

Empathetic responses and gender sensitivity in combating violence against women and children: A qualitative study on female police officers' experiences

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Abstract

Violence against women and children (VAWC) is a pervasive global issue affecting individuals, families, and communities through physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. Investigators in the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) face unique challenges in ensuring survivor safety while holding perpetrators accountable. This study explored the experiences of female police officers, focusing on the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they employ, and the ways these experiences shape their ability to support victims. Data analysis revealed six emergent themes: Empathetic Responses and Gender Sensitivity; Overcoming Barriers in Victim Cooperation and Societal Stigma; Managing Emotional Resilience; Utilizing Coping Mechanisms; Overcoming Reluctance and Building Trust in Supporting Victims; and Empowering Through Comprehensive Support. Findings highlight the critical role of female officers in providing compassionate assistance despite challenges, such as victims' reluctance to pursue legal action or forgive abusers. Emotional resilience and coping strategies, including peer support networks and solution-focused approaches, are essential for officers to manage the emotional demands of their work. Based on these insights, it is recommended that the Philippine National Police implement comprehensive training on empathy, gender sensitivity, effective communication, and confidentiality, and provide counseling and emotional support resources. These measures aim to strengthen officers' capacity, support victim protection, and enhance community trust in VAWC interventions.

Keywords: challenges, coping mechanism, support, experiences, female police officer

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1. Introduction

Violence against women and children (VAWC) remains a critical global concern (Shrestha et al. 2024; UNICEF, 2017; Guedes et al., 2016), which requires sustained and specialized intervention from law enforcement agencies. Female police officers are often at the forefront of responding to VAWC cases, serving as primary investigators and key figures in ensuring victim protection and case resolution. Their role demands not only professional competence but also a high level of empathy and gender sensitivity. However, repeated exposure to victims' trauma and distress places these officers at heightened risk of emotional strain and secondary trauma, which can adversely affect their well-being and professional performance (Craddock & Telesco, 2022; Warren, 2015; Foley & Massey, 2020; Hughes, 2024).

Despite the central role of female police officers in addressing VAWC, existing research has largely emphasized the experiences and needs of victims (i.e., Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022; Serrano-Quijan, 2020; Balahadia et al., 2022), with limited attention given to the perspectives of law enforcement personnel who manage these cases. Female police officers encounter distinct challenges, including emotional exhaustion, psychological stress, and the pressure to balance procedural responsibilities with compassionate care (Degerstedt et al., 2025; Elliot et al., 2015; Treece, 2023). Understanding their lived experiences is therefore essential to gaining a more comprehensive view of VAWC response mechanisms and identifying gaps in institutional support. This study addresses this gap through a qualitative examination of female police officers assigned to Bacolod City Police Stations 1, 4, 6, and 7, stations that receive a high volume of VAWC reports.

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of female police officers handling VAWC cases, with particular attention to the challenges they face, their coping strategies, and the emotional and psychological impacts of their work. By documenting their experiences, this research seeks to inform the development of supportive programs and policy interventions that enhance officers' well-being, strengthen their emotional resilience, and improve the quality of support and services provided to victims of violence against women and children.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Police Response to Violence Against Women and Children

The police play a crucial role in addressing domestic violence and abuse, functioning as frontline responders for victims seeking protection and justice. Despite this central role, research has raised concerns about inconsistencies in police responses (Güss et al., 2020; Wire et al., 2024; Kassem & Turksen, 2025; Spence & Crivatu, 2025), which may result in victims not receiving adequate support and experiencing gaps in justice outcomes. Nevertheless, law enforcement agencies remain essential in preventing and responding to VAWC. Police interventions include rapid response mechanisms, provision of safety tools such as mobile phones and alarms, securing victims' homes, facilitating access to legal protection, and ensuring timely police assistance. In some cases, victims also receive specialized support from officers trained in domestic abuse cases.

