

A Case Study on the Gender-Based Harassment Victims and their Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based harassment includes a variety of verbal, physical, or psychological abuse directed at persons based on their perceived gender, all of which contribute to an environment of inequity, fear, and insecurity. This study explores the challenges encountered by individuals subjected to gender-based harassment, with a particular emphasis on their coping mechanisms and strategies. Employing a case study design with data triangulation, this research offers an in-depth analysis of experiences in one of the cities of Misamis Occidental, Philippines. Participants who experienced harassment within the past two years were selected based on their willingness to participate. Among the participants were eight individuals, comprising five females and three males. Seven were students, while one was employed at a local grocery store. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25 years old. Ethical considerations encompassed obtaining informed consent, maintaining anonymity, and complying with the Data Privacy Act. Data analysis followed Yin's 5-step method, with thematic codes generated using NVivo software. The findings illustrate substantial psychological and emotional distress among victims, manifesting as anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem, underscoring the importance of social support and advocacy as pivotal coping mechanisms. Fear and avoidance behaviors were common, highlighting the need for both individual support and systemic changes. The study concludes that gender-based harassment has a profound impact on mental health; however, resilience and empowerment fostered by supportive environments and advocacy are crucial for recovery. Recommendations include implementing comprehensive support programs, strengthening social support networks, enhancing support services, and fostering a culture of respect and accountability through education and policy reforms. These measures aim to establish safer, more equitable environments where individuals feel secure and respected.

Keywords: Advocacy, Challenges, Empowerment, Harassment, Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based harassment includes a variety of verbal, physical, or psychological abuse directed at persons based on their perceived gender, all of which contribute to an environment of inequity, fear, and insecurity (Yasegnal, 2023). It is a widespread and deeply ingrained problem that attacks people based on their gender, maintaining detrimental power relations and impeding societal progress toward gender equality (Gupta et al., 2021). Gender-based harassment not only maintains harmful power relations and societal development toward gender equality, but it also highlights the critical need for comprehensive tactics to counteract and prevent such behavior (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Furthermore, gender-based harassment has far-reaching implications, hurting people's emotional and physical well-being as well as the whole social fabric of communities, highlighting the need for proactive efforts to address this widespread issue. Understanding the diverse nature and far-reaching consequences of gender-based harassment is critical for establishing successful policies and initiatives aimed at making society safer and more inclusive (Dhiman, 2023).

Gender-based harassment is a widespread problem that crosses international borders and affects countless people in numerous nations (Policek, 2022). Globally, an estimated 736 million women—nearly one-third of all women—have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner abuse, non-partner sexual assault, or both at some point in their lives (Akilan, 2023). Despite international treaties and national legislation, implementation,

and enforcement are variable, leaving many victims without proper protection or remedy (Heymann et al., 2023). Gender-based harassment cases in other nations underscore the critical need for comprehensive legal and societal measures to protect individuals' rights and dignity globally (Gondal et al., 2023). To promote safer and more inclusive societies, efforts to address gender-based harassment include putting in place legislative frameworks, increasing awareness, and promoting gender equality. Furthermore, organizations, governments, and individuals work together to generate long-term change in the battle against gender-based harassment and discrimination through initiatives such as training programs, helplines, and advocacy campaigns (Dale et al., 2021).

Gender-based harassment continues to be a serious problem in the Philippines, requiring immediate attention and comprehensive solutions to provide a safer workplace for all (Isles & Balahadia, 2022). Gender-based harassment charges have been regularly recorded in the Philippines, emphasizing the importance of addressing this prevalent issue (Bansal et al., 2023). These cases not only have an impact on people's well-being, but they also impede the country's progress towards gender equality and safer workplaces. Despite progress in improving women's rights in the country, persistent cultural norms and systemic barriers continue to support discriminatory practices and behavior (Bhandari, 2023). Addressing these deeply held attitudes necessitates ongoing education, awareness campaigns, and legislative changes to promote a more inclusive and equal society.

