

# Lived Experiences of Social Workers Handling Rape Survivors

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## Abstract:

This paper deals with the lived experiences of social workers handling rape survivors in Baguio City. The main objective of the study is to understand the role of social workers handling rape survivors by determining the challenges being faced by them. In addition, it seeks to know the influence of their lived experiences towards their life outside rehabilitation centers.

This study utilized qualitative research method through case study. The participants of the study were three social workers from the CFSPI, which were chosen via purposive sampling. A semi-structured interview serves as the main tool in this study. Using thematic analysis, the data were coded, categorized and themed. Based on the findings of the study, it was revealed that social workers handling rape survivors experience hardships performing their role. Further, social workers are mostly being challenge due to self-reservation, neglectful parents and difficulties in handling a child. Social workers also shared that their experiences had influenced their personal life through having a positive perception towards life. It is then concluded that Social workers are satisfied with their job despite the difficulties in handling survivors. Social works help social workers have a positive insight towards their personal life despite affecting their emotional well-being. The researcher then recommends that the CFSPI may strengthen parental involvement programs, particularly in parent-child relations and they may provide intervention programs for their social workers that will boost their emotional well- being.

Key words: *Live experiences, Social Worker, Rape Survivors, Social Work*

## INTRODUCTION:

*“Social work is the art of listening and the science of hope”*

*-Everyday Inspiration Journal*

Social workers are considered as an agent of change and reform because of their vital role in the healing process of crime victims (Khinduka, 2001), especially in cases of rape, whereby the mental health of the victim is mostly affected (Campbell, 2008), as proved by several studies (Ljungwald, 2008). However, seldom had considered the adverse effects of the victim’s trauma to the social worker.

Evidently, social workers play a vital role in the healing process of a rape victim. The care and concern being shown to the victims helped them cope with the unpleasant impact of what happened. Working with them helps the victim deal with the challenges being faced.

Most of the role of social workers has something to do with the rehabilitation and coping process of a person suffering from a crisis (Chadron, 2003). Specifically, the role of the social worker is to assist to the victim by helping her understand what is happening, help in the recovery from the traumatic experience, and to provide an explanation of options available for the circumstances.

However, social workers' experiences can become emotionally and psychologically challenging. Freeman (2016) cited that social workers commonly experienced occupational trauma in the form of vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and/or burnout. Vicarious trauma occurs when a person is holding back his/her feelings while listening to the traumatic experiences of other people, which may result in the transformation of the person's sense of self, professional cognitively, psychological and emotional (Pearlman, 2012). It commonly occurs due to the continuous exposure of the social worker who is experiencing or had experienced trauma. Meanwhile, secondary trauma pertains to the natural and consequential behaviors and emotions resulting from exposure to a traumatizing event experienced by other people (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). It occurs due to the contact of the person.

Both vicarious trauma and secondary trauma may trigger burnout, mental health issues and might affect the ability of the social worker in dealing with a client. Lastly, compassion fatigue, pertains to the feeling of being numb and disconnectedness, which may result in the inability to empathize, as well as, to perform social works. Social work is the frontline in fighting off traumatic events. However, social workers' dedicated support and help to people suffering from the crisis may lead to interference to their social and personal life.

In the Philippine setting, the Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD) is the central agency responsible for promoting social works. The DSWD, together with local government units and non-governmental organizations, work hand-in-hand in assisting the needy.

Being a social worker is a calling that is not that easy (Maung, 2020). Also, a recent study in the Philippines found that social workers are now spending most of their time on computers and filing paperwork, leaving a small portion of the day for their personal time. Thus, most of their time are devoted to their job. Also, in an interaction with one of the social workers in the locality, the most common problem they are facing is the high number of caseloads assigned to them due to the lack of social workers. There are also times in which they are being pulled out from their specific assignment to cater other tasks not part of their function. This occupational stress may add up to the psychological stress that burdens the social worker.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

This study is anchored with the following theories: a) Constructivist Self-development Theory by Saakvitne and Pearlman, Sense of Coherence Theory, Gestalt Theory, and Emotional Processing Theory.

**Constructivist self-development Theory.** This theory was introduced by Saakvitne and Pearlman (1996). It explains how social workers adapt with the secondary trauma brought by dealing with traumatic people. Most social workers construct their own way of dealing with traumatic people. If the social worker can't be able to create a way to deal with traumatic victims they tend to absorb the adverse effect of dealing with traumatic people.