Legislative frameworks have strengthened police responses to VAWC. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) significantly reshaped law enforcement practices by funding victim services, improving investigative procedures, enhancing training, increasing staffing, and fostering multi-agency collaboration. Since its enactment, police approaches toward victims and offenders have evolved, contributing to improved advocacy services and crime reduction (Jennings et al., 2020). Similarly, law enforcement agencies are encouraged to adopt victim-centered and perpetrator-focused policies that address the root causes of domestic violence while ensuring unbiased responses, as effective police intervention is a critical first step in community-level prevention (Alan et al., 2023).

Female police officers play a distinct and influential role in addressing violence against women, particularly in severe cases. Research suggests that the presence of female officers encourages law enforcement agencies to treat domestic violence more seriously and may increase victims' willingness to report abuse, especially in cases involving sexual assault and intimate partner violence (Newman, 2018). Historically, many police departments viewed domestic violence as a private matter rather than a law enforcement concern, a perception that began to change following legislative reforms such as VAWA. However, victim trust in the police remains a challenge in many contexts. In Zanzibar, distrust rooted in corruption and bribery has discouraged women from reporting abuse (Grant, 2018). To address this, gender desks were established in police stations to provide privacy and a more supportive reporting environment. Despite this initiative, limited resources and inconsistent implementation hinder

effectiveness. Grant (2018) emphasizes that officers' behavior, particularly empathy and sensitivity, is essential in building trust, underscoring the need for widespread gender-based violence training among police personnel.

In the Philippines, institutional mechanisms such as VAWC Desks and Women and Children Protection Desks (WCPDs) serve as frontline responders, particularly at the barangay level. Gender sensitivity training programs have been implemented to strengthen officers' capacity to handle abuse cases effectively, emphasizing victim-centered approaches, neutrality, and informed decision-making by survivors (Catapang, 2019). The Philippine National Police (PNP) has also highlighted the importance of fully functional VAW desks, especially in remote communities, to ensure confidentiality, proper documentation, and access to protection orders (Meniano, 2020). The Magna Carta of Women mandates the establishment of VAW desks in all barangays, positioning them as primary providers of support services for victim-survivors. These desks, managed by designated officers, also engage in community counseling, awareness campaigns, and advocacy for women's and children's welfare (Balahadia et al., 2022). National monitoring data reveal that while barangays have established VAW desks, functionality levels vary, highlighting the need for improved training, funding, and operational standards (Matahum & Tanigue, 2025).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, WCPDs faced unprecedented challenges, including mobility restrictions, logistical shortages, and procedural delays. Despite these obstacles, police units continued investigations and arrests, reinforcing the expectation that crises should not justify neglect of VAWC cases (Lalu, 2020). However, studies also report persistent gaps, including inadequate resources, unclear role definitions, and insufficient qualifications among desk officers, which limit effective case handling (Consignado et al., 2022).

2.2. Psychological Stress, Trauma, and Coping Among Police Officers

Police officers who handle VAWC cases are frequently exposed to chronic stress and trauma. Stress is defined as a perceived or actual threat to physiological balance, involving complex interactions among the endocrine, nervous, and immune systems. Cortisol regulation through the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis plays a significant role in stress responses, with implications for cognitive function and mental health (James et al., 2023). Prolonged exposure to traumatic material places officers at risk of secondary traumatic stress (STS), burnout, and emotional exhaustion.

Empirical studies highlight the emotional toll of investigating sexual and domestic violence. Officers often witness victims' distress, face low conviction rates, and experience frustration when cases do not progress, all of which contribute to trauma symptoms (Morabito et al., 2020). Continuous exposure to sexual violence cases necessitates supportive mechanisms such as clinical supervision, peer support, and reflective practices (Parkes et al., 2021). The stigma surrounding mental health within police organizations further exacerbates emotional insecurity, underscoring the need for comprehensive care frameworks that prioritize officer well-being (Redmond et al., 2023).

