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**EXPLORING THE UNDERLYING FACTORS BEHIND VICTIMS’  
REFUSAL TO FILE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (VAW)  
CASES IN THE PROVINCE OF ALBAY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite established legal frameworks like Republic Act 9262, violence against women (VAW) remains a critical issue in the Philippines, with a significant gap in research regarding why victims choose not to pursue legal action. This study explores the underlying factors behind victims’ refusal to file VAW cases in the Province of Albay, focusing on Legazpi, Ligao, and Tabaco cities. Using a phenomenological qualitative research method, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 participants who had experienced violence but opted not to file formal charges. The findings reveal a pattern of non-reporting, particularly in Legazpi City, which recorded the highest number of refusals; specifically, among married women over the age of 30 with high school-level education. Key barriers identified include financial dependence, as housewives relying on their partners for support feared losing their homes and basic necessities. Additionally, sociocultural factors such as hiya (shame) and the perceived sanctity of marriage create a wall of silence, where survivors endure abuse to protect family reputation or children's welfare. The study also highlights how abusers manipulate parental responsibilities and legal status to maintain control even after separation.

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The research concludes that for many victims, refusing to file a case is a strategic survival choice rather than a sign of weakness. To address these systemic barriers, the study proposes the “LAKAS-Pamilya: Paglaya, Pagbangon, at Pagkalinga” program. This initiative aims to transform local barangays into proactive safety nets by prioritizing economic self-efficacy, legal literacy, and psychological support to empower survivors to break the cycle of violence.

**Keywords:** *Violence Against Women (VAW), Republic Act 9262, Albay Province, Non-reporting, Economic Dependence, LAKAS-Pamilya Program, Legal Literacy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Women play an integral role in the society. They are the backbone of families and are crucial to the growth and development of communities (Fawad, 2023). While children are the extraordinary blessing to any nation; they are the greatest gift to humanity. They have limitless potential and are useful human resources for the progress of the country (Nagpal, 2020). Yet, women and children are still relegated to the sidelines, subjected to discrimination and marginalization.

At the global level, violence against women persists as a prevalent issue. According to the UNICEF research study on Children’s Protection and Well-being, it estimates that around two-thirds of children aged 1-14 years have experienced violent discipline from their caregivers, and more than a quarter of women will experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime. (WHO Geneva, 2024). Such findings highlight how

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violence not only affects individual welfare but also deters societal progress, continuing cycles of marginalization.

Narrowing to the national level, many women and children are still suffering from multiple types of violence which greatly affects their life and welfare. Even with the existing laws and punishments violence still thrives in the Philippines and the numbers are high. The Republic Act No. 9262 also known as the "Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act of 2004", is a Philippines government initiative intended to address the issue of violence against women and children.

The search queries in the Philippines related to violence against women and children (VAWC) and sexual, physical, psychological violence rose by 63 percent during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), according to GABRIELA. Many of the women cited joblessness and ensuing economic hardships during the pandemic as factors to the worsening abuse they face at home, according to GABRIELA Secretary-General Joms Salvador (Baron, 2021).

One of the Philippines' primary responses to the COVID-19 has been the imposition of the so-called 'community quarantines. The government has enforced differing levels of restrictions on people's mobility and economic activities by suspending public transport, requiring people to stay indoors, shutting down certain businesses, shifting to work- and study-from-home arrangements, declaring local curfews, and setting up checkpoints.

The first few weeks of the lockdown already saw an increase in reported cases of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly against women. In Quezon City, for example, the

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Women and Children’s Desk is reported to have processed at least 12 complaints per week during the first two weeks – more than twice the number they were receiving before the pandemic reached the Philippines. Overall, during the first four months of the lockdown (March to June 2020), some 4,260 cases of violence against women and children were reported to the Philippine National Police (PNP), of which 2,183 were committed against women (Berse et al., 2021). The agency noted that the reporting of complaints may have been affected by ‘the restricted movement in the communities, suspension of public transportation, victims being locked down with their perpetrators, lack of communication channels, and lack of information on where/how to report.

The Bicol Region has not been immune to this trend. Based on the report of the PNP Regional Women’s and Children Protection Desk in the Bicol region, a total of 2, 512 incidents that victimized women and children were recorded for year 2020. These include 737 VAWC cases such as physical; psychological; economic; and sexual abuse while 659 rape cases have been noted. On the recorded rape incidents, 313 were solved; 341 were cleared while 5 are still under investigation. Meanwhile, on the VAWC cases 187 were cleared; 545 were solved while 5 are still under investigation (Bicol Mail, 2020).

As for the preliminary data gathered by the researcher from the Albay Police Provincial Office- Women and Children’s Desk Unit, there are cases of Violence Against Women wherein the victims refused to file cases against their perpetrators. From the year 2022, there are 93 cases recorded, 27 of these cases victims refused to file the case. Also, for the year 2023,

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where there are 333 cases recorded, 1 case wherein the suspect died, 81 cases were filed against the suspect and 252 refused to do so. Another record from the last year, 2024, with a 339 recorded VAWC cases, 279 of these were not filed, 56 filed cases and 4 were under investigation. These figures highlight a pattern of non-reporting, where victims choose not to pursue legal action despite available support.

The researcher focuses to explore the underlying factors behind victims' refusal to file Violence Against Women (VAW) Cases in the Province of Albay, which comprises 15 municipalities and three component cities which are the Legazpi, Ligao and Tabaco.

While global, national, and local studies show that violence against women (VAW) is common and current efforts to stop it are not enough, there is an important gap: not much research looks at the main reasons why victims choose not to file cases. Past studies focus on numbers and government policies but do not explain enough about personal, social, and system-level problems that stop people from reporting. This study fills that gap by examining the many reasons why victims refuse to file Violence Against Women (VAW) cases in the Province of Albay. By closely looking at victim backgrounds, economic issues, and other local factors, the research aims to give a full picture of these patterns. This can guide specific actions to increase reports, help victims feel stronger, and make local protections better. By focusing on Albay, the study helps in the bigger fight against VAWC, linking world knowledge to practical, local solutions.

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## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This chapter details the methodological framework of the study, including the research design, the selection of participants, the procedures for gathering data, the instruments utilized, and the strategies for data analysis.

### Research Methodology

This section explains the framework of the study's methodology. This includes a presentation of research design, the respondents of the study, the locale of the study, the research instrument, the data gathering procedure, and the data analysis.

### Research Design

The researcher employs phenomenology qualitative research method, to explore the underlying factors behind victim refusal to file VAW case in the Province of Albay.

According to Dovetail Editorial Team, phenomenological research is a qualitative study approach that builds on the assumption that the universal essence of anything ultimately depends on how the audiences experience it.

Phenomenological research gains insight into the experiences and feelings of a specific audience. These narratives are the reality in the audience's eyes. Phenomenological researchers record and analyze the beliefs, feelings, and perceptions of the audience they're looking to study. Only the audience's views matter—the people who have experienced the

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phenomenon. The researcher's personal assumptions and perceptions about the phenomenon should be irrelevant. (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023)

## Research Instrument

This study employs a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore the nature of victim-offender relationships, the underlying factors influencing the refusal to file Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) cases, and the victims' perceptions of the justice system.