**Sense of Coherence (SOC) Theory.** This theory was introduced by Aaron Antonovsky. It simply explains why some people becomes ill or stay healthy under stressful condition. (Ostling, 2017). Social workers, with high sense of coherence, who deals with victims suffering from rape trauma will be able to manage the stressful condition of exposing to such, otherwise, the social worker will suffer from vicarious or secondary trauma.

**Gestalt Theory.** The premise of this theory is that individuals form patterns from their experiences. The person's behavior is dependent on the effect of that experience in their lives (Kantrowitz

& Okun, 2008). Social workers deal with various stressful moments, mostly catering their client's traumatic experience. Applying gestalt theory, the effect of facing stressful conditions will be dependent on how the social worker is going to perceive the situation.

**Emotional Processing Theory.** This theory claims that fear is activated through associative networks. High intense of fear will result to problematic way of functioning. Mostly, social workers deal with traumatic people. Long exposure with them may result to an intense emotion that may affect their way of functioning.

While most researches concentrate on the impact of rape towards the victim, physically and psychologically, little had considered the effect towards the social worker handling rape survivors. Thus, as a Criminologist, the researcher became interested in this topic to gain an understanding on the daily challenges being faced by a social worker.

The paradigm depicted on figure 1 shows the flow of the research study. The first box refers to the participants while the 3 inner boxes pertain to the data that will be gathered from the participants. The 2 boxes above address to the proper course of action to be done if the experiences of the social worker is not pleasant. The last box talks about the outcome of the study, basically it refers to the effect of the experiences of the participants towards their personal life.

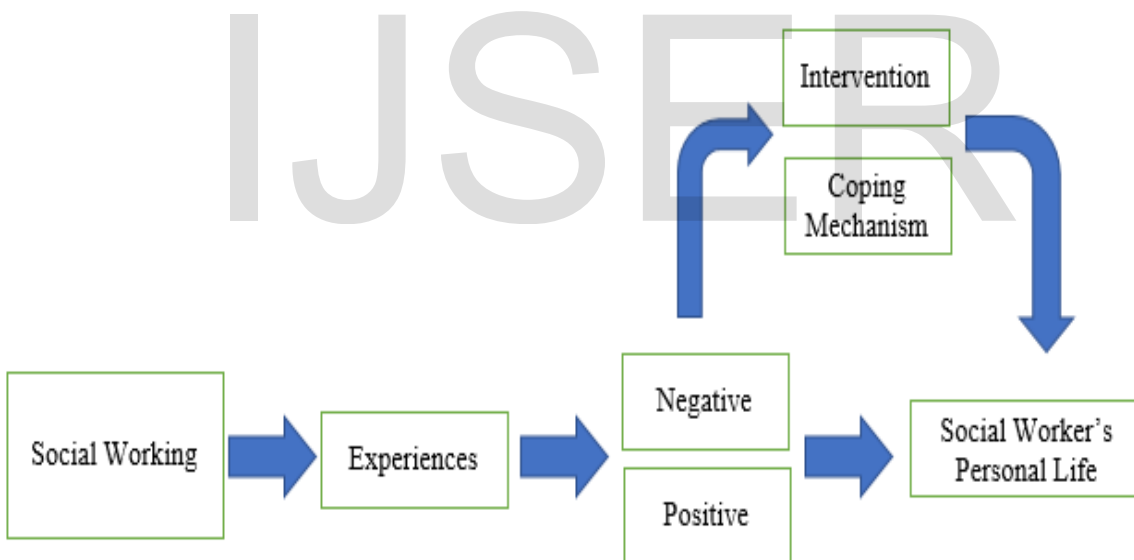


Figure 1. Paradigm of the Study

The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experiences of social workers handling rape victims. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of social workers handling rape victims?
2. What are the challenges encountered by the social worker in the rehabilitation of rape victims?

3. What is the influence of the lived experiences of social workers toward their lives outside the rehabilitation centers?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Three social workers, all female, from the Child and Family Service Philippines Inc. (CFSPI) participated in the study. In selecting the participants, purposive sampling was utilized. Under this method, the researcher selects the sampling units based on his subjective judgment (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Those who meet the purpose or objective of the study are those deliberately included by the researcher in his sample (Garcia, 2015). This sampling technique is suitable since participants will be chosen based on their occupation and workplace. Requirements are participants should be social workers, who, in their professional work had handled rape victims. The inclusion criteria for participants of this study are: a) Social workers assigned to handle rape victims and b) handled at least 1 rape victim.