The vulnerability and lack of authority that gender-based harassment victims frequently experience, together with the potential for psychological trauma and, in some cases, actual physical violence, emphasizes how urgent it is to confront this prevalent problem (Lung et al., 2020). A sense of limited agency, anxiety, and a possible unwillingness to disclose situations due to worries about victim-blaming and social stigma define the victim status in gender-based harassment (Puente-Martínez et al., 2023).

Additionally, victims could suffer long-term emotional and psychological effects, which may affect their general quality of life and well-being. The victim's status in cases of gender-based harassment can also have significant social and economic effects, such as reduced participation in public life and constrained chances for personal and professional growth, which emphasizes the necessity of extensive support systems and prevention measures. Creating successful measures to offer support, lessen the prevalence of gender-based harassment, and advance a safer and more just society for everyone depends on having a thorough understanding of the complex problems victim's encounter. (Cameron & Tedds, 2021).

Exploring the multifaceted landscape of gender-based harassment, this qualitative research study aims to investigate the gender-based harassment lived experiences and reporting patterns in public spaces. It also evaluates the efficacy of Republic Act 11313 (Safe Spaces Act), a legislative framework that offers assistance and protection to victims of harassment of this kind. The study aims to uncover complex insights into how the existence of RA 11313 influences individuals' perceptions of safety and empowerment in reporting gender-based harassment incidents, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the law's impact on addressing this societal issue through in-depth interviews and participant observations (Gonzalez, 2022). It also dives into the varied narratives and techniques utilized by people affected by this prevalent issue. The study strives to illuminate the resiliency and ingenuity of those whose lives have been affected by gender-based harassment as we examine deeper into their experiences, ultimately advancing our understanding of this important social issue.

The study aims to increase awareness while also informing the establishment of more effective support systems and legislation aimed at establishing a safer and more inclusive society for all by investigating the varied spectrum of coping methods used by victims of gender-based harassment. The study aims to unravel the complex and frequently unsaid stories of those affected, shedding light on their experiences and the challenges they face. This is in response to the growing recognition of the profound impact gender-based harassment has on individuals.

METHODS

A case study research design was employed in the study. Case study is a form of qualitative descriptive research that is used to look at individuals, a small group of participants, or a group as a whole. This qualitative method of

study emphasizes detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. Researchers have used the case study research method for many years across a variety of disciplines. A qualitative research design generally involves data collection using a variety of methodologies, such as interviews, observations, focus groups, and document or artefact analysis. A case study thoroughly assesses the analytical unit (case). Data triangulation is a crucial part of the design to provide a thorough, complete, and contextual description. This study was conducted in Ozamiz City. It is a third-class component city in Misamis Occidental, Northern Mindanao, Philippines.

Despite substantial studies on gender-based harassment in a variety of settings, there is still a huge vacuum in understanding victims' lived experiences and reporting patterns in public areas in the Philippines. Existing research has primarily focused on workplace harassment (e.g., Isles & Balahadia, 2022) or school violence, leaving a significant gap in understanding public space harassment and the effectiveness of legislation such as Republic Act 11313 (Safe Spaces Act) in protecting victims and encouraging reporting. Furthermore, while there is a lot of literature on the psychological and emotional distress caused by gender-based harassment, there is a shortage of qualitative research that explores the complexities of these experiences, such as victims' coping methods and resilience.

Furthermore, the literature on gender-based harassment frequently focuses on the prevalence and general effects on victims (e.g., Policek, 2022; Gondal et al., 2023), but there is a scarcity of studies that look at the intersectional factors, such as cultural norms and systemic barriers, that perpetuate harassment in specific socio-cultural contexts like the Philippines. This gap highlights the necessity for in-depth qualitative research that not only chronicles victims' lived experiences in public settings but also assesses the actual efficiency of current regulatory frameworks. Addressing this gap is critical for designing comprehensive measures to better help victims, improve reporting processes, and, ultimately, build safer and more inclusive public spaces.