The interview guide is divided into three parts. The first part is to examine of the nature-offender relationship in terms of marital status, cohabitation, family ties, emotional dependence and financial dependence. The second part is to explore the underlying factors influencing the refusal to file VAWC case along with psychological and social factors, cultural beliefs and economic conditions. And the last part is to explore the victim's perception of legal process that influence their decision to refuse filing VAW cases. To ensure the instrument's accuracy, the guide was subjected to validity and reliability testing to confirm the content's relevance, clarity, and comprehensibility.

The participant interview phase was conducted over a period of 65 working days, spanning from April 28, 2025, to July 29, 2025. This timeframe was established to ensure sufficient duration for gathering comprehensive and high-quality qualitative data.

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## Data Gathering Procedure

The following methods was employed by the researcher to provide an organized and methodical response to the study's purpose:

The researcher first developed an interview guide, which submit to validation and approval by the adviser. Following this, the researcher obtained official endorsement from the Dean to conduct the study. Upon receiving institutional approval, the researcher requested a list of VAWC cases from the City Social and Welfare Development of Ligao, Tabaco and Legazpi to identify potential participants.

Before data collection began, the researcher obtained informed consent from both the Barangay Captains and the individual participants to ensure voluntary participation. The researcher personally conducted all interviews. During each session, the study's purpose was discussed in detail, with the Barangay Captain and the Barangay VAW-Desk Officer present to supervise the proceedings.

Data collection was conducted across three cities over a total of 65 working days, including time spent on follow-ups. In Ligao City, the scheduling process lasted one week, and data collection across five barangays (Bacong, Pandan, Bagumbayan, Tinago, and Batang) was completed in two working days. Two participants, one each from Barangay Pandan and Barangay Batang, were interviewed via Zoom as they were working outside the province.

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Data collection in Tabaco City spanned 23 working days. Participants from the first three barangays (Pinagbobong, Guinobat, and San Roque) approved the requests and were interviewed immediately. Challenges arose in the remaining two barangays: in Barangay Mariroc, scheduling was delayed due to the unavailability of the Barangay Captain, and in Barangay San Ramon, the initial request was declined by the VAW-Desk official. Following negotiations and follow-ups, these interviews were finalized and conducted five days later.

In Legazpi City, it took 28 days to gather the necessary data from Barangays Taysan, Gogon, Rawis, and Rizal. The interview process proceeded smoothly, except for a participant from Barangay Estanza who withdrew from the initial schedule. The interview was successfully rescheduled and conducted 12 days later. Following the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher personally retrieved and verified all gathered data.

### Participants of the Study

This study involved a total of 15 participants, equally divided among three locations in Albay: five from Ligao City, five from Tabaco City, and five from Legazpi City. To ensure the data was relevant to the research goals, participants were selected based on the following three criteria: (1) they have experienced violence as defined by Republic Act 9262; (2) the incident(s) occurred within the Province of Albay; (3) they chose not to pursue formal legal action against the perpetrator.

The sample size of 15 was chosen as it allows for a deep, focused analysis of the victims' experiences. To identify these individuals, the researcher coordinated with Barangay

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Captains and Barangay VAW-Desk Officers. These officials helped identify participants who were recorded as VAW victims between 2022 and 2024. By selecting individuals with direct, firsthand experience, the study ensures the information gathered is both detailed and relevant to understanding the complexities of why victims may opt out of the legal process.

### Sampling Technique

The researchers used a non-probability type of sampling, specifically the purposive or judgement sampling method in exploring the underlying factors behind victim refusal to file a VAW case in the Province of Albay. Purposive sampling refers to a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics that you need in your sample. In other words, units are selected on purpose in purposive sampling (Nikolopoulou, What is Purposeive sampling, 2022). This sampling technique were used by the researcher in the study considering the participants are the victim of Violence Against Women who refused to file a case ensuring that they have direct involvement as a victim of VAW.

Purposive sampling was used by the researcher to collect qualitative responses, to improve understanding and generate more accurate research results because the information gathered from the participants will be pertinent to the study setting.

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## Study Site

The study focuses on the Province of Albay, specifically targeting its three major cities: Legazpi, Ligao, and Tabaco. These locations were selected due to their high number of reported Violence Against Women (VAW) cases.

As the capital of Albay and a major urban hub, Legazpi City consistently records the highest volume of VAW cases in the province, partly due to its large population density across 70 barangays. Between 2022 and 2024, the city maintained high figures, recording 49 cases (2022), 46 cases (2023), and 42 cases (2024). The study specifically targets the barangays of Taysan, Gogon, Rawis, Rizal, and Estanza as this are recorded with the highest VAW cases.

Tabaco City, a coastal component city and vital trade hub, faces significant challenges regarding VAW across its 47 barangays. The city saw an upward trend in reports with 12 cases (2022) rising to 19 cases (2023), before slightly declining to 14 cases (2024). The analysis focuses on the barangays with the highest prevalence: Pinagbobong, Guinobat, San Roque, Mariroc, and San Ramon.

Ligao City serves as the primary commercial center for the 3rd District of Albay. Despite its smaller scale compared to the capital, VAW figures have shown a steady increase over the three-year period, recording 19 cases in 2022, 19 cases in 2023, and rising to 22 cases in 2024. The study focuses on the barangays of Batang, Tinago, Bagumbayan, Pandan, and Bacong.

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The study was conducted in five (5) barangays where the highest prevalence of violence was recorded. By focusing on these areas, the study aims to acquire a more accurate and detailed understanding of the underlying factors contributing to elevated rates of victims' refusal to file VAW cases.

## Data Analysis

This study employs a dual-methodological approach, utilizing document analysis and thematic analysis to interpret the collected data.

Document analysis pertains to the process of interpreting documents for an assessment topic by the researcher as a means of giving voice and meaning. According to (Bowen, 2023), document analysis is described as a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other qualitative research techniques, document analysis involves carefully reviewing and interpreting data to find significance and build understanding. This is used to address the first objective of the study. This method allows the researcher to interpret existing data to provide voice and meaning to the assessment topic. By carefully reviewing and interpreting these documents, the researcher will build a foundational understanding and uncover significant patterns relevant to the first phase of the study.

Thematic analysis is about analyzing the patterns and themes within the set of data to identify the underlying meaning. It is also beneficial when working a large body of data, as it allows the researcher to divide and categorize large amounts of data in a way that makes it

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easier to digest. Thematic analysis is useful when looking for subjective information such as a participant's experiences, views and opinions. (Crosley, 2021) This method is used for objectives 2,3, and 4 to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. By applying these to specific objectives, the researcher can uncover the underlying meanings and nuances inherent in the qualitative data gathered.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from exploring the reasons behind the victims' refusal to file VAW case in the Province of Albay from 2022 to 2024. The study aims to describe the demographic profile of VAWC victims, to examine the nature of the victim-offender relationship, explore the underlying factors influencing the refusal to file VAWC cases, to analyze how the victims' perception of justice system responsiveness, and prior experiences with authorities influence their decision to refuse filing VAWC cases and to develop a victim support and empowerment program to provide psycho-social support, legal literacy sessions, and empowerment activities that help victims understand their rights, access services, and overcome fear or stigma. Visual aids such as tables and graphs were used to enhance data interpretation.

### 1. Demographic Profile of VAW Victims

Below is a detailed analysis of the age, civil status, educational attainment and economic status of the VAW victims in Ligao City, Tabaco City and Legazpi City from 2022-

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2024 highlighting valuable insights into the underlying factors influencing the refusal to file

VAWC cases

### a. Age

This table presents the number of victims who refused to file a Violence Against Women (VAW) case, categorized by age bracket across three cities, Ligao City, Tabaco City, and Legazpi City, over a three-year period (2022 to 2024).

