

# Unveiling the Lived Experiences of Police Officers in Dealing with Violence against Women and Children

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of female police officers in handling Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases, highlighting their emotional and professional challenges and the coping strategies they employ. Through in-depth interviews with five officers from the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD), the study identified themes such as the emotional struggles in addressing violence cases, demonstrating empathy and establishing trust with victims, contributions of female officers in victim support, overcoming difficulties in managing complex cases, and adopting coping mechanisms to manage emotional stress. While empathy enhances victim support, it also contributes to emotional strain, particularly in cases involving male perpetrators. Female officers play a vital role in fostering trust, supported by trauma-informed and gender-sensitive training. However, challenges such as victims' loyalty conflicts and fear of retaliation emphasize the need for emotional resilience. Officers manage stress through family support, professional techniques like compartmentalizing emotions, and self-care practices such as mindfulness and physical exercise. The study recommends enhancing emotional support, training programs, peer networks, victim-centered protocols, and promoting work-life balance and self-care to better equip female officers in managing the complexities of VAWC cases effectively.

**Keywords:** coping strategies, emotional strain, empathy, family support, female police officers, violence against women and children (VAWC)

## INTRODUCTION

Police officers are public servants employed by government agencies to maintain peace and order, serve and protect the people, and enforce laws (Zulyadi, 2020). They both consist of a number of men and women. They also have their duties to fulfill in law enforcement, depending on the specific roles they are assigned to. As males are believed to be stronger than females, the latter were offered limited duties, usually in office-based and gender-based settings. One of their duties is identified as responding to crimes against women and children (Seiser, 2019).

Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) refers to traumatic and harmful acts, such as physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, that are committed against women and children (Garcia, 2020). It is a prevalent issue in various places, such as homes, workplaces, and public places, and may be perpetrated by strangers, relatives, acquaintances, or intimate partners (Fritzon, 2022). Moreover, many cases would go unreported due to the silence of the victims. Few of them choose to stay silent in order to protect the reputation of the family, and others are ashamed of sharing their experience (Yates, 2020). On the other hand, a couple of numbers often dismiss their complaints because they tend to be more impatient in waiting for the results. In fact, in order to attain justice, there is this so-called "due process" (Murphy et al., 2022).

Violence against women and children remains a serious problem in the Philippines despite efforts to address it. According to the 2022 National Demographic and Health Survey conducted by the Philippine Statistics

Authority (2023), 17.5% of Filipino women between the ages of 15 and 49 reported being a victim of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse at the hands of their romantic relationships with others. In 2021, there were 1,791 rape cases, 1,505 acts of lasciviousness, and 8,399 reported incidents of physical violence. On the other hand, Garcia (2020) stated that rape remains a widespread crime in the Philippines. A 2022 National Baseline Study on Violence against Children found that 17.1% of Filipinos aged 13-17 experienced sexual violence, and 3.2% were victims of forced consummated sex during childhood (Ramiro et al., 2022).

The Republic Act 9262, the Anti-Violence against Women and Their Children Act of 2004, seeks to impose fiercer penalties on perpetrators of crimes against women. Moreover, it offers a range of support services to victims of crimes against women and their children, including livelihood assistance, legal support, psychological support, medical assistance, shelter and temporary housing, and socioeconomic support (Perandos et al., 2019). This law was enacted by the Philippines Congress and enforced and applied by various government agencies and entities around the Philippines. This law penalizes different offenses or crimes, starting from physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, economic abuse, emotional abuse, and stalking (Cagara & McLaren, 2019). Furthermore, the penalties vary to imprisonment and fine, and it aggravates when certain circumstances are present, such as the use of a weapon, when the commission of the offense in the presence of a child, or with the involvement of illegal drugs, the penalties imposed on perpetrators will be more severe (Sichon & Guhao, 2020).

Republic Act No. 7610, the Special Protection of Children against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act, is a law in the Philippines that aims to safeguard children from any forms of abuse, exploitation, and discrimination (Lim, 2022). This law imposes fierce penalties on perpetrators of crimes against children (Callenero et al., 2023). Moreover, according to Indico (2024), it offers a range of support, such as education, rehabilitation, and protection in any legal proceedings. The Department of Justice implemented the Republic Act No. 7610. It punishes any person who commits irrational, immoral, and cruel acts, such as child abuse, cruelty, exploitation, or other conditions prejudicial to the child's development. Furthermore, the penalty for any person who commits such an act varies from imprisonment to a fine (Aquino & Villarosa, 2023). According to Nigam (2022), it is the rape cases with a victim below 12 years old would be non-bailable.

Female police officers who are tasked with enforcing Republic Act 9262, Republic Act 7610, and other related laws face various challenges on a daily basis. One of these challenges is the emotional stress obtained during responding to such cases (Purba & Demou, 2019). These officers are regularly exposed to the trauma and suffering of the victims and survivors, which can take a toll on their emotional well-being (Queirós et al., 2020). Moreover, not all victims continue to desire to proceed with legal measures. Even after showing empathy, guidance, and encouragement to prioritize their safety above all else, some still refuse to pursue it (Ofori et al., 2019).