Female police officers face heightened psychological risks due to the demanding nature of their work and additional gender-related pressures. Studies using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis reveal that female officers often view themselves as resilient, adaptive, and committed public servants who rely on positive coping strategies. However, they also report fear, disrespect in the field, work–family conflict, and limited time with their families (Blanco et al., 2023). Research focusing on Filipino female police officers highlights the prevalence of secondary traumatic stress and burnout among those handling women and children cases (Alagos et al., 2022). Secondary traumatic stress arises from repeated exposure to others' trauma and manifests in emotional and behavioral symptoms similar to direct trauma exposure. Case studies further demonstrate that high job demands, uneven caseloads, and lack of supervision contribute to burnout, reinforcing the need for structured workplace mental health programs, balanced workloads, and regular debriefing sessions (Leon & Campomanes, 2022).

Law enforcement officers also encounter systemic and procedural challenges when enforcing VAWC laws. In some cases, victims withdraw complaints due to fear, reconciliation attempts, or social pressure, leading to accusations of unlawful detention against officers and discouraging proactive enforcement (Güss et al., 2020). Cultural norms further influence reporting behaviors, as seen in Tabuk City, where conflict resolution traditions and beliefs that violence is “normal” contribute to underreporting despite awareness of legal protections (Ignacio, 2022). International evidence reinforces that domestic violence remains a pervasive social injustice requiring coordinated responses. In Africa, collaboration among police, courts, and community organizations is essential to reduce domestic violence and protect women and children effectively (Mpofu & Mamba, 2024; Kiconco, 2024; Mpofu & Tfwala, 2024). These findings collectively highlight the need for systemic support, cultural sensitivity, and

interagency cooperation to strengthen police responses to violence against women and children.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the following theories.

Resilience Theory. Resilience Theory provides a lens for understanding the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by female police officers in managing the demands of their work. Resilience theory examines how individuals are affected by and respond to adversity, change, loss, and risk (Hurley, 2022). Central to this theory is the view that resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process that can be developed over time. Individuals may demonstrate varying levels of resilience across different situations, depending on the nature of stressors and available resources. Female police officers handling cases involving violence against women frequently encounter traumatic and emotionally demanding situations. Within this context, resilience theory emphasizes the ability to adapt positively despite exposure to stress and adversity. It also highlights the importance of social and organizational support systems in strengthening resilience. Supportive work environments and community networks can significantly enhance female police officers' capacity to manage emotional and psychological challenges. Thus, resilience theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how female police officers evolve, adapt, and sustain their effectiveness while addressing violence against women.

Humanistic Theory. Humanistic Theory emphasizes the self-actualizing tendency as a core driver of human behavior. Humanistic theory focuses on personal growth, intrinsic motivation, and the innate human desire for fulfillment and creativity (Miller et al., 2022). Applied to female police officers dealing with VAWC, this framework facilitates an understanding of their subjective experiences, personal values, and internal motivations. By emphasizing individual perspectives and human potential, humanistic theory enables a deeper appreciation of the officers' strengths, challenges, and capacity for growth. This perspective contributes to a more holistic understanding of their lived experiences and highlights the importance of empathy, self-worth, and personal meaning in their professional roles.

Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) Theory. According to Stamm (2019), ProQOL Theory is widely used to assess compassion satisfaction, burnout, and compassion fatigue among professionals who assist individuals experiencing trauma and suffering. This model is particularly relevant to helping professions, including law enforcement, healthcare, and social

services. Female police officers handling VAWC cases are routinely exposed to distressing and traumatic situations. ProQOL provides a structured approach to examining how such exposure affects their emotional well-being, including both the rewarding aspects of helping others (compassion satisfaction) and the adverse effects of prolonged stress. Understanding this balance is critical for developing targeted interventions that enhance officers' well-being, mitigate burnout, and promote a sustainable and fulfilling professional quality of life.