The researcher utilized qualitative research through case study in order to satisfy the objectives of the study. The primary data-gathering tool utilized in this study is semi-structured interview which is open-ended. This allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up (Turner, D. III, 2010). The interview was a one-on-one interview. The one-to-one interview is a commonly used data collection method in health and social research (Ryan et al, 2013).

The researcher used thematic analysis in presenting the facts in the study. According to Clarke and Braun (2003), thematic analysis refers to a process of identifying themes or patterns, from the data collected, and use these themes to address the research problem (Maguire et al, 2017).

The researcher reviewed the notes and listen to the information that was recorded from the interview. The data gathered was transcribed into writing, the common responses was coded and segmented. Theories and other related literature was used to interpret the data gathered. The researcher, in order to protect the identity of the participants made use of codenames.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

### Lived experiences of Social Workers handling Rape Survivors

The following themes describe the experiences of Social Workers handling rape survivors.

#### Strange Experience in performing role

Social workers are great contributors in the development or coping of a person in crisis. In this study, performing the role of being a social worker faces a lot of hardships, since they are dealing with unusual events.

**Shifting Personalities.** Taking care of rape survivors is not that easy. Most social workers, both new worker and those who had been in the job for several years, considered it as an unusual experience.

And most often, they were not used to it, thus, social workers need to shift their personalities when dealing with the rape survivors.

In an interview with Participant 1, she said, *“parang iba yung role mo kapag ada ka ijay. So kelangan pag nasa shelter ka ganito ka, so kelangan mo maging strikto para sa kanila, kasi pag hindi, nu haan agtutunos bagbagam, madadael jy rules and regulations nga naiset mo”*. (As if your role is different if you are in the shelter. So if you are in the shelter you need to be like this, you need to be strict for them, because if not, if your statements are not consistent, the rules and regulations that were set will be destroyed.) Social workers need to adjust their personality once in the shelter since they are dealing with different people with different personalities. The people whom they interact with is not the same with the people they are used to deal with and communicate in everyday.

**Shocked.** According to Participant 2, *idi nagwork ak dito talaga nga nashock ak, ijay kwan ti cases idi, child abuse nga as young as kastoy ket ada ti mangperpetrate, mostly ket dagijay trusted talaga or kapamilya nga talaga nga very shocking*. (When I worked here, I was shocked with the cases before, like child abuse as young as she is, she is being perpetrated, mostly be trusted person or family member, its very shocking.) This experience narrated by Participant 2 shows that there are unexpected realities on the experiences of the survivor that might surprise someone. Incidence of shock occurs due to the society’s different notion of the role of social services, various ways of bringing up children and different concept of physical and mental health (Legault, 2008).

### Children Management

Most abused person being sheltered are children, who were abused by people known to them.

**Disciplinary Mechanism.** Discipline allows children to develop self-discipline, and helps them become emotionally and socially mature adults (Paediatrics Child Health, 2004). There are different effective ways children could be disciplined. Social workers deals with different behaviors of rape survivors, in order for them to learn the way of life, they are being disciplined in accordance to their need.

All of the participants cited that most of the disciplinary mechanism they utilize is the reward or punishment system. Specifically, Participants 1 and 3 stated *Usa met ti reward ken punishment system knyami. Nu ada inaramid nga mayat reward them, nu madi punish them*. (Reward and punishment system is common to us. If he (child) did something good we will reward him, if not good punish them), *nu uubbing met ma’am, reward system and punishment system. about food or basic needs da*. (For the young ones, reward system and punishment system), respectively. This implies that young survivor’s behavior can be corrected as long as the technique to be employ is proper based on who the child is. Thus, it is the duty of the social worker to look for the appropriate disciplinary action towards the child. The idea of reward and punishment is supported by Operant Conditioning by B.F. Skinner. As cited in the article entitled ‘Foundations for Understanding and Managing Behavior’, the occurrence of desired behavior is increased by positive reinforcement and eventually extinguished by non-reinforcement. The reward is used as reinforcement so that the child will repeat good behavior while punishment is provided for the child not to repeat his action.

### Satisfaction

Social workers obtain much satisfaction from their work with high commitment and believe they can make a difference to people’s lives (Eborall and Garmeson 2001; Huxley et al. 2005).