A range of emotional stressors are often experienced by female police officers when victims choose not to pursue the filing of the case (Nisar & Rasheed, 2020). They were deeply committed to supporting victims and seeking justice on their behalf, so when cases are not pursued, they may feel a sense of frustration, disappointment, or helplessness (Sherwood et al., 2019). They may also struggle with feelings of self-doubt or inadequacy, questioning whether they could have done more to support the victim or to ensure that justice was served (Bishopp et al., 2019). These officers may reflect on their interactions with the victim, wondering if they could have provided more effective assistance or if they missed opportunities to intervene (Purba & Demou, 2019).

Accordingly, unveiling the lived experiences of female police officers in responding to violence against women and children is a new study that the researchers have decided to conduct. This study aims to address the knowledge gap by providing limited yet valuable insights into the professional challenges and emotional toll faced by police officers. It opens a new door for understanding the realistic dealings in their line of work, highlighting their personal experiences and coping mechanisms. The purpose of this study is to allow the researchers to look into their experiences and assess whether their exposure to those problems while responding to such cases affected their perceptions or decisions in life, as well as their personal and romantic

relationships. This research aims to evaluate the emotional exertion required to support survivors and victims of violence against women and children and how their mental health has been significantly affected in handling these cases.

By uncovering the narratives behind their badge, this study will shed light on the unique experiences and challenges faced by female police officers in handling cases of violence against women and children. By understanding their perspectives, the study aims to enhance their support systems and mental health resources, improving work efficacy and well-being. Additionally, the findings of this study might influence future actions to better allocate roles and responsibilities within law enforcement. It could also raise public awareness of the difficulties in addressing VAWC. Ultimately, this study aims to foster a more supportive and effective environment for both female officers and the victims to whom they extended their help.

## METHODS

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to unveil the lived experiences of police officers in handling violence against women and children. Using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method for data analysis, the researcher followed seven distinctive steps: familiarization, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive description, producing the fundamental structure, and seeking verification of the fundamental structure. Ethical protocols were strictly observed, ensuring participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntariness in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. This study involved five female police officers from various police stations, which represents a small sample size. While this offers rich, detailed insights, the limited number of participants affects the generalizability of the findings. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a structured interview guide, with consent secured before the study. The analysis revealed the universal essence of participants' experiences through a composite narrative of shared perceptions, challenges, and adaptive strategies, providing rich insights into their life behind the badge.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Profile of the Participants

The study participants are female police officers from different police stations in Misamis Occidental, ages 32 to 38. Five individuals out of the total participants fall into this age range. They are also all female, and their experiences varied, reflecting a diverse representation among the participants.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Code Name	Age	Civil Status	Years in Service
P1	33	Married	10
P2	34	Single	9
P3	35	Single	10
P4	38	Married	15
P5	32	Married	8

### Emotional Struggles in Addressing Violence Cases

Handling cases of violence against women and children (VAWC) can have a profound emotional impact on female police officers. They often experience intense empathy for victims, which can heighten the emotional burden of their work while balancing the demands of their professional responsibilities. This emotional toll can lead to stress, burnout, and even secondary trauma, underscoring the importance of providing adequate emotional support, resilience training, and coping mechanisms to help them navigate the challenges of these sensitive cases effectively. The participants commonly expressed the profound emotional impact of handling

violence cases, highlighting shared experiences of mental and emotional exhaustion. Participants 1, 4, and 5 discussed the toll of constant exposure to distressing situations, with Participants 1 and 5 emphasizing how the victims' trauma affects them personally and professionally. Empathy was a common sentiment, as Participants 3 and 4 shared how deeply they are moved by victims' struggles, particularly in cases involving financial dependence or fear. Participant 4 further linked her emotional response to her role as a mother, noting how cases involving children resonate with her on a personal level. These shared experiences underscore the immense emotional burden faced by female officers and highlight the importance of mental health support and coping mechanisms in their work. These are evident in the responses of the participants during the interview.