Before interviewing participants, researchers obtained written approval from the university's dean of the College of Criminology. This approval allowed the researchers to conduct their study and interview the participants. Once approval from the dean is obtained, the researchers then ask for the permission of the participants. Upon obtaining the necessary permissions, the researchers set an appointment with the identified participants and propose the schedule of the interview.

Furthermore, the researchers informed the participants that the conversation will be recorded and will assure them that all their responses in the interview will be kept with utmost confidentiality. After that, the data will be analyzed and will be presented.

The participants of the study are those who experienced gender-based harassment within 2 years from their study. The participants were chosen willingly depending on their willingness to participate in the requested action. By reading and explaining to the participants the terms of conditions specified in the informed consent, the participants was helped to comprehend the nature of their involvement.

In the entire process of the study, the welfare of the participants was the priority of the researcher. Privacy and confidentiality were always observed, particularly the names of the participants and other information unnecessary to the study. The researcher adhered to the guidelines set by the Republic Act No. 10173 known as the "Data Privacy Act of 2012".

Through these, the researcher ensured the privacy and confidentiality of the qualitative research. Further, informed consent to the participants before conducting the interviews were provided. This consent was free of technical terms to avoid miscommunication which gives the participants a clear view of the benefits they may obtain and their contribution to the study. The researcher informed them to read thoroughly the statement and agreement in the informed consent. For clarity, the researchers loudly read the information from the informed consent and explain the content in the local dialect or language they can understand directly. The researchers then distribute copies of the informed consent after the participants have signed the form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile of the Participants

A total of eight (8) participants, five (5) were females and three (3) were males participated in the study through a face-to-face interview. As to the participants' occupation, seven (7) were students and one (1) was an employee at a grocery store. The participants' age bracket ranged from 19-25 years old, and all of the participants were single in status.

Name	Age	Occupation	Civil Status
P1	19	Student	Single
P2	21	Student	Single
P3	19	Student	Single
P4	18	Student	Single
P5	20	Student	Single
P6	24	Student	Single
P7	21	Student	Single
P8	25	Employee	Single

Experiences of the Gender-based Harassment Victims

This part presents the different themes that were derived from different responses of the participants of the study during the conduct of the interview. The study explored the victims' experiences in conducting a face-to-face interview with the participants. Themes were derived from the responses of the participants of the study after conducting the interview. The study identified three(3) appropriate themes which are: (1) Psychological and Emotional Distress, (2) Fear and Avoidance Behaviors, (3) Empowerment, Social Support and Advocacy.

Psychological and Emotional Distress

Psychological and emotional distress refers to the psychological and affective consequences that experiences and events have on an individual's emotions and mental state, including changes in mood, stress, anxiety, depression, and shifts in self-perception and relationships (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). Understanding the emotional impact of gender-based harassment is crucial in developing effective coping mechanisms for victims (Alcantud & Campdepadrós-Cullell, 2021). When individuals experience harassment, they often endure a range of negative emotions, including fear, shame, and self-doubt, which can significantly affect their mental well-being (Heugten & D'Cruz, 2021). Psychological and emotional distress resulting from gender-based harassment can have profound effects on an individual's mental well-being, encompassing feelings of fear, shame, and self-doubt (Empinado & Ledesma, 2023). These emotional responses often manifest as symptoms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, highlighting the urgent need for effective interventions and support mechanisms to address the psychological toll of harassment (Chen & Noopura, 2024). These responses from the participants reflect the significant psychological distress caused by gender-based harassment. Participants 1, 2, and 4 express feelings of fear, weakness, shame, and self-blame as a result of the harassment they've endured. They describe struggling to focus on daily activities, experiencing low self-esteem, and feeling anxious about potential future incidents. Similarly, Participant 3 discusses feeling negatively impacted by sexual jokes, leading to increased fear and affecting their daily routines. Participants 1, 2, and 4 also highlight the challenges of speaking up and seeking support due to fear of judgment, which is echoed by Participant 2. These accounts underscore the profound emotional toll of gender-based harassment and the pervasive impact it can have on individuals' mental health and well-being. These are evident in the response of the participants during the interview conducted:

"Being targeted by gender-based harassment has been tough. It makes me feel scared, weak, and ashamed. It's hard to focus on school or enjoy things I used to like. I'm always worried it might happen again, which makes me anxious all the time. Gender-based harassment has really hurt my mental health. It's made me feel sad, worried, and bad about myself." (P1)

"I find it challenging to speak up worrying about criticisms that they might think that I'm just over-reacting or just making up stories. I also find it challenging to seek a support network that could sympathize and offer assistance based on my situation, because I am afraid on being judged by other people or even those people whose very close to me specially my family. As victim of this kind of harassment, I was traumatized, it often leads to stress thinking that it might happened again and again. I got low self-esteem..." (P2)

"I experienced receiving sexual jokes from older men. Mostly along the streets and sometimes when I am commuting or traveling. It affected me negatively, as well as my daily lifestyle. Because of these harassments, I am more afraid to go out alone." (P3)

"They don't even consider my feelings; they make me uncomfortable and scared because they do not accept me for who I am. I've experienced this kind of harassment at school. My mental health is affected by the depression they've caused on, and I also blame myself responsible for their treatment, believing that perhaps I am the underlying reason of the way they act." (P4)

The implications of understanding the psychological and emotional distress of gender-based harassment can be profound, leading to feelings of fear, shame, and self-doubt among victims. Participants in the study reported experiencing a range of negative emotions, including anxiety and low self-esteem, because of the harassment they endured. These emotional responses often manifest as symptoms of psychological distress, highlighting the urgent need for effective interventions and support mechanisms to address the toll of harassment on mental well-being.

Fear and Avoidance Behaviors

Fear and avoidance behaviors are common responses to gender-based harassment, reflecting the profound impact that such experiences can have on individuals' sense of safety and well-being. (Thorton & Willmott., 2023). Participants described feeling afraid and anxious, often avoiding certain places or activities where they anticipate harassment may occur (Avendaño& Manue., 2021). These responses highlight the pervasive nature of fear and avoidance in shaping victims' daily lives, leading to disruptions in their routines and social interactions. Additionally, fear and avoidance can contribute to further isolation and mental health challenges, as individuals may withdraw from social situations or experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety (Shahid&Jehan., 2023). Addressing fear and avoidance behaviors requires not only providing support and resources to empower victims but also implementing broader societal changes to challenge the underlying factors that perpetuate harassment and create environments where all individuals feel safe and respected. This theme is composed of two sub-themes which are discussed in detailed below:

Self-Blame

Gender-based harassment significantly impacts mental health, leading to feelings of sadness, anxiety, and self-doubt. Many individuals not only grapple with the trauma and self-blame Reid, C. (2023) but also fear that their complaints will be dismissed or invalidated by their support networks (ReidC., 2023). Self-blame, often rooted in negative self-perceptions and a sense of personal failure, can lead to feelings of helplessness, depression, and a diminished sense of self-worth (Johnson & Mcdonald., 2022).

The participants' responses reveal a pervasive impact of gender-based harassment on their mental health, manifesting in sadness, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem. One participant expressed that being targeted by harassment has led to feelings of sadness, worry, and a profound sense of self-doubt, ultimately making them feel unsafe (P1). Another participant reported that this harassment has induced depression, exacerbated by a tendency to self-blame, internalizing the belief that their actions might be the cause of the harassment. (P4). Similarly, a participant highlighted the daily struggle with trauma and self-blame, indicating the significant emotional toll of

their experiences (P5). Additionally, there is a shared fear of not being taken seriously if they disclose their situation to friends, family, or superiors, driven by a concern that their complaints might be dismissed as falsehoods (Hogan & Ward., 2021). (P8). Collectively, these responses underscore the profound psychological distress and pervasive self-blame among individuals facing gender-based harassment, coupled with a fear of disbelief and invalidation from their support networks. These are evident in the responses of the participants during the interview conducted:

"Being targeted by gender-based harassment has really hurt my mental health. It's made me feel sad, worried, and bad about myself. I've started to doubt my value and feel unsafe." (P1)