YEAR	AGE BRACKET	LIGAO CITY	TABACO CITY	LEGAZPI CITY
2022	15-19	2	0	4
	20-29	7	3	9
	30-39	7	8	15
	40 years & above	3	1	21
	<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>12</b>
2023	15-19	2	1	3
	20-29	4	7	12
	30-39	3	7	14
	40 years & above	10	4	17
	<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>
2024	15-19	1	0	1
	20-29	4	2	10
	30-39	9	4	19
	40 years & above	8	8	12
	<b>Total</b>		<b>22</b>	<b>14</b>

Over three years, Legazpi City had the highest number of women who chose not to report violence compared to Ligao and Tabaco. In 2022, Legazpi had 49 women refuse to file cases, which was much higher than the 19 in Ligao and 12 in Tabaco. While these numbers dropped slightly in Legazpi by 2024, they actually rose a bit in Ligao. The data shows that

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older women, specifically those aged 30 and up, are the ones most likely to decline taking legal action. In Legazpi, about 73% of all refusals came from this older group. On the other hand, teenagers aged 15 to 19 almost always choose to move forward with their cases, with Tabaco reporting zero refusals for this age group in some years.

This implies that older victims are likely facing greater obstacles to filing. These obstacles includes the fear of economic instability or losing support, especially if the perpetrator is the main provider, the concerns over the breakdown of marriage, the welfare of children, or social stigma from the extended family and victims who have endured abuse for a longer period may have lower self-efficacy or belief in the justice system's ability to help.

For women in their 30s, the biggest hurdles to getting legal help are usually a lack of money and the need to take care of their children, a reality highlighted by research from Srinivas et al. (2022) and Lievore (2015). On top of money worries, there is also the cultural pressure of *hiya*, or shame. As Contreras (2020) explains, many women steer clear of legal battles because they are afraid that taking action in public will bring disgrace upon their families. While younger women might be more likely to seek justice in court, older women face a tougher choice, choosing to keep the family together instead of taking legal action to avoid being judged by others (Aizpurua et al., 2021). This difficult choice has become even harder due to recent economic ups and downs. In fact, a sharp rise in women deciding not to pursue legal cases in 2023 is directly tied to economic instability, which has left older women with even less money of their own to fall back on (Pang, 2023).

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## b. Civil Status

This section presents the number of victims who refused to file VAW cases between 2022 and 2024. The table breaks down these occurrences by civil status to highlight reporting trends in Ligao City, Tabaco City, and Legazpi City.

YEAR	CIVIL STATUS	LIGAO CITY	TABACO CITY	LEGAZPI CITY
2022	Single (Common-law spouse)	7	5	23
	Married	12	7	26
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>49</b>
2023	Single (Common-law spouse)	8	9	15
	Married	11	10	31
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>46</b>
2024	Single (Common-law spouse)	11	7	20
	Married	11	7	22
	<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>42</b>

Over a three-year period, Legazpi City saw the highest number of women (137) who chose not to report abuse cases, which is much higher than in Ligao City (60) or Tabaco City (45). In all three areas, married women were the most likely to avoid taking legal action compared to those living with partners. This was especially clear in Legazpi City, where the number of married women refusing to file cases peaked at 31 in 2023. While the total number of refusals in Legazpi slowly went down over the years, the numbers in Ligao City slightly increased, and Tabaco City’s numbers went up and then down.

The data implies that being legally married actually makes it harder for women to speak up and seek justice. Because marriage involves so many legal, money, and family ties,

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married women feel they have too much to lose compared to those in informal relationships. They fear that reporting abuse will ruin their home life or leave them broke. While Legazpi City is seeing fewer reported cases, the numbers are still high or inconsistent in places like Ligao and Tabaco. This means the silence around domestic abuse is still a major problem that changes from town to town.

Experts suggest that it can be hard to get people in busy cities to answer surveys because they are stressed, have very tight schedules, and do not feel as connected to their neighbors (Kalmijn, 2020; Durrant & Steele, 2009). Research shows that while married people usually feel a sense of duty to help out, they will still say "no" if a survey asks questions that feel too personal or invade their family time (Perelli-Harris & Styrac, 2017; Warguez et al., 2022). Interestingly, couples who live together without being married now act almost exactly the same way when faced with these requests (Balter et al., 2023). These trends show that where a family lives, whether in a big city or a quiet rural area, really changes how comfortable they are sharing personal information with strangers (Sasaki et al., 2021).

### c. Educational attainment

This section analyzes the educational attainment of VAW victims across Ligao, Tabaco, and Legazpi City whether academic background correlates with the decision to pursue or forgo legal action.

YEAR	EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	LIGAO CITY	TABACO CITY	LEGAZPI CITY
	Elementary	0	2	3
	Undergraduate			
	Elementary Graduate	3	2	9

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<b>2022</b>	High School Undergraduate	6	0	10
	High School Graduate	7	6	16
	College Undergraduate	3	0	7
	College Graduate	0	2	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>2023</b>	Elementary Undergraduate	1	3	5
	Elementary Graduate	6	2	6
	High School Undergraduate	3	1	7
	High School Graduate	4	7	21
	College Undergraduate	3	3	4
	College Graduate	2	3	3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>2024</b>	Elementary Undergraduate	3	0	1
	Elementary Graduate	3	2	9
	High School Undergraduate	1	5	11
	High School Graduate	11	4	10
	College Undergraduate	1	3	7
	College Graduate	3	0	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>42</b>

From 2022 to 2024, many women in Ligao, Tabaco, and Legazpi City chose not to file formal cases regarding violence. Looking at their backgrounds, there is a clear link between how much school a person finished and their decision to stay out of court. Most of these women, about 35%, were high school graduates, making them the largest group. Legazpi City saw the most instances of this, especially in 2023. On the other hand, women who graduated from college were the least likely to skip filing, making up less than 9% of the total. The

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numbers show a steady pattern: women with a high school level of education are the most hesitant to take legal action.

This implies that finishing college helps people understand their rights and gives them the money they need to handle the court system. In Legazpi City, these issues peaked in 2023, which likely means that local money problems or a lack of easy-to-reach legal help are stopping women from coming forward. If we don't find ways to make the legal process simpler and more trustworthy for women with less education, many will continue to suffer in silence without any protection from the law.

This trend shows what Pascual and Reyes (2022) call legal cynicism. This means people know how to use the legal system, but they don't actually believe it will be fair to them. Even though UNESCO (2023) points out that a high school education gives people the basic skills to start a legal case, many people drop out of the process. This happens because they lack what Johnson (2022) calls educational shielding; the extra protection and confidence that comes with a college degree, which helps people handle outside pressure.

Smith and Anderson (2021) noted that even when people know how to fight for their rights, they will give up if the stress or cost of a conflict feels too high during tough times. On the other hand, Llamas (2024) discovered that high school graduates are tied to traditional village networks, which limits their choices. Still, the small drop in people giving up during 2024 might mean people are starting to develop socio-educational resilience, a concept from David et al. (2023) that suggests people are learning how to better handle these challenges.

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#### d. Economic condition

This section examines the economic profiles of victims across Ligao, Tabaco, and Legazpi City who opted not to pursue formal legal action regarding Violence Against Women (VAW) cases. The following data highlights the prevalence of non-filing among specific labor sectors, providing insight into the systemic barriers to legal recourse.