*"Handling these cases every day can take an emotional and mental toll. Sometimes, the stories and experiences of the victims affect me deeply, and it becomes hard to separate work from personal feelings. It is challenging to stay strong when you are constantly exposed to such distressing situations." (P1, 42-46)*

*"Hearing the stories of victims profoundly affects me, both as a professional and as a person. It is deeply emotional to listen to their struggles, especially when victims stay with abusers out of financial dependence or fear." (P3, 149-151)*

*"Handling cases involving women and children is not an easy job. It deeply affects me both mentally and emotionally. For every case we handle, I have to put myself in the victim's shoes, which allows me to respond truly and provide meaningful solutions to their problems. One case that stands out involved a child who his father or stepfather raped. Such situations profoundly affect me, especially as a mother." (P4, 206-211)*

*"The victims' experiences and stories affect me personally and professionally through the trauma they experience, which often leads to my emotional exhaustion." (P5, 261-262)*

Handling violence cases, particularly those involving women and children, takes a significant emotional toll on police officers (Lu et al., 2024). The nature of these cases often exposes officers to distressing narratives of trauma, abuse, and vulnerability. Daily immersion in such stressful cases can lead to emotional exhaustion as officers struggle to separate their professional responsibilities from their emotions (Normandin, 2020). The intense emotional engagement required in this work often results in a mental burden, particularly when officers empathize deeply with victims' pain and struggles (Copeland, 2020).

Empathy plays a critical role in managing these cases, as it allows officers to understand victims' experiences and provide meaningful support. However, this deep emotional connection can also heighten the emotional strain (De Leon & Campomanes, 2022). Officers often encounter victims who remain in abusive situations due to factors like financial dependence or fear (Pereira et al, 2020). This dynamic adds complexity and emotional weight to their work, which underscores the difficulty of maintaining professional boundaries while responding compassionately to victims' needs.

It is supported by the Social Identity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which help explain the emotional toll experienced by police officers handling violence cases involving women and children. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals derive their sense of self from their group membership, such as their professional identity as protectors and enforcers of justice. This role fosters a deep emotional investment in their work, as officers view themselves as defenders of victims. When systemic barriers or recurring violence hinder their efforts, perceived failures can impact their collective and personal identity, intensifying emotional stress. Meanwhile, Symbolic Interactionism highlights how meanings attached to interactions and symbols shape emotional responses. Encounters with vulnerable victims and recurring symbols of abuse, such as visible injuries or children's distress, evoke a profound emotional resonance. These interactions often blur professional boundaries as officers struggle to reconcile their objective duties with their subjective empathy. The strain is compounded when victims remain in abusive situations, symbolizing systemic inefficacies and triggering frustration or helplessness. Both theories underscore the need for targeted mental health resources,



resilience training, and counseling to help officers process their roles and interactions while mitigating emotional burnout.

Related studies emphasize the significant emotional and psychological impact on law enforcement officers who handle cases of violence against women and children (VAWC). Research highlights that officers frequently experience secondary trauma or compassion fatigue due to prolonged exposure to victims' distressing narratives and the graphic nature of abuse cases. A study by Morabito et al. (2021) found that professionals working with trauma victims often develop symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including emotional exhaustion and difficulty compartmentalizing work and personal life. Similarly, research by Anders et al. (2022) shows that police officers handling sensitive cases reported higher levels of stress and burnout compared to those in other roles.

The implication of the emotional impact on police officers handling VAWC cases highlights the urgent need for comprehensive support systems within law enforcement agencies. Without proper interventions, such as counseling services, peer support programs, and resilience training, officers risk experiencing burnout, reduced effectiveness, and long-term mental health challenges. It can adversely affect their ability to provide empathetic and effective support to victims, potentially influencing case outcomes and undermining the justice process. Additionally, prioritizing mental health resources in police training and operations can help create a more sustainable and supportive work environment, enabling officers to maintain their well-being while managing the demanding nature of their roles.

### **Demonstrating Empathy and Establishing Trust with Victims**

Empathy is the ability to deeply understand and share the feelings of others, which enables female police officers handling VAWC cases to provide compassionate support to victims in their most vulnerable moments. Building trust involves fostering a sense of safety and reliability, empowering victims to share their experiences openly, and ensuring that justice is pursued with sensitivity and care. The participants shared common responses emphasizing empathy and trust-building as vital strategies in handling VAWC cases. Empathy was highlighted by Participants 1, 2, 3, and 4, who focused on providing comfort and reassurance to victims, particularly during initial interactions, while Participant 2 and 5 stressed listening without judgment and maintaining a calm demeanor to support victims emotionally. Trust-building emerged as a central theme for Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5, with effective communication, confidentiality, and showing genuine concern being key strategies. Participants 4 and 5 further noted the importance of avoiding intimidating or overly formal approaches, while Participants 1 and 3 emphasized balancing empathy with professionalism to make victims feel both supported and safe. Across responses, participants underscored the importance of balancing professionalism with empathy to make victims feel both supported and safe. Female officers' gender-sensitive approaches often enable them to break down barriers that victims face in seeking help. These are evident in the responses of the participants during the interview.