"My mental health is affected by the depression they've caused on, and I also blame myself responsible for their treatment, believing that perhaps I am the underlying reason of the way they act." (P4)

"I've been through a lot of challenges to the point that I even blame myself... dealing with the traumas they've caused me every day is incredibly difficult for me." (P5)

"I fear that if I open up this situation to my friends and family and even in my superior, they might not take my complaints seriously and think that I only made false stories." (P8)

Development of Fear

The development of fear in response to gender-based harassment is a significant psychological phenomenon that profoundly impacts individuals' well-being and behavior (Tripathi, G., 2022). Victims often experience heightened levels of fear as a result of past traumatic experiences, leading to increased vigilance and avoidance behaviors to mitigate the risk of further harm (García-Carpintero & Diego-Cordero., 2020). The responses of participants 3 and 7 illustrate the development of fear as a direct consequence of experiencing gender-based harassment. Participant 3 expresses feeling more afraid to go out alone following instances of harassment, indicating a heightened sense of vulnerability and apprehension about potential threats in public spaces. Similarly, Participant 7 describes feeling fearful and avoiding certain environments, such as the gym, due to concerns about encountering perpetrators of harassment. These responses highlight the profound impact of harassment on individuals' sense of safety and well-being, leading to significant changes in behavior and lifestyle choices as a means of self-protection (Geppert & Shah., 2023). Such fear-based responses underscore the pervasive and lasting effects of gender-based harassment on victims' lives, often resulting in avoidance behaviors and limitations on their freedom of movement and participation in daily activities. These are evident in the response of the participants during the interview conducted:

"Because of these harassments, I am more afraid to go out alone." (P3)

"Since that event happened, I feel afraid, I no longer want to go to the gym because I keep thinking, and 'What if they're around?' It's like I developed fear and neglected my physical health ever since that incident." (P7)

Fear and avoidance behaviors are pervasive responses to gender-based harassment, reflecting the profound impact of such experiences on individuals' sense of safety and well-being (Jehan & Termizi., 2023). Victims often experience heightened levels of fear and anxiety, leading to avoidance of certain places or activities where they anticipate harassment may occur. This fear can result in significant disruptions to victims' daily lives, affecting their routines, social interactions, and overall mental health. Additionally, fear and avoidance behaviors can contribute to further isolation and psychological distress, as individuals may withdraw from social situations or experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety in anticipation of potential threats. Addressing these fear-based responses requires comprehensive support and resources to empower victims and challenge the underlying factors that perpetuate harassment, creating environments where all individuals feel safe and respected (Ringrose & Regehr., 2023).

In the context of gender-based harassment, the consequences of self-blame are particularly severe. Victims may experience ongoing emotional distress and trauma, affecting their ability to function in daily life.

Self-blame and development of fear are deeply intertwined with an individual's mental health and well-being (Skalski-Bednarz & Toussaint., 2024) Research indicates that self-blame is often a response to negative life events, such as gender-based harassment, where individuals may internalize responsibility for the actions of others. This can lead to feelings of helplessness, depression, and low self-esteem, as individuals perceive themselves as inadequate or deserving of mistreatment. Studies show that prolonged self-blame can significantly impact psychological resilience, making it difficult for individuals to cope with adversity effectively.

The implications of understanding self-blame and development of fear in the context of gender-based harassment are profound. Recognizing the detrimental effects of self-blame can inform interventions aimed at supporting victims, such as counseling and advocacy programs that challenge victim-blaming narratives (Powell & Scott., 2023).