Social Support Theory. Social Support Theory emphasizes the protective role of social relationships in mitigating stress and reducing negative outcomes. According to Kort-Butler (2018), social support theory highlights how positive social interactions, both informal and institutional, can reduce risk factors associated with crime and stress. Informal support from family and peers, alongside formal support from institutions such as government agencies and the justice system, plays a crucial role in promoting resilience and well-being. In the context of female police officers responding to VAWC, social support theory underscores the significance of both organizational support within the police force and personal support networks outside of work. Examining the interplay between these support systems allows for a deeper understanding of how female officers cope with emotional strain, maintain resilience, and sustain their mental and emotional health while navigating the complexities of their roles.

Stress and Coping Theory. Stress and Coping Theory explains how individuals manage stress through cognitive appraisal and the adoption of coping strategies. According to Labrague et al. (2018), effective coping depends on how individuals perceive stressful situations and select appropriate behavioral and emotional responses. Female police officers, especially those assigned to VAWC desks, face multifaceted stressors, including exposure to trauma and challenges associated with working in a male-dominated profession. Their appraisal of stressful events, access to coping resources, and reliance on strategies such as social support and self-care significantly influence their resilience. Organizational support through training, gender-sensitive policies, and mental health programs further strengthens coping capacity and helps prevent burnout. This framework provides insight into how stress management and institutional support can enhance officers' effectiveness in addressing gender-based violence.

Expectancy Theory. Expectancy Theory, proposed by Victor Vroom, is also relevant to this study as it explains motivation based on individuals' beliefs about effort, performance, and outcomes. According to Main (2023), the theory comprises three components: expectancy

(belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to rewards), and valence (the value placed on those rewards). Anchoring expectancy theory in the lived experiences of female police officers dealing with VAWC allows understanding of how motivation influences their performance. Officers' expectations regarding recognition, support, and meaningful outcomes shape their decision-making and commitment to handling VAWC cases effectively. By examining these motivational dynamics, the study can inform strategies that enhance engagement, performance, and job satisfaction among female police officers.

Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model. Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007). The JD-R model examines the relationship between job demands, job resources, and employee well-being. According to Brauchli et al. (2015), the model links occupational demands and resources to both positive and negative biopsychosocial health outcomes. In relation to female police officers handling VAWC cases, the JD-R model provides a framework for understanding how high job demands, such as emotional labor and exposure to trauma, interact with available resources, including training, supervision, and organizational support. Identifying imbalances between demands and resources allows for targeted interventions aimed at improving officers' well-being and effectiveness. This framework supports advocacy for enhanced institutional support systems that promote resilience and sustained professional performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research method employing a phenomenological research design to gain a full awareness of the experiences that female police officers had on the ground as well as their coping strategies when dealing with cases of violence against women and children. Qualitative research aims to understand ideas, experiences, and opinions using non-numeric data, such as text, audio, and visual recordings. The focus was on language, behaviors, and social structures. Qualitative researchers wanted to present personal experiences and produce narrative stories that used natural language to provide meaningful answers to their research questions.

According to Ho and Limpaecher (2022), phenomenological research constitutes a qualitative research method that endeavors to comprehend and portray the fundamental essence of a phenomenon. This approach delved into the everyday experiences of individuals, with researchers setting aside their preconceived notions about the phenomenon. In essence, phenomenological research scrutinized lived experiences to glean profound insights into how individuals perceived and made sense of those encounters. Ultimately, its focus lies in examining lived experiences to enhance our understanding of how people interpreted and grasped the significance of those experiences.

3.2. Participants of the Study

This study was conducted at the selected Bacolod City Police Stations, specifically at Police Stations 1, 4, 6, and 7 of the Women and Children Protection Desk. Bacolod City might have had a significant number of reported VAWC cases. Choosing the research site allowed the study to investigate the experiences of female police officers in an environment with a notable incidence of such cases. This focus was critical for understanding the challenges, coping mechanisms, and responses within the context of a city dealing with a substantial number of VAWC incidents.