*"While I must ensure justice is served, I also make sure to show empathy and provide comfort to the victims. By being compassionate, I help them feel more secure during the process. Balancing both responsibilities is important to ensure that justice is served without compromising the emotional well-being of the victims. When I first meet a victim, my priority is to give them comfort and reassurance. I let them know that I am here to listen without judgment." (P1, 28-33)*

*"I build trust and rapport by being empathetic, listening without judgment, and showing genuine concern for their well-being. I maintain a calm demeanor, respect their pace in sharing, and ensure confidentiality." (P2, 100-102)*

*"I approach each situation with firmness to uphold the law while ensuring the victim feels supported and safe throughout the process. One of our primary strategies is to build trust with victims. It starts by ensuring they feel safe and heard." (P3, 171-174)*

*"In our first meeting with the victim, we have to make them feel comfortable and refrain from questioning them about the matters at hand. We have to establish a friendship first before the investigation starts." (P4, 240-242)*

*"Building trust is essential, and it starts with effective communication. We avoid being aggressive or overly formal, as this can make victims feel uncomfortable or intimidated." (P5, 352-354)*

Empathy and trust-building are critical in effectively addressing cases of violence against women and children (Jakobsen, 2021). Empathy involves understanding and sharing the emotional experiences of victims, creating a supportive environment where they feel safe and heard. Providing comfort and reassurance during initial interactions can help victims feel secure and validated, which is essential for them to open up about their experiences (Dalton et al., 2022). Listening without judgment and maintaining a calm and approachable demeanor further reinforce this support, ensuring victims do not feel overwhelmed or dismissed.

Trust-building is equally vital, as it establishes the foundation for cooperation and transparency between the victim and the officer. Effective communication, confidentiality, and genuine concern are key elements in building trust. Victims are more likely to share their stories when they feel respected and assured that their privacy will be protected (Dalton et al., 2021). Avoiding intimidating or overly formal approaches can also help victims feel at ease and reduce anxiety. Additionally, balancing professionalism with empathy ensures that justice is pursued without compromising the victim's emotional welfare (Jakobsen, 2022). By fostering a sense of safety and understanding, officers can empower victims and ensure that their voices are heard in the pursuit of justice.

It is supported by Symbolic Interactionism and Social Identity Theory, which highlight the importance of empathy and trust-building in addressing violence against women and children. Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes how positive interactions and meaningful communication, such as active listening and a calm demeanor, create shared understandings that reassure victims of their safety and worth. Through symbols like supportive gestures and confidentiality, officers foster trust, shaping the victim's perception of the justice process as compassionate and secure. Social Identity Theory complements this by highlighting how treating victims with respect and reducing the psychological distance between "officer" and "victim" helps victims feel included and valued, countering stigma and fostering empowerment. Together, these theories demonstrate how empathetic actions and trust-building behaviors enable officers to create safe spaces where victims feel heard and supported, essential for achieving both emotional healing and justice.

Several studies highlight the importance of empathy and trust-building in addressing violence against women and children (VAWC). Research indicates that empathetic responses from law enforcement enhance victims' willingness to cooperate and share details of their experiences, fostering a more effective investigative process (Jakobsen, 2021). Trust-building is similarly emphasized in studies, showing that clear communication, confidentiality, and nonjudgmental attitudes are essential in creating a supportive environment for victims. Furthermore, trauma-informed approaches, which prioritize emotional safety and understanding, have been shown to reduce victim retraumatization and improve case outcomes (Rich, 2019). These findings align with the critical role of police officers in balancing professionalism with compassion to ensure justice and victim empowerment.

The second theme implies that for police officers handling VAWC cases, developing empathy and building trust is critical for effective law enforcement. These qualities allow officers to approach sensitive situations with understanding and professionalism, ensuring they can manage the emotional complexities of such cases while still upholding the law. By prioritizing empathy and trust, officers can foster stronger relationships with the community, improve cooperation during investigations, and mitigate the challenges of handling difficult and traumatic cases. It highlights the need for comprehensive training programs that equip officers with the emotional intelligence and communication skills necessary to balance their law enforcement duties with compassionate service.

## Contributions of Female Officers to Victim Support

Female police officers play a crucial role in providing empathetic and culturally sensitive support to victims of Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC), ensuring a more comfortable and trusted environment for reporting abuse. Their unique understanding of gender-specific issues allows them to effectively address the emotional and psychological needs of victims while also pursuing legal actions against perpetrators. The participants commonly emphasized that the presence of female officers significantly enhances victim comfort, trust, and openness, especially in cases involving women and children. Participants 1, 2, 3, and 5 highlighted how victims feel safer and more willing to share their experiences with female officers due to their approachable demeanor. Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 further noted that this trust encourages victims to provide more detailed accounts, with Participant 4 specifically mentioning the impact of specialized Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) training in fostering cooperation, particularly among child victims.

Additionally, Participant 5 underscored the systemic importance of having female officers in every police station to handle domestic violence cases effectively, ensuring victims feel safe to disclose their experiences, particularly when the abuser is a male partner. These insights collectively affirm the vital role female officers play in supporting VAWC victims with empathy and understanding. These are evident in the responses of the participants during the interview.