Empowerment, Social Support and Advocacy

Empowerment, social support and advocacy play pivotal roles in addressing gender-based harassment (Cayir & Spencer, 2021). Participants in the study highlighted the significance of leaning on their social networks for emotional support and validation, with friends and family providing a crucial source of comfort and understanding. Meanwhile, advocacy efforts aimed at raising awareness, challenging societal norms, and promoting respect for all genders are essential in creating lasting change (Kuteesa & Akpuokwe, 2024). Moreover, empowerment involves gaining control over one's life, fostering a positive self-image, and developing the confidence to overcome challenges. Empowerment initiatives, such as advocacy and support groups, play a crucial role in mitigating effects by providing resources and fostering a sense of community. These initiatives also encourage individuals to challenge discriminatory practices and promote respect for all individuals, thereby creating safer and more inclusive environments. By promoting resilience through empowerment, individuals can build the necessary skills and resources to navigate and overcome the challenges posed by gender-based harassment, promoting their mental health and well-being.

By speaking out against harassment, victims and allies alike contribute to shifting cultural attitudes and fostering environments where harassment is not tolerated. Furthermore, advocating for systemic changes, such as implementing policies and programs that address gender-based violence, is critical for creating safer and more equitable spaces. Together, empowerment, social support and advocacy efforts are instrumental in empowering individuals, challenging harmful behaviors, and creating a society where everyone can live free from harassment and discrimination (Freeman & Schulenberg, 2023). This theme is composed of three sub-themes which are discussed in detail below:

Seeking Support Networks

Seeking support networks is a crucial aspect of coping with gender-based harassment, providing individuals with emotional validation, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging. By reaching out to trusted friends, family members, or professional resources, individuals can access the support they need to navigate the emotional challenges and empower themselves to address harassment effectively. Participants 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8 all emphasize the importance of reaching out to trusted individuals, such as friends and family, for emotional validation, advice, and companionship. They acknowledge the value of sharing their experiences and feelings with close confidants, finding solace in the support and understanding they receive.

Additionally, some participants highlight the importance of seeking professional help when necessary, recognizing the significance of professional mental health services in addressing deteriorating mental health. These responses underscore the vital role of social support in navigating the emotional challenges posed by harassment and empowering individuals to assert their boundaries and seek assistance when facing adversity. These are evident in the response of the participants during the interview conducted:

"The techniques or coping strategies that I used to overcome these kinds of challenges is that I gain courage to speak up to my close friends. I ask for their advice and support and they even sympathize with my situations."
(P2)

"Aside from leaning on my family and friends for support I have learned to stand my ground and ignore their words. I also learned to defend myself through going straight to the authorities if I ever experience being sexually harassed again." (P3)

"I always open up to my mom and my closest friends how I'm feeling, and we generally spend a lot of time together." (P5)

"Avoid isolation and seek help from professional mental health services if you can't handle it anymore and your mental health is deteriorating." (P6)

"In overcoming this situation, I seek help through seeking advice towards my friends. Since I am more comfortable to share this experience with them first." (P8)

Advocating for Change

Advocating for change is essential in addressing gender-based harassment, as it challenges societal norms and promotes respect for all individuals. By speaking out against harassment and advocating for policy reforms, individuals contribute to creating safer and more equitable environments where harassment is not tolerated.

Participants 2 and 6 both emphasize the importance of advocacy and taking proactive steps to address gender-based harassment. They encourage victims to speak up, seek support from authorities, and resist isolation. Additionally, both participants underscore the significance of prioritizing mental health and self-esteem, highlighting the need to combat discrimination and promote respect for all individuals. Their advice reflects a proactive approach to advocacy and empowerment, urging victims to assert their rights and seek assistance in navigating the emotional and psychological toll of harassment. These are evident in the response of the participants during the interview conducted:

"My advice to all those victims of gender-based harassment, especially those people who remain silent don't hesitate to ask for help. Whether from authorities or your family. Because I realized that, being vocal to this kind of situation can really lessen the burden I kept on hiding for a long period of time. And through seeking support and sympathy, it strengthens me to be a whole person again." (P2)

"My advice to victims experiencing gender-based harassment is to report the incident to the authorities and show people who bullied you that you won't be bullied easily; stay strong. Avoid isolation and seek help from professional mental health services if you can't handle it anymore and your mental health is deteriorating. Strengthen your self-esteem and fight against discrimination, promoting respect for all individuals." (P6)