YEAR	OCCUPATION	LIGAO CITY	TABACO CITY	LEGAZPI CITY
2022	Housewife	15	7	28
	Self-employed	2	3	11
	Private employee	1	1	6
	Public employee	0	0	2
	Student	1	1	2
	<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>
2023	Housewife	11	14	34
	Self-employed	4	3	4
	Private employee	3	0	4
	Public employee	0	0	0
	Student	1	2	4
	<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>
2024	Housewife	9	7	21
	Self-employed	7	3	10
	Private employee	4	3	6
	Public employee	1	0	1
	Student	1	1	4
	<b>Total</b>		<b>22</b>	<b>14</b>

Between 2022 and 2024, data from Ligao, Tabaco, and Legazpi City shows that money plays a huge role in whether women report abuse. Most women who chose not to file legal charges were housewives who depended on their partners for financial support. For example, in Legazpi City, the number of housewives who didn't file cases jumped from 57% in 2022 to 74% in 2023. We see the same pattern in other cities, like in Ligao, where 15 out of 19 people

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who didn't come forward were housewives. On the other hand, women with steady jobs and their own income, like government employees, almost always pursued legal action.

The data implies that you need money to get justice. Many women who stay at home and rely on their husbands for money do not report abuse because they are afraid of losing their homes or having no food. In Legazpi City, for example, 74% of these women stay silent because being financially dependent acts like a gag order that keeps them from using the law. On the other hand, women with stable government jobs are much more likely to go to court because their steady income gives them the courage capital to speak up. This means that until the government helps survivors find ways to support themselves financially, legal protection will remain a luxury that only independent women can afford.

Many women find it difficult to take legal action because they rely on others for money, a problem pointed out by Klasen (2020) and Tindowen (2019). Beyond not having enough cash, the act of going to court is simply too expensive in terms of time. As Vyavaharkar (2023) and Lanzona (2022) explain, people like small business owners and market sellers lose money every hour they spend away from their work to deal with court cases. This financial stress is made even worse for regular employees by what David and Albert (2020) call a middle-income trap, where the high price of hiring a lawyer cost more than the amount of money they might actually win in the end.

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## 2. Nature of victim-offender relationship

This section presents an in-depth understanding of the nature of victim-offender relationship, as shared by the participants. By examining their experiences, the researcher highlights the marital status, cohabitation, family ties, emotional and financial dependence of the victim to its offender.

Using the viewpoints of participants labeled L1 to L5, T1-T5 and LE1-LE5, the study aims to understand the relationship between the offender and the victim of VAW. Participants L1 to L5 represents the victims from Ligao City, T1 to T5 represents the participants from Tabaco City and the participants from Legazpi City, represented as LE1 to LE5. Participants are coded to retain a methodical approach to data collection and analysis while simultaneously anonymizing personal identities. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, the researcher assigned alphanumeric numbers to the victims.

### a. Marital status

In examining the marital status the victims, the response from the participants highlights the nature of their relationship on their offender. These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of their relationship. The findings emphasize the importance of addressing underlying factors why VAW victims refuse to file VAW case against the offender.

#### *Marital trap*

The marital bond acts as a barrier, causing the victim to refuse filing formal charges against their offenders. Majority of the participants emphasizes the complicated pressure

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related to being a wife. For victims, the marriage contract creates a sense of ownership which

forces a sense of endurance for the sake of the family.

As L1 notes, *"He feels like he owns me just because we have the marriage papers"*. While L3 describes how legal status is exploited to prolong harassment, stating, *he uses the fact that we are still legally married to harass me"*.

This control intensifies during legal battle; as T2 observes, *"He has become more controlling lately because he doesn't want the annulment to go through"*.

Even after legal intervention, abusers frequently manipulate parental responsibilities and financial dependence to maintain their grip.

L4 highlights the misuse of co-parenting, sharing, *"he uses visitation time to humiliate and curse at me"*. While LE5 reflects on the lingering psychological toll, noting, *"the trauma from his abuse is still there every time we have to meet for the sake of the children"*.

Financial abuse further tightens this grip, as evidenced by LE1's experience: *"he still has my ATM card and our money, so he still controls my every move"*.

Finally, the societal pressure to uphold the sanctity of marriage creates a wall of silence fueled by shame and public perception.

L5 admits the difficulty of seeking help, simply stating: *"because of the shame"*. While T5 explains the disconnect between private reality and public image, adding, *"Everyone thinks we're still in the honeymoon stage"*.

This performance of a perfect family is a barrier for LE4, who fears that no one will believe the truth because the abuser appears *"kind"* in public.

The victims' responses explains that marriage, which is supposed to be a safe partnership, can sometimes be used as a trap to control a person. Many abusers feel a sense of ownership over their partners, using their legal status as a husband or wife to justify

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mistreatment. This control gets worse when the victim tries to leave or get an annulment, as the abuser fights harder to keep their power. Even after a couple separates, an abuser might use things like kids' visitation schedules or money to keep the victim under their thumb. On top of this, social pressure to keep marriage sacred or look like a perfect family forces victims to stay quiet. This creates a wall of silence where the abuser acts kind in public to hide the reality of the harm they do at home, leaving the victim feeling alone and without help.

The current judicial approach is failing because it treats domestic violence as a single legal event rather than a continuous cycle of social and economic control. Therefore, the legal system alone is not enough to guarantee safety; without economic independence and childcare support, the justice provided by the courts is only temporary. Local government units could move beyond legal aid and provide transition programs that include livelihood assistance and secure childcare. By cutting the economic ties that abusers use as leverage, the city can finally break the cycle of entrapment that keeps victims silent.

Saunders (2023) explains that abusive behavior comes from the attacker feeling like they own their partner, and they continue to try to control them even after the relationship ends. When they can no longer reach their partner directly, Tutty et al. (2023) note that abusers use the court system as a weapon, such as using child visits or unnecessary lawsuits to keep harassing and upsetting their victims. This situation is especially hard to fight in places like the Philippines, where De Leon & Tanalgo (2024) point out that the strong belief in the sacredness of marriage can make victims feel too ashamed to speak up or ask for help, leading to a culture of silence.

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## ***Paperless trap***

Victims who are not legally married to their partners also feels that they are emotionally and practically tied to the offenders despite having no formal legal protection. Because they are common-law spouses, many victims hesitate to file a VAW case due to fear of losing financial support, concern for their children, social stigma, or uncertainty about their legal rights. The absence of a legal marriage can make victims feel less entitled to seek help, which influences their decision not to report the abuse. Victims highlight how financial dependence in a live-in setup creates a lopsided power dynamic.

As L2 explained, *"We've been living together for five years. Since we aren't married, he often threatens to kick me out of the house because he's the one paying for everything"*. And LE2 noting that being the provider allows their partner to treat them like a child, stating, *"We are living together in his house. Since he is older and the provider, he looks at me like a child he can discipline and hurt if I don't obey"*.

This is also seen in the experiences of T1, who expresses the instability of being a common-law partner, *"We are living together, but we frequently break up and get back together. I feel like I have no legal standing or rights over him because I am just a 'common-law partner' and not a legal spouse"*. And T3, who describes being alienated by the partner's family, saying, *"We are living together in his province, far from my family... they always say I'm just a GF (girlfriend) so I don't have a say"*.

Even after the relationship ends, the cycle of abuse persists through intimidation or manipulation.