*"As a female officer, I believe my presence helps victims feel more comfortable and safe when reporting their experiences. Victims, especially women and children, may find it easier to open up to me because they see me as more approachable and understanding." (P1, 17-20)*

*"As a female officer, I believe my presence can make victims feel more comfortable and safe, encouraging them to report and cooperate. There have been instances where victims, particularly women and children, opened up more readily to me, sharing details they might not have with male officers." (P2, 84-87)*

*"My presence as a female officer helps victims feel more at ease. Many women hesitate to share their experiences with male officers due to fear or distrust. When they see a female officer, they often feel more understood and comfortable opening up." (P3, 160-163)*

*"The presence of a female police officer, particularly those of us trained in the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD), can significantly influence child victims. I often find that they are more cooperative during investigations when I am involved. I have experienced numerous instances where my gender created a more comfortable environment for victims." (P4, 230-235)*

*"The presence of a female officer is very important in handling these cases, as it helps build trust with the victims. Victims are often reluctant to provide full statements or trust someone who may not relate to their experiences. Every police station must have a female officer to handle cases of domestic violence against women and children. Many victims feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences with a male officer, especially if the perpetrator is a man, their partner, or their husband. Female officers play a vital role in encouraging victims to express their pain, traumas, and the harassment or verbal abuse they have endured." (P5, 300-307)*

Female police officers play a pivotal role in supporting victims of Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) by creating a safer and more trusting environment for them to disclose their experiences (Lorenz et al., 2019). Many victims, especially women and children, feel hesitant to share sensitive details with male officers due to fears of judgment, misunderstanding, or cultural barriers. The presence of a female officer often mitigates these concerns, encouraging victims to open up and cooperate more fully during investigations (Miller & Segal, 2019). This dynamic is particularly important in cases where the perpetrator is a male family member or intimate partner, as female officers are perceived as more approachable and empathetic in handling such situations.

The effectiveness of female officers is further enhanced by specialized training, such as programs provided through Women and Children Protection Desks. These officers are equipped with skills in trauma-informed

care, gender sensitivity, and child-friendly interviewing techniques, enabling them to address the unique emotional and psychological needs of VAWC victims (Rich, 2019). Such training not only helps victims feel heard and understood but also contributes to gathering accurate and detailed accounts of incidents, which are crucial for successful case resolution. Moreover, the involvement of female officers has been shown to reduce the retraumatization of victims during the investigative process, ensuring a more supportive journey toward justice (Lathan et al., 2019).

The importance of female officers in handling VAWC cases underscores the need for systemic changes within law enforcement (Miller & Segal, 2019). Ensuring the presence of female officers in every police station can significantly enhance the capacity of law enforcement agencies to address domestic violence and child abuse cases effectively (Dalton et al., 2022). By fostering an environment of trust and understanding, female officers not only support victims but also help bridge the gap between communities and law enforcement, promoting a more inclusive and effective justice system.

This is supported by Social Identity Theory by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) and Symbolic Interactionism by George Herbert Mead (1937). Social Identity Theory emphasizes how individuals derive a sense of belonging and trust from shared group identities, explaining why female victims often feel more comfortable with female police officers whom they perceive as understanding their experiences and perspectives. Similarly, Symbolic Interactionism highlights how the presence of female officers symbolizes safety, empathy, and support during interactions with victims. These officers, equipped with specialized training, create an environment where victims feel valued and empowered to share their experiences, reducing the barriers posed by fear, judgment, or cultural stigma. Together, these theories illustrate how female officers foster trust and connection, playing a critical role in the effective and compassionate handling of VAWC cases.

Several studies support the significant role of female police officers in handling cases of Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC). For instance, Lorenz et al. (2019) found that victims are more likely to disclose sensitive information to female officers due to their perceived empathy and approachability, which fosters trust and cooperation. Miller and Segal (2019) further highlighted that female officers contribute to creating a safer and more supportive environment for victims, particularly in cases involving domestic violence. Rich (2019) emphasized the importance of trauma-informed training, noting that female officers equipped with these skills are better able to address the psychological and emotional needs of victims while reducing the risk of re-traumatization. Dalton et al. (2022) underscored the systemic benefits of integrating female officers into law enforcement agencies, demonstrating their critical role in improving investigative outcomes and bridging gaps between victims and justice systems. These studies collectively affirm that female officers bring unique strengths to addressing VAWC cases, enhancing both victim support and the overall effectiveness of law enforcement responses.

The third theme implies that specialized training for female officers, such as that provided through the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD), is crucial in enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement in handling VAWC cases. This training equips female officers with the necessary skills to provide trauma-informed care and conduct sensitive investigations, particularly when working with children and victims of domestic violence. It highlights the importance of institutionalizing such training programs across all police stations to ensure that female officers are adequately prepared to address the emotional and psychological needs of victims. Furthermore, investing in the professional development of female officers can lead to more victim-centered approaches, ultimately fostering trust in the justice system and improving outcomes for vulnerable populations.

