the findings of the study that the professional work of social workers has an impact on them. The findings show how the professional work of social workers impacted their physical health, thoughts, emotions and socializations.

**Findings 4:**

For the fourth statement of the problem there were two significant themes that emerged. The traits of an effective social worker shared by the interviewees based on their own experiences are awareness, respect and acknowledging participation; competent, and good working relationship. These traits of an effective social worker is consistent with social work principles such as worker self-awareness, respect, and participation of the client in problem solving. The findings of the study shows that interacting with fellow social workers is important in terms of partnership and helping each other in managing similar cases of child sexual abuse. Because they are on the same field, they can share burden and experiences in a way that they are learning from each other.

**Findings 5:**

Support programs were crafted based on the findings of the study which can be instrumental for the social workers in performing their duties and responsibilities in handling child sexual abuse cases. The researcher organized these support programs crafted based on the response of the interviewees into a table and entitled it as the Professional in a Personal Development Programs for Fellow Social Workers. Further studies; workshops, seminars, and trainings; mental health and psychosocial support; and retreat are the support programs crafted based on the findings of the study. Objectives, specific activities, responsible person, resources, time frame, and expected output for each support program were indicated in the table.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Social workers handling child sexual abuses cases in non-government child caring agencies in Antipolo City, Rizal have thorough understood about the nature of child sexual abuse. The objectives of the study to explore, examine, and describe the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases were attained. The understanding of social workers about child sexual abuse was described as not an ordinary social problem and the sad truth is its still growing despite the increasing awareness campaign efforts by the local government and private child caring institutions. It is a serious concern that not everyone can handle. It affects not only the victims, but everything related to it primarily the families, the community and the social workers who handle it. The effects of child sexual abuse is very damaging and it creates



dysfunctional family, depression, suicidal tendencies, fear, anger and others. All of these are just some of the many factors making social work profession a very challenging field. Victims of child sexual abuse needs continues support as they go through the journey of seeking justice and full recovery. The manifestations of sexual abuse may still be triggered any time and it needs to be addressed appropriately.

2. The interviewees are aware of their responsibilities and based on their experiences they perform their tasks selflessly to help and guide the victims in overcoming traumas and other effects of child sexual abuse. Their responsibilities are focus on the intervention for the victims.
3. The interviewees of the study also identified the characteristics of the alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse and their exposure with them is a great help for them to learn how to legally and professionally deal with the alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Dealing with the alleged perpetrator of child sexual abuse must be knowledge or evidence-based to be able to addressed them accurately.
4. The participating social workers make meaning of their experiences by accepting and understanding the nature of their work in handling child sexual abuse cases. They knew firsthand as social workers that their work can be challenging but they accepted it and continue to make their job meaningful in spite of all the difficulties. The support they receive from co-workers in the workplace help them thrive in their work. The essence of the experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases began by the time they accepted it and perform their roles. The findings of the study reveal that social workers handling child sexual abuse prioritize the welfare and best interest of their clients over their own safety. Social workers ensure that every child they handle receives all the necessary interventions towards complete healing. Everyday social workers work so hard fighting for justice their clients or the victims of child sexual abuse deserve. Social workers work hand in hand with the victims of child sexual abuse and face all the difficulties on daily basis. Despite all the safety issues, struggles, and critical situations, social workers persevered and continue to handle child sexual abuse cases. They still find meaning of their experiences; considering it as challenging and yet fulfilling and rewarding experiences. In performing their responsibilities, social workers are able to receive organizational support in terms of seminars, trainings, wellness and debriefing, rest and recreations; financial assistance and technical assistance. These kind of support for the social workers are vital for them to be able to feel valued and appreciated in the works that they do. It motivates them to continue to deliver quality service to the clients more effectively and productively.
5. Due to the sensitive and forensic nature of child sexual abuse cases and because social workers are real people dealing with it, they can't avoid the negative impact of their professional work in terms of their physical health, thoughts, emotions, and socialization. Social workers are so dedicated performing their professional work but they also have the tendency to absorb all the emotions brought about by their work which led to the negative impact on their physical health, thoughts, emotions, and socializations. The personal lives of social workers are also impacted by the toughness

of their professional work. In spite of the negative impacts of their work, social workers are professionally trained to develop coping strategies that they use to maintain their health mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Social workers have different reactions on how their professional work is affecting them. Some are more vulnerable that would fight their own battles silently while the others appear tough and able to develop self-care to avoid burned-out.

6. The effectiveness of social workers cannot be measured by educational achievement only. A social worker has to be fully aware and knows the proper application of her/his roles, functions, values, and principles. Effective social workers also acknowledge their weaknesses and there are parts of the job that are beyond their capacities and capabilities. And from their weaknesses there comes the importance of interacting with fellow social workers for support. Interacting with fellow social workers and even with other professionals is a good avenue to learn new things in relation to giving service to clients particularly the victims of child sexual abuse.
7. To support the social workers, the researcher crafted programs based on the findings of the study. The goal of the support programs is to recognize and value social workers by providing opportunities for them to enhance their knowledge, skills and expertise as well as to ensure that social workers are well-supported, well-equipped to be able to continue provide quality service to clients. The primary providers in the implementation of the support programs in terms of financial support and other provision are the employers of the social workers. In terms of direct services for each support programs, the primary providers are the counselors, psychologist, and others.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers earnestly recommend the following:

1. This study was focused in just one area which is the non-government child caring agencies in Antipolo City, Rizal. It might be helpful to include other areas in Rizal in future related research to explore more on the lived experiences of social workers handling child sexual abuse cases.
2. Policies, programs, and services in relation to child protection must continue to be promoted and advocated to increase awareness among families and communities with hope that it will help lessen or much better stop the occurrence of child sexual abuse.
3. For social workers handling child sexual abuse cases, it is important to be accredited as social workers managing court cases as well as to promote professional practice and ensure quality service delivery. Through accreditation, recognition is given to the Social Worker's competence as an expert witness in court litigation and to exercise professional handling of cases in the court setting.
4. Further studies focusing into each theme discovered in the study will be helpful for social workers handling child sexual abuse cases to understand more of the nature of child sexual abuse and enhance their knowledge and competencies in providing services and interventions to victims of child sexual abuse.

5. Utilization of professional personal development programs for social workers is recommended to better equip social workers in handling child sexual abuse cases.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researchers strictly followed the ethical standards of research in the conduct of this study. The interviewees were invited to participate in the study by forwarding the necessary letter to their respective Administrative Authority in the Child Caring Agencies where they are affiliated. The researchers sought individual voluntary consent of the interviewees for confirmation of their participation in the study. The interviewees were provided with an informed consent form to be signed before the conduct of the interview.

Second, rights of the participants regarding anonymity, confidentiality, and feedback of the result of the study were discussed before data gathering. No names were indicated on any of the interview questionnaires. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym as SW1 to SW12 that stands for means Social Worker 1 to Social Worker 12. The researchers assured the interviewees and their child caring agencies that their information and well-being would be safeguarded and always protected even after the conduct of the study. The interviewees were assured of their freedom to withdraw at any time and that they were not exposed to any physical, psychological or social harm.

Lastly, at the end of the interview, a debriefing process was facilitated by the researchers.

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