T4 recounts her lingering fear, stating, *"Now that we are separated, I feel a sense of fear every time I see a text from him because he cannot accept that he no longer has control over me"*. While LE3 explains how shared parental responsibilities are exploited, noting, *"He is using our child's condition to get close to me and find new ways to hurt or intimidate me"*.

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The responses shows that couples living together without being married are at a much higher risk of abuse because they lack legal protection. In many cases, the partner who earns the money uses that financial power to control the other person, threatening to make them homeless or treating them like a child who needs to be punished. Because they aren't legally married, these partners feel invisible to the law and are dismissed by their partner's family, leaving them with no support system. Even after the relationship ends, the abuse continues through threats or by using their children as a way to maintain control. Without the safety net that marriage provides, many people find themselves trapped in a cycle where their rights and safety depend entirely on their partner's mood.

This suggest that the legal system isn't keeping up with the reality of modern relationships. Because current laws are designed for traditional marriages, people in unmarried or non-traditional setups are being left behind and ignored. Without specific programs to protect these individuals, they will remain invisible to the law and their communities, trapped in a cycle of abuse that they cannot easily escape. The government should redirect funding toward inclusive advocacy. This means training police and social workers to recognize and support non-traditional households specifically, ensuring that when a survivor reaches out, the system actually has a door open for them.

When one person in a relationship takes total control of the money, it creates an unfair power dynamic where one partner holds all the cards (Postmus et al., 2020). As Tadiar (2022) points out, this leads women to feel as though they have no legal say or rights within their own relationship. What makes this even more troubling is that the abuse rarely stops when

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the relationship ends; instead, many people continue to use these same tactics to maintain power and control over their former partners long after they have separated (Tutty et al., 2023).

## **b. Cohabitation**

Victims who continue to live with their offenders faces difficulties in reporting abuse. Sharing the same home can create fear of retaliation, emotional dependence, financial reliance, and concern for children, which makes victims less likely to file a VAW case. The close living arrangement limits privacy and safety, discouraging victims from seeking legal help.

### ***Forced endurance***

The shared experiences of the victims highlight a painful irony: the home, which is traditionally a symbol of safety and unity, serves as a site of profound isolation and performance. A central theme among the respondents is the endurance of long-term domestic toxicity for the sake of appearances or tradition. Victims highlight the heavy burden of staying within a shared home to either protect their children or adhere to traditional expectations

*As L1 shared, "Yes, we've been together for 10 years. We live in the same house, so the children won't notice anything. Every day, I'm walking on eggshells because we have to pretend everything is okay whenever we're at the dinner table".*

*While L5 articulates the cultural weight of their confinement, noting, "Yes, we have been together for 15 years. We have lived together under one roof continuously because that is what we were taught, that a married couple should never separate. I endure his abuse within the four walls of our home".*

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T5 recounts a loss of autonomy shortly after moving in, stating, *"Yes, we were together for a year and six months. We just moved into our own house. I thought it would be happy, but it turned into a prison because he became so controlling over everything I did inside the house"*.

While LE4 describes the painful dissonance between an idealized home and the reality of abuse, explaining, *"Yes, it's been 8 years in our dream home. Our house is beautiful, but every room holds a memory of his abuse. On the outside, we look happy, but on the inside, we don't speak to each other unless he is giving an order"*.

Living in a toxic relationship means that a long marriage isn't a sign of happiness, but simply a sign of how much pain someone can take. For people like L1 and L5, staying together for a decade or more is just a forced endurance. They stay to keep up appearances for their kids or because they feel trapped by the belief that couples should never split up, even when there is physical abuse. Even if they live in a dream home like LE4, the house feels more like a storage room for bad memories than a safe space. As T5 points out, a house can quickly turn from a new beginning into a prison. In these homes, the four walls aren't there to protect the family; they act like a cage where people are forced to stay silent and pretend everything is fine.

This suggests that for many victims, the home transforms from a sanctuary into a prison of silence and isolation. When survival becomes the daily priority, seeking legal help feels impossible, leading to a cycle of unreported abuse. Traditional outreach methods will continue to fail because they rely on victims coming forward voluntarily. Authorities could stop viewing long-term or stable relationships as evidence of a healthy environment. Instead, they must proactively shift their strategy to identify forced endurance, where a partner stays not

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out of love, but out of fear and create specialized intervention programs that reach victims who are too restricted to seek help on their own.

This situation relates to Tizon's (2021) study on *pagtitimpi*, or the act of patiently enduring hardship. However, in this case, that endurance is being used for a harmful purpose. As Anyanwu et al. (2023) explain, this is a way for an abuser to exert control by using the home itself to trap the victim and limit their freedom. This creates what Patel and Guerrero (2022) call the contrast effect, a psychological trick where the abuser makes the home look cozy and normal on the outside to hide the fact that abuse is happening behind closed doors.

### ***Difficulty of untangling lives***

Victims who live with or near their offenders may fear retaliation, loss of shelter, or disruption of their daily living, making them feel unsafe to report the abuse. Limited access to secure housing or alternative living arrangements can discourage victims from pursuing legal action. For those who have successfully move out , their focus is establishing a safe zone away from the perpetrator.

As L3 shared, *"We haven't been together for almost a year now... I always keep my door locked out of fear that he might find me"*. While T4 noted, *"I'm currently staying with a friend... I'm safer here than I was in our old house"*.

Conversely, the presence of children forces continued contact unfortunately grants the abuser opportunities for confrontation and verbal abuse. Even without children, victims experience a lack of privacy.

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For example, L4 explained, *"we have to see each other every weekend for the sake of the kid"*. And LE3 added, *"Because of our sick child, I allow him to come here every day"*.

LE1 still deal with boundary violations, stating, *"He still comes over here without any notice"*. While T3, describes a suffocating atmosphere, remarking, *"every move I make is being watched by his siblings"*.

The data shows that victims' lives after leaving an abuser depend heavily on how much distance they can maintain. For people like L3 and T4, the main goal is building a safe zone to stop living in fear; L3 still keeps doors locked a year later, while T4 moved in with a friend for protection. However, finding safety is much harder when there are children involved. L4 and LE3 explain how being a parent forces them to stay in contact with the abuser for things like co-parenting or doctor visits, which the abuser uses as a chance to cause trouble. This lack of privacy happens even without kids, like LE1 dealing with the abuser showing up uninvited. For others, like T3, the situation feels like suffocation because they are still stuck living in the same family area under constant watch. True freedom is a sliding scale: things like children or shared housing act as anchors that let an abuser keep a scary and constant presence in a survivor's life.

The fact that survivors avoid the legal system because it cannot guarantee their long-term safety is a clear sign that our current justice system is incomplete. This situation implies that legal victory is meaningless if it leaves a victim homeless or tethered to their abuser through unmanaged co-parenting. If it continues to focus only on the courtroom trial without providing for the survivor's life after the trial, the legal system will remain a tool that unintentionally protects the abuser's control. Therefore, government should transform legal

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intervention into a holistic service that integrates housing and secure family protocols as essential rights, rather than optional extras.

Leaving an abusive situation is about much more than just finding a safe place to live; as Pangket (2022) points out, it is a brave and essential move toward taking back control of your own life and creating distance from someone who has harmed you. Unfortunately, this journey is rarely simple, because as Tutty et al. (2023) explain, leaving a home does not automatically stop the manipulative power an abuser tries to hold over you. Bell et al. (2021) note that abusers frequently use legal rules or social pressures, like the expectation that you must act a certain way as a parent, as weapons to keep exerting power and to keep harassing you long after you have left.