**Job Fulfillment.** Participant 1 said that *now ti panagkitak ngay kt fulfilling on my part professionally, mentally and everything personal, both ngay kt amin naited t CFSPi kanyak kasi first job ko*. (Now, the way I see it is fulfilling on my part professionally, mentally and everything personal both,

both is given to me by CFSPI since this is my first job). Also, Participants 2 and 3 stated that *para kanyami nga workers, nu natulungan jy survivor iti uray basi bassit lng nga banag, dakkal en unay djy para kanyami*. (For us workers, if we help a survivor in little way, that is big enough for us). This shows that touching other people's life makes the job fulfilling. For people who want to dedicate their life in helping others, social work can be a fulfilling career. It is a career of helping others help themselves. A social worker facilitates change in the behavior of individuals and communities.

According to Mack (2012) in his study entitled 'Why Social Workers remain in the Field: An Exploratory Study on the Protective Factors Associated with Social Workers, majority of social workers tend to have high instances of job satisfaction. In a related study Evans et al (2006) cited that 237 mental health social workers in England and Wales, forty-seven (47%) percent stated that they were at least mostly satisfied with their jobs while nineteen (19%) percent reported that they are not satisfied. Similar findings were reported by Papadaki and Papadaki (2006) after surveying 61 social workers from Crete, Greece. Of the social workers from Crete, 1.6% were extremely satisfied with their jobs, 46% were very satisfied, 37.7 were moderately satisfied, and only 18% reported being only somewhat satisfied.

**Supportive Colleagues.** Support from boss and co-workers may leave a great impact towards the person. It can be a reason for the person to stay and give his best in performing his task.

This is true based on the claim of Participants 1 and 2 that support from their colleagues help them a lot. Participant 1 said that *very thankful ak jay support ti staff, ada ti teamwork kn jy support ti mentor me* (I'm very thankful for the support of the staff, there is teamwork and the support of our mentor). Participant 2 also stipulated that *wen uray narigat ngem ada da met ketdi dagita kakadwa nga mangisuro nu nia ti aramidem*. (Yes, even though it's hard, my colleagues are there to guide me on what to do). This means that supervision and support from co-workers may lead to a high intention of staying in workplace. Strong social support from co-workers and superiors creates a workplace in which people can thrive. A workplace where co-workers are happy, provide comfort, and share praise can rise productivity and build a sense of belonging. If there is a lack of social support and positive connections, workers lose the qualities attributed to their ability to thrive (Maslach et al. 2001). In addition to these findings, Gillen (2008) stressed the benefits of supervisors creating a safe time and place for workers to have the opportunity to vent their frustrations and concerns about current cases.

### Challenges encountered by the social worker in the rehabilitation of rape victims

Social workers face many challenges and hardships throughout their careers (Mack, 2012). Social workers are handling cases of different people centered on violence, substance abuse, isolation, abuse and more. With experienced, proper training and a positive mindset, social workers across the nation have developed strategies for addressing these issues, but many challenges remain (University of Nevada, n.d.).

### Self-reservation

**Role Confusion.** Role ambiguity is an issue considered to affect the performance of an individual (Celik, 2013). It was cited by Participant 2 that *no maminsan jay intention mo or goal mo ket tumulong ngem haan mo nga amu you're just breaking, haan ka gayam makatutulong*. (Sometimes, you thought your intention or goal is to help but you does not know you are just breaking, you are not helping. You though you are helping but you are not). This shows that the situation and reaction of the survivor towards the event creates confusion on the part of the social worker, especially in exercising his/her duty towards the child. Moreover, Celik (2013) contend that role confusion decreases job performance directly or indirectly.

**Self doubt.** It was mentioned by Participant 2 *no ada jy case ijay court ket haan nga nagsao jy ubing Iblame ko ti bagik, asla nga ay apay ngay nagkurang ak ba nga nagprepare. Apay ngay nga idi*

*kwa kt kasjay. Apay nga very helpless da during court?* (If the case is in Court and the child is not going to talk, I'll blame myself, like why, is my preparation not enough. Why do they seem helpless in Court?) This shows that the success and failure of a social worker is based on the performance or improvement of the survivor. As mentioned earlier, social workers help shape the well-being of a person, however, if the child survivor seems to be disturbed during the process, doubt would arise on the part of the social worker. Self-doubt arises if the person is uncertain about their competence or ability (Reich, 2014).

### **Behavioral Problem**

**Misbehavior of Children.** In the interview with Participant 1, she said, "Maysa nga challenge ket jay behavior da." This is supported by the statement of Participant 3, stating that *nu agpaspasaway da, tumakas da or marabian agawid from school. Or agaapa da.* ( If they will misbehave, they escape or come home late from school.) These statements from the participants imply that children survivor are sensitive to everything making it hard to handle them. It was noted that most of the misbehavior of children are triggered by her environment.