Overcoming Trauma

Overcoming trauma resulting from gender-based harassment is a complex and challenging process that requires individuals to navigate through profound emotional distress and reclaim a sense of empowerment and resilience (Shala., 2022). Participants' experiences reflect various strategies and approaches aimed at addressing the lasting psychological effects of trauma, highlighting the importance of seeking support, advocating for change, and prioritizing self-care in the healing journey. Participant 1 advises others to recognize that they are not at fault and encourages them to seek help from friends, family, or professionals while emphasizing the significance of self-care. Similarly, Participant 2 highlights the value of being vocal about one's experiences, as it can alleviate the burden of silence and foster strength and wholeness. Participant 3 underscores the importance of standing firm against harassment and seeking assistance from authorities if necessary. Furthermore, Participant 6 stresses the need to avoid isolation, prioritize mental health, and fight against discrimination. Participant 7 reflects on overcoming trauma by speaking to staff members and finding reassurance in knowing that others are aware of their situation. These responses collectively underscore the importance of seeking support, speaking out against harassment, and prioritizing one's well-being in overcoming the challenges posed by gender-based harassment. These are evident in the responses of the participants during the interview conducted:

"My advice to others facing gender-based harassment is to know it's not your fault and you're not alone. Talk to someone you trust for help, like a friend, family member, teacher, or counselor. Don't hesitate to report the harassment if needed and focus on taking care of yourself first." (P1)

"Being vocal to this kind of situation can really lessen the burden I kept on hiding for a long period of time and through seeking support and sympathy, it strengthens me to be a whole person again." (P2)

"Aside from leaning on my family and friends for support I have learned to stand my ground and ignore their words. I also learned to defend myself through going straight to the authorities if I ever experience being sexually harassed again." (P3)

"Avoid isolation and seek help from professional mental health services if you can't handle it anymore and your mental health is deteriorating. Strengthen your self-esteem and fight against discrimination, promoting respect for all individuals." (P6)

"What I did in overcoming my trauma, I talk to the staff about my situation although the perpetrator was not apprehended at least I feel secure and assured that it will never happen again because some people already know and are aware of what really happened." (P7)

Empowerment initiatives, which encourage individuals to assert their rights and seek justice, are crucial in promoting resilience and fostering a positive sense of self. By addressing self-blame and promoting empowerment, organizations and communities can create environments where victims feel supported, respected, and empowered to speak out against harassment, ultimately contributing to improved mental health outcomes and a more equitable society.

Empowerment, social support and advocacy are integral components in addressing the pervasive issue of gender-based harassment (Matemba & Banda, 2024). The theme of seeking support networks underscores the importance of individuals reaching out to trusted friends, family members, and professional resources for emotional validation and practical assistance. By sharing their experiences and feelings with close confidants, individuals can find solace in the support and understanding they receive, empowering them to navigate the emotional challenges posed by harassment effectively. Additionally, seeking professional help when necessary is highlighted as a crucial step in addressing deteriorating mental health, emphasizing the significance of professional mental health services in providing comprehensive support to victims. These responses underscore the vital role of social support in empowering individuals to assert their boundaries and seek assistance when facing adversity.

In tandem with seeking support networks, advocating for change emerges as a fundamental strategy in combating gender-based harassment. Participants emphasize the importance of speaking out against harassment and advocating for policy reforms to challenge societal norms and promote respect for all individuals. By taking proactive steps to address harassment, individuals contribute to creating safer and more equitable environments where harassment is not tolerated. Moreover, advocating for systemic changes, such as implementing policies and programs that address gender-based violence, is recognized as critical for fostering environments where everyone can live free from harassment and discrimination (Dale & Maki, 2021). Furthermore, overcoming trauma resulting from gender-based harassment is a complex and challenging process that requires individuals to navigate through profound emotional distress and reclaim a sense of empowerment and resilience. Victims employ various strategies and approaches to address the lasting psychological effects of trauma, including seeking support from friends, family, or professionals, advocating for change, and prioritizing self-care. (Cunningham & Spencer., 2020).