### ***Path to independent living***

Based on the responses provided by the victims, leaving the shared residence was a decisive step in their recovery, though they face different stages of the transition. Victims have successfully moved out to establish distance, though they find themselves at different stages of their healing journeys. While separation brings safety, it also introduces new stressors.

T2 sought immediate refuge and is currently navigating the turbulence of this transition, explaining, *"I left our home and moved in with my relatives. This has had a huge impact because I have to adjust to a new environment while also worrying about the court hearings"*.

Whereas LE5 took a more permanent path and reflects on the lasting peace and stability that comes with building a secure, independent life, noting, *"We've been living apart for almost two years now. I live in a house*

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*I bought... moving out was the best decision I ever made for my own safety”.*

Getting to a safe place starts with moving away from the person causing harm, but how people do this depends on what they have. For some, like T2, this means moving in with relatives to escape quickly. This stage is very stressful because they have to handle a new living situation while also dealing with the pressure of court cases. On the other hand, LE5 shows what happens when things stabilize over time. Instead of just finding a temporary spot, LE5 bought a house, turning safety into a permanent part of life. While T2 is still struggling with the immediate mess and emotions of moving, LE5 has been independent for two years and can look back with relief, knowing that leaving was the best decision for their long-term peace.

This implies that legal rights are effectively useless without housing security, as the stress of homelessness prevents people from actually participating in the judicial process. Government must change how we provide legal aid. Instead of just giving someone a lawyer, they need a wrap-around support model where social services and legal teams work together. Policymakers should categorize housing assistance as a mandatory part of legal defense. By ensuring a person has a safe place to sleep first, they give them the stability they need to show up to court, follow through with their claims, and actually achieve a fair outcome.

For Filipinos, relying on family for help during tough times is a natural part of life (Ofreneo et al., 2021). This is especially important when someone decides to leave an abusive home, which is a very stressful and difficult time both emotionally and practically (Bonomi et

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al., 2021). During these moments, the family acts as a vital safety net by offering a stable place to live, which is key for a survivor's healing and long-term health (Pang et al., 2022).

### ***Forced dependency***

This theme covers the situations where a victim stays in an unhealthy relationship not mainly because of social or physical reasons, but due to financial dependence or being trapped in a cycle of emotional and psychological trauma. Victims describe a life of forced submission dictated by their living arrangements, where the domestic space becomes a site of control rather than safety. For these victims, the threat of homelessness or the weight of being a dependent creates a barrier to escape.

L2 emphasizes how being a dependent strips her of her agency, stating, *"Because he pays the rent, I have no voice"*. This mirrors LE2's experience noting that *"He treats me like a servant"*.

T1 illustrates the volatile nature of these relationships by saying, *"he kicks me out, or I leave on my own and take my things with me"*.

L2 captures this sentiment by its response, *"I can't do anything but stay"*.

The responses shows that when one person controls the money for housing, they take away their partner's freedom. This happens because being a dependent force a person to stay silent; as L2 explains, since the partner pays the rent, she loses her voice and must obey. This power imbalance turns the relationship into a form of unpaid labor, where LE2 feels treated like a servant rather than a partner, with every part of her life controlled. The home itself becomes a weapon, as seen with T1, who is constantly kicked out or forced to leave, creating a scary and unstable environment. In the end, victims like L2 feel they have no choice but to

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stay, not because they want to, but because they have no other place to go and must avoid becoming homeless.

The fact that people choose not to file cases as a survival strategy implies that the current legal system is failing to address the underlying fear of homelessness and poverty. This creates a dangerous cycle where survivors remain trapped in abusive situations because the risks of seeking justice are higher than the risks of staying silent. If this dynamic isn't changed, legal rights will exist only on paper and will never actually protect those they are meant to serve. The government must move beyond just changing laws and instead provide immediate, guaranteed housing and financial aid so that choosing justice does not mean choosing destitution.

Research shows that being financially dependent on an abuser creates a deep sense of shame and a heavy emotional weight (Ofreneo, 2023). This problem is made worse because abusers use their control over basic necessities, like food and a place to live, to treat their partners more like servants than equals (Fawole, 2021). Because of this, many survivors feel trapped; the terrifying fear of becoming homeless often forces them to stay in an abusive relationship just to keep a roof over their heads (Sullivan et al., 2022).

### c. Family ties

On this objective the responses of the victims explore the complicated web of family dynamics in abusive or high-conflict relationships. In many Filipino households, family

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influence can either be a source of strength or a significant barrier to leaving an abusive situation.

### ***Family pride***

The response of the victims on these theme focuses on saving face, preserving the sanctity of marriage, or maintaining a perfect public image despite the abuse. The cultural weight placed on the sanctity of marriage supersedes personal safety, trapping them in a dangerous cycle of endurance.

L5 highlights this painful reality, noting, *"To them, the sanctity of marriage is more important than my safety. They keep sending me back to him every time I run away"*. Similarly, T5 experiences a lack of active support from her family: *"My own parents are disappointed, but since they don't want my marriage to look like a failure, they are just advising me to be patient for now"*.

In other instances, the pressure to maintain a perfect image prevents victims from speaking out.

LE1 shares the burden of hiding the abuse during social gatherings: *"We still pretend that we're okay in front of relatives whenever there's a reunion. The fear of becoming the talk of the family is what drives me to stay silent and not tell anyone about his abuse"*.

For LE4, being placed on a pedestal makes seeking help feel impossible: *"We are the model couple for both of our families. Their pride in us is what stops me from asking for help"*.

The responses show that for many victims, family pride and the cultural pressure to stay married actually become dangerous traps. In the cases of L5 and T5, the idea that a marriage must be kept sacred is used to force victims to stay in abusive relationships, making the fear of being judged for a failed marriage more important than their actual safety. This

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pressure is even worse during public events, where LE1 and LE4 noted that victims feel forced to act like a perfect couple, suffering in silence just to keep up appearances.

Legal systems are designed to protect people, but they cannot function if people are too afraid to use them. Because social stigma and shame act as powerful barriers, simply passing new laws does not guarantee that victims will seek help. The necessary action is to launch aggressive public education campaigns that specifically target the shame of domestic violence. Local authorities need to shift the burden of embarrassment from the victim to the perpetrator and the bystanders. By normalizing the act of seeking help, they turn the social structure from a cage into a safety net, ensuring that legal interventions actually have a chance to work.

When marriage is seen as a permanent, sacred bond that can never be broken, leaving an abusive situation is viewed as an attack on religious beliefs (Beit-Hallahmi & Noret, 2022). This mindset creates a heavy social burden where families stay quiet about the abuse just to keep their reputation intact (Delos Reyes, 2025). Because of this intense pressure to save face, victims feel forced to hide their pain and put their family’s pride ahead of their own safety (Alkan & Demir, 2025).

### ***Familial pressure***

In this theme, the children are used as the primary anchor—either as a reason to stay or as a tool for continued harassment. Extended family systems act as powerful vehicles that either trap a survivor in an abusive cycle or serve as the lifeline for escape. While the family

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is traditionally seen as a support system, these responses from the victims reveal how familial pressure prioritizes the concept of family over the safety of the individual. Victims describe being forced to stay or reunite for the sake of the children. There is also a shared theme of external narratives defining the victim's role, at the expense of their own reality and how the focus on the child leads to the erasure of the victim's trauma.