### **Overcoming Difficulties in Managing Complex Cases**

Handling VAWC cases poses challenges for female police officers, such as managing emotional stress from victims' traumatic experiences while maintaining professionalism and objectivity. Additionally, they often face societal biases and resource limitations that can hinder their ability to provide comprehensive support and justice to victims. The responses from the participants reveal common challenges faced by female police



officers in handling VAWC cases, particularly when the perpetrator is a family member, someone close to the victim, or an influential individual. Participants 1, 2, and 4 emphasize the complexity of family dynamics, where victims may experience conflicting feelings of loyalty and fear and are often hesitant to pursue legal action in order to preserve family status. Participants 2, 3, and 5 also highlight the victim's reluctance to take legal action due to fear, dependency on the abuser, or the influence of powerful perpetrators, such as politicians. These common challenges, highlights the necessity for strategies that address victims' fears and conflicting emotions. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive support systems and training to equip officers with the tools to navigate these dynamics effectively. These are evident in the responses of the participants during the interview.

*"When the perpetrator is a family member or someone close to the victim, it creates a difficult situation." (P1, 50-51)*

*"In situations where the perpetrator is a family member or someone known to the victim, I prioritize the victim's safety and emotional well-being. It presents challenges such as the victim's conflicting feelings of loyalty and fear." (P 2, 114-117)*

*"One of the biggest challenges is dealing with victims who are hesitant to pursue legal action due to fear or dependency on their abusers. Additionally, cases involving influential perpetrators can complicate matters." (P3, 185-188)*

*"In most cases, the challenges we have encountered are that both families are hesitant to pursue the case in order to preserve their family status. In this situation, the police officer handling the case may have a hard time accessing the situation." (P 4, 255-257)*

*"There are situations, especially when the perpetrator is someone of influence or power, where the process can be even more complex. Some clients are fearful, particularly if their partners are prominent figures like politicians." (P5, 331-333)*

Handling cases of violence against women and children (VAWC) can be particularly challenging when the perpetrator is a family member, someone close to the victim, or an influential individual. In such situations, victims often experience a complex mix of emotional and psychological barriers that complicate the legal process (Ledesma et al., 2023). Many victims feel trapped by their loyalty to the perpetrator, especially when the abuser is a family member, which can create an internal conflict between seeking justice and maintaining familial bonds. This emotional struggle is often compounded by fear of retaliation, either from the perpetrator or from other family members who may pressure the victim to withdraw the case in order to preserve the family reputation and status (Balahadia et al., 2022). Such dynamics make it difficult for law enforcement to gain the cooperation of victims, as they may be reluctant to testify or pursue legal action out of fear of disrupting their familial ties or facing further violence.

Moreover, the involvement of influential individuals, such as politicians or people in positions of power, adds another layer of complexity to handling these cases. Victims whom individuals with power abuse often fear the consequences of taking legal action, as they may believe that their abuser's influence could result in retaliation, either through the legal system or through social pressure (Spearman, 2023). This fear can create a situation where victims feel isolated, powerless, and unsupported, leading them to hesitate in coming forward or fully cooperating with law enforcement (Simeon, 2022). In cases involving such perpetrators, female police officers must navigate not only the emotional and psychological challenges of the victims but also the external pressures that arise from dealing with powerful individuals, all while striving to protect the victim's safety and uphold justice.

Handling VAWC cases presents complex and multifaceted challenges (Reuben et al., 2021). Victims often face emotional and psychological hurdles, such as feelings of loyalty, fear, or dependency, which can complicate the process of seeking justice (Meeker et al., 2020). These cases also require officers to demonstrate

emotional resilience and maintain professionalism in highly sensitive and distressing situations (Lennie et al., 2020). Successfully managing these challenges is crucial for creating a safe, supportive environment that enables victims to pursue justice, empowering them to overcome their fears and take the necessary legal steps despite the obstacles they face.

It is supported by Social Identity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which help explain the complex dynamics in handling cases of violence against women and children (VAWC), especially when the perpetrator is a family member or an influential individual. According to Social Identity Theory, victims often experience intense loyalty to their family or community, creating an internal conflict between seeking justice and maintaining familial bonds. This loyalty, particularly in cases of familial violence, is tied to the victim's sense of identity within the family unit, making it difficult to pursue legal action. Additionally, victims may fear social exclusion or retaliation from family members or powerful individuals, complicating their willingness to cooperate with law enforcement. Symbolic Interactionism further illustrates how the victim's internalized roles, such as that of a loyal partner, conflict between the desire for justice and the fear of disrupting family harmony. In cases involving powerful perpetrators, the fear of retaliation from the broader community may lead victims to hesitate in coming forward, viewing legal action not as a path to safety but as a risk to their social standing and security. These theories highlight the multifaceted challenges female officers face in navigating the emotional, psychological, and social pressures that victims experience while striving to uphold justice and protect their safety.