Empowerment involves equipping individuals with the confidence, skills, and resources needed to confront and overcome harassment, thereby enhancing their ability to cope with adversity (Umezulike, 2020). Additionally, we found that social support networks are essential in providing both emotional and practical assistance, which significantly enhances resilience. These networks, consisting of friends, family, and community groups, offer crucial support that helps individuals navigate challenging situations. Furthermore, advocacy efforts within communities are pivotal in promoting resilience by actively addressing and working to mitigate harassment.

These efforts create a safer and more supportive environment, ensuring that individuals feel protected and valued, which is fundamental for building and sustaining resilience.

The implications of the themes of empowerment, social support and advocacy in addressing gender-based harassment are multifaceted and far-reaching (Suleman & Yunus, 2024). Firstly, recognizing the importance of seeking support networks underscores the need for accessible and comprehensive resources for victims, including mental health services and support groups. By prioritizing the provision of emotional validation and practical assistance, communities can empower individuals to navigate the emotional challenges posed by harassment effectively. Secondly, advocating for change emphasizes the role of collective action in challenging harmful behaviors and promoting respect for all individuals. Efforts to raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and advocate for policy reforms are crucial for creating safer and more equitable environments where harassment is not tolerated (Thelma, 2024). Ultimately, by fostering a culture of support and advocacy, society can work towards creating lasting change and empowering individuals to live free from the pervasive effects of gender-based harassment.

CONCLUSIONS

The researchers conclude that Gender-based harassment has a profound emotional impact on victims, affecting their mental well-being and daily lives. Gender-based harassment profoundly affects mental health, causing fear, self-blame, and diminished self-esteem. Victims experience a range of negative emotions, which underscores the need for effective interventions and support mechanisms. Addressing fear and avoidance behaviors requires both individual support and systemic changes. Victims need accessible resources and supportive networks, while advocacy and policy reforms are necessary to challenge societal norms that perpetuate harassment. Social support plays a vital role in empowering individuals to assert their boundaries and seek assistance when facing adversity. Accessing trusted friends, family members, and professional resources for emotional validation and practical assistance helps victims navigate the emotional challenges posed by harassment effectively. Professional mental health services are crucial for addressing deteriorating mental health. A

dvocacy efforts are equally important, encouraging victims and allies to speak out against harassment, challenge harmful behaviors, and advocate for policy reforms that promote respect for all individuals. Together, social support and advocacy efforts contribute to creating environments where everyone can live free from harassment and discrimination. Furthermore, empowerment and resilience are crucial in mitigating these effects. Supportive environments and advocacy are essential in helping victims regain control and foster a positive self-image.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended to implement comprehensive support programs that include counseling, advocacy, and education to combat gender-based harassment. Awareness campaigns should focus on promoting respectful behavior and creating safe environments. Organizational policies should be strengthened to address and prevent harassment effectively, ensuring that victims are supported and empowered to seek help without fear of judgment. Additionally, efforts should be made to address the root causes of gender-based harassment through education and policy reforms, promoting a culture of respect and accountability.

To address gender-based harassment effectively, it is recommended to strengthen social support networks and ensure victims have access to comprehensive mental health services and support groups. Communities should prioritize the provision of emotional validation and practical assistance to empower individuals facing harassment. Advocacy efforts should focus on raising awareness, challenging societal norms, and implementing policies and programs that address gender-based violence. By fostering a culture of support and advocacy, society can work towards eliminating gender-based harassment and creating safer, more equitable environments for all individuals.

Enhancing support services for victims, promoting awareness campaigns, implementing policies against gender-based violence, and encouraging a culture of support and advocacy. These measures aim to create safer environments where individuals feel safe and respected.

To address the impact of gender-based harassment, it is crucial to provide comprehensive support and resources for victims. Empowerment initiatives, such as support groups and advocacy programs, should be prioritized to promote resilience and positive mental health. Additionally, broader societal changes are needed to challenge discriminatory practices and create safe, inclusive environments for all individuals.

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