L1 experiences a sense of cultural expectation and soft pressure, stating, *"There is heavy pressure from both sides to fix the marriage for the sake of the children. They tell me that fighting is just a normal part of marriage, they just give me advice on how to be a good wife".*

In contrast, LE3 faces a more targeted form of manipulation, noting, *"His family is using the child's condition to force us to live under one roof again, even though it is dangerous for me. They tell our child that I was the one who destroyed the family, which is why the situation becomes chaotic during visitations".*

While families enable the abuser by encouraging reconciliation, a victim highlights a contrast where her own family acts as her support system to manage the logistical hurdles of their daily needs.

As L4 explains, *"My family is the one helping me take care of the child when I need to attend to some things".*

The responses show a painful trend where family members use children as tools to force victims back into bad relationships. Instead of focusing on the victim's safety, families prioritize keeping the perfect family image alive, which ignores the trauma the victim has suffered. For example, L1 felt soft pressure from others who treated domestic violence as just a normal part of marriage. In a more extreme case, LE3 was guilt-tripped into returning to a dangerous home by people using their child's disability as an excuse. Some families even go

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as far as attacking the victim’s character; L4 shared how the abuser’s family told their child that they were a home destroyer for leaving. However, family isn't always the enemy. L4 also highlighted a positive shift where their own family became a vital support system, providing the childcare needed.

Because the law cannot fully protect victims who are being pressured or manipulated by their own families, legal solutions alone are not enough to ensure safety. Safety is tied as much to financial and social stability as it is to the law; if a victim cannot afford to live independently or handle childcare alone, the legal system's protections remain out of reach. The government should provide subsidized, independent childcare and emergency financial housing that is not tied to a victim’s family. By removing the victim's economic dependence on their abusers or unsupportive relatives, they give them the actual power to use the legal protections available to them.

According to Bila et al. (2023), these expectations can make women put their own needs aside to maintain family harmony. This behavior is closely linked to the Filipino concept of *pagtitiis*, which is a deep sense of endurance. As noted by Ofreneo et al. (2021), this tradition of suffering in silence is meant to keep the family whole, though it sometimes happens at the cost of the safety or well-being of the individuals involved.

### ***Financial dependence***

The victims’ responses highlight how poverty or financial debt creates a prison that makes leaving nearly impossible. Their shared experience shows how domestic conflict is

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rarely just between two people; it is reinforced by external social structures. The tragedy is compounded by the betrayal of the victims' own families, who prioritize financial survival over the victims' safety. For the victims, their families act as barriers to escape rather than a support system.

L2 shared the painful reality of her situation, stating, *"My own family... they tell me to just endure it because they can't afford to support me if I move back home"*.

Similarly, LE2's family ties are complicated by financial dependency, as she explained, *"My family borrows money from him, so they pressure me to stay just so the help they receive won't be cut off"*.

These responses show a heartbreaking situation where families care more about money and debt than the safety of their own relatives. Instead of being a safe place to turn, the family becomes another trap. L2 felt forced to stay in an abusive relationship because their family was too poor to help them leave. In another case, the family of LE2 actually relied on the abuser for loans and financial help, which made them pressure the victim to stay so they wouldn't lose that support. Essentially, poverty turns family members into part of the problem, leaving victims with no way out because the people who should love them most are the ones holding them back.

The current legal system treats domestic abuse as a standalone criminal issue, but this approach fails to account for the economic reality of many households. Because the abuser is the sole provider, the victim is forced to choose between personal safety and the literal survival of their extended family. This creates a cycle where the law offers protection that the victim cannot afford to accept. The justice system could integrate social welfare directly into the

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legal process. Instead of only providing lawyers and police, the state should offer immediate, long-term economic specifically for families whose stability is tied to an abuser. They could shift from a punish the abuser model to a sustain the family model to give victims a genuine path to exit.

Sometimes, family members can accidentally make it harder for a victim to stay safe. As Guthrie et al. (2021) point out, these loved ones can become unexpected obstacles when a victim tries to get help. This situation gets worse because of what Llanes (2022) calls the weaponization of financial dependence. Essentially, this means the abuser uses money to control the victim, making it very difficult for them to leave or build a life of their own.

### ***Familial interference***

This theme covers the responses of the victims where the relationship has reached a boiling point, involving legal action and the need for physical protection. The victims' narratives emphasize a transition from being victimized by an extended network to finding sanctuary within their own kin. It highlights the physical and emotional interference of the perpetrators' families.

*As L3 noted, "His siblings are even helping him track me down, so I don't trust them". While T4 faces emotional manipulation as she accounts, "They are using guilt trips, saying how pitiful he is and how he has been drinking constantly because I left".*

Beyond these personal intrusions, other victims focus on the institutional and foundational recovery process.

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T2 described the alienation faced within the legal system, sharing, *"I am already considered an enemy by his family because of my filing for annulment"*.

LE5 asserted control over the narrative by stating, *"They no longer have any power over me because I've set firm boundaries"*.

The responses show a clear difference between victims who are still stuck dealing with their abuser's family and those who have managed to break free. For L3 and T4, the family continues the abuse by spying on them or using guilt trips to keep them feeling scared and controlled. For T2 and LE5, they have moved toward independence by taking the fight to court or setting strict rules for what they will tolerate. While going to court can lead to the family seeing the survivor as an enemy, setting and sticking to firm boundaries seems to be the real turning point that finally takes away the family's power.

The reliance on legal measures like RA 9262 is deficient because the law cannot physically or emotionally shield a survivor from the constant pressure of an abuser's family. When kin-led intimidation remains unaddressed, the legal process fails or is abandoned, meaning the cycle of violence continues despite the existence of a court order. Local authorities should shift from a legal-only mindset to a safety-first strategy. This requires social services to create a physical and social buffer between the survivor and the abuser's relatives. By providing safe housing and emotional counseling that specifically addresses family interference, they can ensure that a survivor has the genuine independence needed to see their legal case through to the end.

These responses show how someone can move from feeling stuck to taking back control of their own life. This journey is made harder by proxy surveillance, where people use

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others to keep track of a person, a concept noted by Lievore (2023). This is made worse when manipulators use pity to control their victims, as explained by Alshammari (2022). The situation is even more difficult because of cultural pressures described by Ofreneo (2021), where many Filipino families feel they must keep a marriage together at all costs. This puts the family's reputation above the safety and happiness of the person, which leaves survivors feeling all alone even when they are around their own relatives.

### ***Isolation and family fatigue***

These responses describe situations where the victim is either physically isolated or where families have become indifferent to the abuse. These narratives suggest that isolation isn't just a matter of physical distance, but a result of emotional burnout and cultural normalization. The barrier is fatigue and indifference from their own family, who have grown weary of the repetitive nature of the relationship, leading them to dismiss her cries for help.

As T1 lamented, *"Our families are exhausted because of the constant fighting and making up; they say, 'That's your life, you know best'".*

In more extreme cases, victims experience both physical and cultural entrapment, particularly when residing in their partner's family compound where they are subjected to persistent gaslighting, effectively normalizing the abuse and silencing their attempts to seek support.

T3 described this isolating environment, noting, *"They tell me that 'men are just like that here' and that my reasons for complaining are 'shallow'".*

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The data shows two very different reasons why victims find it hard to leave abusive relationships. For T1, the problem is loneliness and exhaustion. Because the conflict has happened so many times, her friends and family have simply given up on helping her. They have burned out, leaving her to figure everything out entirely on her own. For T3, the problem is active pressure. Since she lives in her partner's family home, the entire household works together to keep her trapped. They use their culture as an excuse, telling her that the abuse is just normal behavior for a man.