Piaget's Theory of moral reasoning rejected the idea that that children learn and internalize the rules of society given and forced to adhere to. However, he explained that children conform to society's norms of what is right and wrong by being active rather than passive. Further, he elucidated that children's thinking is based on how actions affected them (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, n. d.).

**Child suffering from psychiatric problems.** Most studies claimed that victims of sexual abuse will suffer several mental health problems brought by what happened. This can be proved by the statements of participants whereby most of them claimed that it is hard for them once triggered. It was mentioned by Participants that *ngem ti pinaka challenging siguro nga nahandle ko dajiy ada ti mental illness da, nadiagnose da ti mental condition gapu ijay nangyari.* (But the most challenging maybe that I handled are those with mental illness, they were diagnosed with mental condition because of what happened. This means that sexual abuse do have great negative impact on the child. And one of the greatest effect is on the psychological well-being of the survivor.

In the study entitled "The Mental Health Impact of Rape", conducted by Dean Kilpatrick of the National Violence against Women Prevention Research Center, it was confirmed that rape does have several mental health impacts. One of the mental health problem identified is Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Another mental health problem identified is major depression. The study found out that 30% of rape victims had experienced at least one major depressive episode in their life while 21% of the respondents experience major depressive episodes during the assessment (Medical University of South Carolina, 2000).

### **No parental involvement in the recovery programs**

It is the responsibility of parents to help in the recovery process of the rape survivor. Parental Involvement can provide support for their children's treatment and recovery process (Saywitz et al. 2000). However, the one of the problem encountered by social workers is the non-participation of the parent during the process.

**Uncooperative Parents.** According to Participant 2, during the recovery process, parents should take part by undergoing several session on parenting skills and understanding an abused child. However, soliciting parental involvement is hard.

According to Professor Charles Desforges (2003) family involvement is strongly influenced by family social class and child's attainments. Thus, most parents becomes proud of their child if it brought fame and good reputation in the family. However, this diminishes if the child brought shame or destroys family's reputation (Department of Education and Skills, 2003).

**Aggressive Parents.** Participant 2 said that *umay da paylang ichallenge da ka me. Ada py jy time nga ithreaten da dakami. Dakami ti pabasulen da nga dakami kanu ti mangsugsugsog, nga dakkel kanu maal ala me nga kwarta ijay korte.* (They even come to challenge us. There was also a time when they threaten us. They blame us because they believe that we persuade (the child), that we gain money from the court). This shows that parents do have misconception towards the role of social workers. It implies that they misunderstood the whole process or reluctant to understand it.

**Problems with the child's reintegration.** Participant 1. *Another problem ket jay agstay jy ubing kanyami ti for how many years. Nu reintegration gamin mam jay ti narigat kasi bagong adjustment so ti ikaskasta me mam ada ti home leave da inut inut da agsubli da tapnu makasanayan da ulit. During reintegration gamin jay stigma ngay ti community nga ah ni kastoy lalo nu kimalat jay kaso. Ada gmin ti ubbing nga madid an agsubli jay community da or family so, nia ngata ti aramiden lumipat kaya jay family or what.* (Another problem is the overstay of the child for several years. For integration ma'am it is difficult because of new adjustments, so what we usually do, they will undergo home leave until such time that they will be used to their home again. During the reintegration, the stigma of the community about the child especially if the case had been known to others. There are children who doesn't want to go back in their community or family, so it's our problem if they will change address or what). These statements of the participants connotes that putting back the child into the mainstream of the society is difficult especially if there is no family involvement during the process.

Reimer (2012) said that families and communities are traumatized by what they have witnessed, because of this social structure deteriorates. Thus, it is common for a rape survivor to be rejected by family members or the community itself.

## **Influence of the lived experiences of social workers toward their lives outside the rehabilitation centers**

### **A change in the Social worker's emotional well-being**

Occupational stress and burnout are real concerns of social workers in performing their job (Maslach, 2003). Emotional exhaustion was reported to decrease workers' ability to cope with work demands and, as a result, increased workers' stress level (Bradley & Sutherland, 1995; Evans et al. 2006).