Related studies have highlighted the significant emotional and psychological challenges faced by victims of violence against women and children (VAWC), particularly when the perpetrator is a family member or someone in a position of power. Ledesma et al. (2023) emphasize that victims often experience intense internal conflict due to loyalty to the abuser, making it difficult to seek justice. It is compounded by fear of retaliation and social pressure, especially when family reputation or status is at stake, as noted by Balahadia et al. (2022). Furthermore, research by Spearman (2023) and Simeon (2022) shows that victims abused by influential individuals often fear the consequences of legal action, believing that the abuser's power could lead to further harm or social ostracism. Lennie et al. (2020) also highlight the emotional resilience required from law enforcement, noting that female officers face additional challenges when

handling VAWC cases due to the complex dynamics of power, loyalty, and fear. These studies underscore the importance of understanding the multifaceted emotional, psychological, and social factors that influence victims' decisions and the difficulties law enforcement encounters in obtaining cooperation and ensuring justice.

The fourth theme implies that the experiences of police officers in handling VAWC cases reflect the need for a deeper understanding of the emotional and situational challenges they face in their roles. These experiences highlight the importance of providing officers with continuous training, emotional resilience strategies, and institutional support to navigate complex cases involving familial ties or influential perpetrators. By addressing these challenges, law enforcement agencies can improve the well-being and effectiveness of police officers, enabling them to provide better support to victims and uphold justice despite the emotional and societal pressures inherent in such cases.

### **Adopting Coping Mechanisms to Manage Emotional Stress**

Coping strategies for emotional stress involve techniques that help individuals manage the emotional and psychological impact of challenging situations, such as seeking support, practicing mindfulness, or engaging in stress-reducing activities. For female police officers handling Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases, these strategies are crucial in mitigating the emotional toll of working with trauma survivors, ensuring their well-being while maintaining professional efficacy. The participants emphasize various coping strategies to manage the emotional stress of handling VAWC cases, with family support being a common anchor for resilience. Spending quality time with loved ones, open communication, and receiving empathy provide emotional grounding and strength. Many also rely on professional strategies, such as maintaining a

composed demeanor, compartmentalizing emotions, and using the "fake it until you make it" mindset to balance work and personal feelings. Self-care practices, including exercise, mindfulness, and peer debriefing, further help process stress and prevent burnout. Together, these approaches enable them to remain effective in their roles while preserving their emotional well-being. These are evident in the responses of the participants during the interview.

*"To cope with the emotional stress of my job, I focus on spending time with my family. Being around them helps me recharge and regain strength after a tough day at work. Thinking about them reminds me why I do what I do, and their presence gives me emotional support. My family is my greatest support system. They are always there for me, helping me deal with the stress and challenges I face. Their love and understanding give me the strength I need to continue doing my job, even when it feels overwhelming." (P1, 55-61)*

*"I use strategies like regular exercise, mindfulness practices, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. I also engage in peer support and debriefing sessions with colleagues to process difficult cases, which helps me cope with the emotional stress associated with my job. My family serves as a crucial support system by providing a safe space to share my experiences and emotions. They listen without judgment, encourage me to take breaks, and remind me of the importance of self-care, helping me maintain balance and resilience in my work." (P2, 119-125)*

*"My family plays a vital role in my emotional well-being. After a particularly tough day or difficult case, I turn to them for comfort and understanding. They offer me a space to unwind, share my feelings, and recharge. Their encouragement and empathy provide me with the strength to continue in this line of work. It is crucial to have a support system that offers both emotional release and grounding, and my family fills that role perfectly." (P3, 204-208)*

*"In every obstacle I face, it is very important to value my family by having constant communication and family time, especially during my free time. With this, I will be able to surpass all those challenges, whether they are physical or emotional stress. My family's constant support helps a lot in overcoming those challenges (P4, 257-261)*

*"One of our primary coping mechanisms is the mindset of 'fake it until you make it.' We maintain a professional demeanor, showing sympathy while withholding personal emotions to avoid absorbing the victim's distress. This approach helps us keep a balanced mindset and prevents negative emotions from affecting the rest of the day. We remind ourselves that this is our work, but we still put our best effort into providing quality service and assistance. These strategies are beneficial in managing personal issues separately from work, enabling us to assist clients calmly and avoid letting personal emotions interfere with our cases. I do not typically share case details with my family; instead, I may tell them when I feel exhausted. My close friends and family serve as a source of relief and encouragement, providing emotional support so I do not become overwhelmed by the stress at work." (P5, 386-396)*

Handling Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases can be emotionally taxing for law enforcement officers, requiring effective coping strategies to manage stress (Queirós, 2020). Research highlights that family support is a crucial factor in maintaining emotional resilience. Spending time with family provides officers with a sense of grounding and emotional stability, offering a safe space to unwind and recharge. Family members often serve as pillars of strength, providing encouragement and understanding that help officers navigate the emotional challenges of their work (Ermasova et al., 2020).