The study's participants consisted of seven (7) female police officers, specifically assigned to the WCPD, focusing explicitly on VAWC cases reported in Bacolod City. The choice of female officers for the study aligned with the understanding that gender played a role in the dynamics of violence, especially in cases involving women and children. Additionally, the WCPD was staffed by female police trained to handle VAWC cases; they were more empathetic and understanding and could bring perspectives and experiences to the study. Therefore, the female police officers with jurisdiction in stations 1,4,6, and 7 were chosen as participants for this study. The three (3) participants underwent in-depth interviews, and the four (4) underwent focused group discussion enabling a collective exploration of their experiences dealing with violence against women and children.

3.3. Data Gathering Instrument

The study utilized a researcher-made interview guide with tailored questions to explore the lived experiences of female police officers assigned to violence against women and children cases. The instrument encompassed a set of questions specifically tailored to explore

the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and challenges faced by these officers in dealing with issues of violence against women and children.

Experts in criminology and psychology validated the interview guide questions to ensure that the in-depth interview questions attained the necessary data to conduct the study and caused no harm to the informants. A thorough and rigorous validation process was undertaken to enhance the instrument's validity. The researchers sought the assistance of experts in relevant fields, including criminology and psychology, to validate the interview guide questions using the Good and Scates Criteria set forth by Crater V. Good and Douglas B. Scates. The mean score was calculated to determine the instrument's validity. The result of the summary of validation of the mean score is 4.78, which indicates excellence.

3.4. Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers followed specific research guidelines from the STI West Negros University College of Criminal Justice Education in conducting the study. Initially, approval was sought from the College Dean, Program Head, and Research Coordinator to conduct the study. After obtaining approval from the Police City Director, a letter of request was submitted to Bacolod City Police Stations 1,4,6, and 7 for authorization to conduct the study among the female police officers assigned to the women's and children's protection desk. Subsequently, informed consent was obtained from the respondents for an in-depth interview, informing them of their rights to participate voluntarily. The experiences and challenges encountered by the informants when dealing with cases of violence against women and children were carefully discussed and noted. An audio recorder was used to record the conversation, which was then transcribed into a written record for analysis and interpretation by the researchers. Confidentiality of the respondents' responses was ensured throughout the study process.

3.5. Data Analysis

Colaizzi's method of data analysis was an approach to interpreting qualitative research data to identify meaningful information and organize it into themes or categories (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021). This meant that the researchers first identified the descriptions and nature of the informants participating in the study, which helped them comprehensively analyze their specific responses. Following this, the researchers were able to extract the significant statements given by the informants, which were used to formulate meanings that were then

derived into clustered themes. These clustered themes were then used to establish emergent themes, which were interpreted and analyzed to formulate findings and conclusions. Furthermore, themes were formulated to determine the significant statements collected in certain responses of participants' opinions on their lived experiences. Additionally, due to financial considerations, the researchers did not hire a data analyst. Instead, the researchers were responsible for interpreting the data themselves.

3.6. Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to the ethical standards established by the University and College for Research. The researchers ensured the voluntary involvement of the informants in this study. Throughout the study, informants had the option to withdraw at any moment. They were fully informed of the purpose of the study's engagement. Informants were required to sign consent papers as evidence of their willingness to participate in the study and the absence of coercion. No information was made public without the informant's explicit permission. Data confidentiality and the informant's anonymity were preserved throughout the study, and only the researchers had access to the secured and stored data. Upon completion of the investigation, data-gathering materials were appropriately discarded.

4. Findings and Discussion

A total of seven (7) informants participated in the study. Four (4) informants took part in a focused group discussion, while the remaining three (3) participated in in-depth interviews. Six (6) emergent themes were derived from the informants' responses. Core meanings were first identified from the data and subsequently used as the basis for formulating the emergent themes.

Experiences of Female Police Officers Handling VAWC Cases

Three (3) emergent themes were identified regarding the experiences of female police officers handling VAWC: Empathetic Responses and Gender Sensitivity, Overcoming Barriers to Victim Cooperation and Societal Stigma, and Managing Emotional Resilience.