**Fear.** Participant 1 *Fear ko lang nu ada ti anak ko baka haan ko mabantayan ngay kt baka kasjay ti mangyari kanyana.* ( I fear that if I will have a child I will not be able to look after her, she might experience the same). Participant 3. *Kanyak, ada jy buteng ko ngay nga baka nu makiasawa ak kt aganak ak kasanu nu mangyari ijay anak ko dijay ngay, nia ngata ti aramidek ngay?* (For me, I have fear that if I will marry and have a child what if it will happen to her also, what should I do?). This implies that social workers orientation of their future life is greatly influenced by their current experiences in social working.

Emotional Processing theory claimed that fear is activated through associative networks. It also emphasized that high intense of fear will result to problematic way of functioning. Mostly, social workers deal with traumatic people. Long exposure with them may result to an intense emotion that may affect their way of functioning. However, fear also affects future decisions of the workers. Some researchers tried to relate it to the personal status of social workers that most of them do have the fear of being in a marriage life.

**Anxiety.** Participant 1 shared that during reintegration nagkaroon ako ngseparation anxiety. *Umiyak ako. Nasasad ako. Idi agawiden nga itulod me, umiyak ako.* (During reintegration, I suffer from separation anxiety. I cry. I feel sad. The moment that we parted ways, I cried) While Participant 2 said



that jy first months ko ditoy kt as in natagtagainep ko jy kaso, haanak makaturturog, apay nga kasjay , apay nga ada ti tatang nga kasjy. (For my first months here, I dreamed the case, I can't sleep. I asked why? Why did the father do such?).

As mentioned earlier, social workers are at risk of anxieties and other form of stress because of the nature of their job. Freeman (2016) cited that social workers commonly experienced occupational trauma in the form of vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and/or burnout. That could be manifested by anxieties, overthinking, fatigue and sleeplessness.

Further, Constructivist self-development Theory explains how how social workers adapt with the secondary trauma brought by dealing with traumatic people. Most social workers construct their own way of dealing with traumatic people. If the social worker can't be able to create a way to deal with traumatic victims they tend to absorb the adverse effect of dealing with traumatic people.

Also, Participant 3 stressed that tas idi damdamuk dtoy, kanayun ko ngay mapapanunut jay kaso jy ubbing, uray nu rabii. Narigat nga maikkat ijay panunot ko, nga apay nga kasjy piman ti nangyari k tubing pay suna. (When I was new here, I always think of the child, even during night time. It's hard not to think, why did it happen to her?) These statements implicate that social workers are affected by the nature of their job. They are at risk of having stress.

Recently studies claim that social workers have previously been identified as being at risk of experiencing stress and burnout (Acker, 1999; Egan, 1993; Gilbar, 1998; Sze & Ivker, 1986; Um & Harrison, 1998).

### **Positive perception towards life**

Despite the negative effect of social working to workers, there is still something good effect of their job towards their personal life.

**Feeling blessed.** It was mentioned by Participant 1, "*personally, thankful ak nga nameet ko isuda, thankful ak nga naam amuk suda. Thankful ak kasi adu naadal ko jy boss ko, mentor ko kn jy ubbing.*" (I'm thankful because I meet them. I'm thankful because I learned a lot from my boss, mentor and from the children.) This means that despite the hardships in their work, social workers do have lot of reasons to be thankful. It became an eye-opener for them to recognize what they have.

**Personal Virtues.** Participant 2 proudly stated that *there are positive effects of social work in her.* Social work help workers with their life realizations that despite the traumatic and stressful situations encountered everyday.

Sense of Coherence Theory tried to explain why some people becomes ill or stay healthy under stressful condition. Generally, a person with strong sense of coherence is more likely to feel less stress and believe that he/she can be able to face most challenges. While a person with weak or low sense of coherence most probably will suffer pain (Collingwood, 2020). Social workers who have positive view towards social work do have high sense of coherence.

### **Conclusions**

Social workers are satisfied with their job despite the difficulties in handling rape survivors. Most of the challenges encountered by the Social worker has something to do with their role and parental involvement. Social works help social workers have a positive insight towards their personal life despite affecting their emotional well-being.

### **Recommendations**

After a careful review of the finding, the researcher recommends the following:

1. The CFSPI may continue with the trainings and programs provided for their social workers. However, the CFSPI may strengthen it's program on the caring aspect.
2. The CFSPI may strengthen parental involvement programs, particularly in parent-child relations. This could be done through activities such as family therapy programs.
3. The CFSPI may provide intervention programs for their social workers that will boost their emotional well- being. This could be achieved through activities on emotional management programs.
4. Future researchers may conduct a study dealing with the effectiveness of family homes or shelter programs in the rehabilitation of rape or sexual assault survivors.

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