In addition to family support, officers employ professional coping mechanisms to manage the psychological impact of their duties (Chitra & Karunanidhi, 2021). Strategies such as maintaining a professional demeanor, compartmentalizing emotions, and adopting a mindset of "fake it until you make it" allow officers to address cases with empathy while shielding themselves from emotional distress. This approach helps them avoid absorbing the trauma of the cases they handle and ensures that personal emotions do not interfere with their responsibilities (Carrier, 2020).

Self-care practices further enhance emotional well-being, with techniques like regular exercise, mindfulness, and peer support playing vital roles (Agarwal et al., 2020). Engaging in physical activities and mindfulness exercises helps officers release stress and build mental resilience, while peer debriefing sessions provide a platform to process difficult cases collectively (Grupe et al., 2021; Lorey & Fegert., 2021). These strategies, combined with family support and professional coping mechanisms, contribute significantly to maintaining a balanced mindset, enabling officers to effectively fulfill their roles while safeguarding their emotional health.

It is supported by Social Identity Theory by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) and Symbolic Interactionism Theory by George Herbert Mead (1937), which illuminates the coping strategies of law enforcement officers handling VAWC cases. Social Identity Theory explains how officers derive their self-concept from their roles in both professional and personal groups, using family support to reinforce their identity outside of work, providing emotional stability, and balancing their dual roles as protectors and nurturers.

This balance strengthens their resilience, allowing them to handle work-related stress effectively. Symbolic Interactionism, on the other hand, focuses on the meanings derived from interactions, where family relationships symbolize love and grounding, enabling officers to recharge, while peer debriefing sessions foster shared understanding and collective coping. These theories underscore how social connections and role-based identities shape officers' strategies to manage the emotional challenges inherent in their work.

Related studies have consistently highlighted the importance of support systems and coping mechanisms for law enforcement officers handling emotionally demanding cases. For instance, Queirós et al. (2020) found that family support plays a critical role in fostering resilience among officers, providing a safe space to process emotional challenges. Similarly, Chitra and Karunanidhi (2021) emphasize that professional strategies like emotional regulation and maintaining a composed demeanor help officers navigate the psychological demands of their roles. Agarwal et al. (2020) identified self-care practices, such as exercise and mindfulness, as essential in reducing stress and enhancing overall well-being. Additionally, studies by Grupe et al. (2021) and Lorey and Fegert (2021) highlight the benefits of peer debriefing sessions, which allow officers to process traumatic experiences collectively and foster mutual support. These findings align with the observed reliance on family, professional, and self-care strategies, demonstrating their effectiveness in managing the stress associated with VAWC cases.

The fifth theme implies that effective coping strategies are essential for law enforcement officers handling VAWC cases to maintain emotional resilience and professional competence. Emphasizing the importance of family support, peer debriefing, and self-care practices highlights the need for a holistic approach to managing the psychological demands of their work. It underscores the critical role of both personal and institutional support systems in fostering well-being, ensuring that officers can perform their duties effectively while safeguarding their mental health. Furthermore, it suggests that law enforcement agencies should implement wellness programs and encourage a supportive work environment to enhance the overall quality of victim assistance and officer satisfaction.

## CONCLUSIONS

Handling Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases presents significant emotional challenges for law enforcement officers, particularly in balancing empathy for victims with the need to maintain professional boundaries. Female officers play a crucial role in fostering trust and providing a supportive, nonjudgmental environment, which encourages victims to share their experiences and cooperate in investigations. Their training in trauma-informed care and gender sensitivity enhances their ability to address the unique emotional needs of victims, especially when dealing with family members or intimate partners as perpetrators. Despite the complex emotional and psychological barriers that victims face, such as loyalty conflicts and fear of retaliation, female officers navigate these dynamics with compassion while maintaining professionalism. Support from family and the use of coping strategies like compartmentalizing emotions and engaging in self-care is essential for officers to manage the emotional toll of such cases, helping prevent burnout and ensuring they can continue to serve and protect victims effectively.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

To support officers handling Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases, police departments may provide regular emotional support, counseling services, and psychological debriefing to help officers manage the emotional toll of their work and prevent burnout. Continued training in trauma-informed care and gender sensitivity is essential to equip officers with the skills to understand victims' psychological needs and respond effectively. Establishing peer support groups and regular psychological debriefings for officers can offer emotional guidance and practical strategies for coping with the unique challenges of these cases. Additionally, victim-centered approaches may be strengthened to address victims' emotional barriers, particularly in cases involving family members or influential individuals. Police departments may also promote wellness initiatives, such as stress management workshops, physical exercise programs, and work-life balance policies, to enhance officers' resilience and job satisfaction.

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The authors declare no competing financial, professional, or personal interests.

### Consent for publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this study.

### Authors' contributions

All the authors took part in the literature review, analysis, and manuscript writing equally.

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