Female police officers reported a sense of fulfillment in providing compassionate and empathetic support to VAWC victims. Gender sensitivity played a crucial role in establishing trust during interviews, as shared gender experiences allowed officers to better understand

victims' situations, build rapport, and facilitate open communication. However, officers also encountered challenges when victims chose to forgive their abusers due to financial dependence, fear, or societal pressure, which often limited the effectiveness of police interventions.

Informants noted that victims' responses to police actions could be a source of frustration. In several cases, victims obstructed the legal process by withdrawing complaints or refusing recommended interventions, thereby restricting officers' ability to provide appropriate assistance. Such barriers highlighted the complexity of addressing VAWC cases within existing social and cultural constraints.

Managing emotional resilience emerged as a critical aspect of the officers' experiences. WCPD investigators emphasized the need for strong emotional tolerance to compartmentalize their feelings and continue delivering professional services. Repeated exposure to victims' trauma and inconsistent client cooperation often led to emotional strain, requiring officers to consciously regulate their emotions to remain effective in their roles.

Coping Mechanisms for Emotional and Psychological Stress

For the coping mechanisms employed by female police officers in managing the emotional and psychological stress associated with their duties, one (1) emergent theme was identified: Resilience and Coping Mechanisms.

WCPD investigators described facing both personal and professional challenges due to the emotionally charged nature of VAWC cases. To cope, officers adopted solution-oriented approaches, maintained balanced perspectives, and demonstrated empathy and resilience. They emphasized prioritizing assistance for vulnerable groups while also ensuring time for family and personal life to counterbalance the demands of their work. These strategies enabled them to sustain their commitment despite ongoing stressors.

Impact of Experiences on Service Delivery to VAWC Victims

Regarding how female police officers' experiences influence their ability to provide support and services to VAWC victims, two (2) emergent themes were identified: Overcoming Reluctance and Building Trust in Supporting Victims of Violence and Empowering Through Comprehensive Support.

Officers reported challenges related to victims' inconsistent behavior and failure to follow through with advice or legal procedures. Such reluctance significantly hindered investigators' capacity to address reported issues effectively and affected their motivation to pursue cases. Persistent non-cooperation often led to feelings of disheartenment and demotivation among the officers.

Despite these challenges, informants emphasized the importance of institutional support in maintaining their effectiveness. Many sought assistance from the Philippine National Police (PNP) through training programs, seminars, and counseling services to enhance their skills and emotional resilience. These forms of support were viewed as essential in empowering officers to continue providing comprehensive and effective services to victims of violence against women and children.

5. Conclusion

The six themes identified in the study emphasize the crucial role of female police officers in handling Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases. These themes include empathetic responses and gender sensitivity, overcoming barriers in victim cooperation and societal stigma, managing emotional resilience, utilizing coping mechanisms, overcoming reluctance building trust in supporting victims, and empowering through comprehensive support. Female police officers play a significant role in providing compassionate support to VAWC victims, often relying on their shared gender to establish trust and understanding. However, they also face challenges such as repetitive cycles of reported cases, emotional stress, and inconsistent behavior from clients. To overcome these challenges, they require ongoing training, emotional support, and a supportive work environment. The study highlights the importance of fostering trust and cooperation between victims and police officers, as well as the need for comprehensive support from the Philippine National Police (PNP) to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) officers in addressing VAWC cases. By addressing these themes, we can improve the support provided to victims of violence and create a more effective and empathetic police force.

Disclosure statement

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the College of Criminal Justice Education of STI West Negros University. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by STI West Negros University preferably by the dean of the college and Bacolod City Police Stations for the participants of the study.

Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used AI tools, such as ChaGPT for correcting sentence construction, grammar, and syntax, and Grammarly for thorough grammar checks, have been employed to ensure the accuracy and clarity of the content. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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