Legal interventions are currently failing because they treat domestic abuse as a private, individual problem rather than a systemic one. If it is continuing to ignore the way society isolates victims and makes abuse seem normal in the home, survivors will remain too afraid or unsupported to ever seek justice. Institutions should shift their focus away in building community support networks that break a victim's isolation. They must launch public campaigns that strip away the privacy shield of the household, making it clear that abuse is a community crisis that requires an active, institutional response to make case filing a safe reality.

According to Baly (2021), this cycle makes family members feel that trying to fix the situation is a waste of time. In Filipino culture, this leads to a "buhay mo 'yan" (that's your life) attitude, where family members stop getting involved because they are tired of being disappointed, as noted by Taturan et al. (2022). This type of burnout is common in homes where everyone lives together, and as Al-Ishaq and Al-Adwan (2023) explain, family members choose to pull back emotionally just to protect their own peace of mind.

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## d. Emotional dependence

In these objective, emotional dependence manifests as a trauma bond, where the victim's sense of self and emotional well-being becomes intimately connected to the offender's validation or moods.

### *Relational reliance*

This theme focuses on children as the main link, masking a toxic relationship for the sake of family. The participants experience emotional stability and parental identity with their toxic partners. Victims emphasize the functional and emotional reliance during health scares involving her children and the volatile nature of this bond where their own emotional state is held hostage by the abuser's temperament.

L1's notes, *"I feel like I can't make decisions for them without him"*.

This volatility extends to significant family milestones, as L4 explains, *"Every time it's our child's birthday, I become dependent on his mood. When he's happy, I'm happy too; but when he goes on a rampage, my entire week is ruined"*.

Furthermore, it illustrates the performative aspect of this connection, admitted to using events to maintain a façade.

As LE3 admits, *"When our child had a school event, I became dependent on him to put on a front that we are perfect parents just so I wouldn't be embarrassed"*.

The data shows that these individuals are deeply tied to their partners in ways that take away their own control. This reliance shows up in three main ways: some feel they can't even make basic parenting decisions during a crisis without their partner; others find that their

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# INSTABRIGHT e-GAZETTE

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own happiness is completely controlled by their partner's unpredictable moods; and some feel they must rely on their partner just to keep up the appearance of a perfect family to the public. These stories show that the relationship isn't just a support system—it's a cage. It controls how they feel, how they act, and how they see themselves, leaving them with very little freedom to make their own choices.

Legal rights are effectively useless if a person is too psychologically paralyzed to claim them. Even if a law like RA 9262 exists to protect them, a victim who feels responsible for their family's reputation or fears social judgment will choose silence over safety. Consequently, the law acts as a door that remains locked from the inside. Institutional responses should mandate psychological counseling as a first step in the legal process to help victims regain their sense of self, create community-based programs that normalize leaving abusive situations, which reduces the social cage and the shame of a damaged public image, and provide victims with financial and emotional tools so they don't feel forced to stay in a relationship for the sake of stability or reputation.

In many families, there is a strong cultural expectation that everyone must share the duty of raising children. Aguila and de Guzman (2021) point out that this intense pressure can make it hard for individuals to make their own choices, especially when it comes to their personal health, because they feel like they don't have the freedom to act alone. This sense of being stuck is made even worse by what Reid et al. (2022) call intermittent reinforcement. This is a psychological pattern where people stay in difficult situations because they get just enough positive attention or support to keep them hooked, making it very hard to leave.

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Finally, Enander and Holmberg (2020) explain that many people feel they must keep up a certain perfect image for their community. Because of this need to protect their reputation, they stay trapped in these restrictive family roles to avoid being judged or seen as failing their responsibilities.

### ***Cycle of Abuse***

This theme is characterized by extreme emotional highs and lows, where the abuser is also the source of comfort. Both individuals are trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle of abuse and relief. This is not merely a bad relationship, but a physiological and psychological state similar to chemical addiction.

T1 describes this, stating, *"It's an addiction. He creates the wound, and he is also the one who heals it"*.

This sentiment is echoed by T3: *"When I became gravely ill, I had no one else to turn to. That was when I felt that I would be dead if he ever left me"*.

In abusive relationships, a confusing cycle develops where the person hurting you is also the only person you turn to for comfort. This is clearly shown by T1, who compared the relationship to an addiction and described the abuser as being both the wound and the cure. Because the abuser alternates between being mean and being kind, the victim starts to rely on them to fix the pain the abuser caused in the first place. This bond becomes even stronger when the victim is cut off from friends and family, as seen in the experience of T3. Without anyone else to turn to, the victim begins to see their abuser as their only way to survive.

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This indicates that a victim's refusal to file a case is a logical response to a state of total isolation and trauma bonding. Legal solutions are currently ineffective because they ignore the psychological barriers that prevent victims from engaging with the law in the first place. So, institutional responses should first take the action of providing intensive social and emotional support to break the cycle of dependency. By addressing the isolation first, the state can create the necessary foundation for a legal case to be successfully pursued later.

It is incredibly difficult to leave an abusive relationship because the cycle of violence and comfort actually changes how the brain works, making it feel like a physical addiction, as noted by Dutton and Painter (2021). This trap is what Monckton-Smith (2020) calls the dependency stage, where the victim feels unable to function without their partner. To make matters worse, Panganiban et al. (2022) point out that it is much harder for someone to break free when they do not have enough help or support from the people and systems around them.

### ***Reputational pressure***

The participants' response is driven by external validation, fear of judgment, or spiritual obligations. These acts as a powerful psychological anchor that traps individuals in abusive or dysfunctional relationships. For some, it is their spiritual and moral worth; to others, it is their social and digital, to convince themselves that they are okay.

For instance, L5 shared, *"When we went to church counseling, I felt that I needed to be with him just to be valid in the eyes of God and of people"*. Similarly, others find themselves tethered to performative displays of affection, with LE4 noting, *"Our connection is based on the likes and*

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*comments of other people. When we look happy online, I feel like maybe we actually are okay”.*

The data shows that both women look for outside proof to stay in their relationships. For L5, her worth is tied to tradition and faith; she feels she needs her partner to be seen as a good person by her church and community. Without him, she feels invalid in the eyes of God. On the other hand, LE4 looks for proof online. She uses social media likes and comments to convince herself that her relationship is doing well, using digital praise to hide her own doubts.

A victim’s choice to seek justice is a social one governed by the community they value most. Because victims rely on religious groups or online circles for their sense of safety and identity providing facts about the law is useless if the victim’s community makes them feel that reporting is a betrayal or a personal failure. Advocates should actively shift the culture within these spaces. This requires a two-pronged action plan: first, partnering with faith leaders to teach that protecting a victim is more sacred than protecting a marriage; and second, building digital survivor networks that offer a new, positive social identity to replace the one lost during a legal battle.

Conroy et al. (2022) describes marriage as a holy and unbreakable promise. This idea fits well with what Abila (2021) noticed about Filipino culture, where keeping a marriage together is seen as a vital moral duty. For many, staying married is a way to honor God and meet the expectations of their community. This is interesting because today, people also deal with what Romero-Martinez et al. (2025) call algorithmic intimacy. This term explains how

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social media and apps now play a big role in how we start, build, and handle our personal relationships.

### ***Erosion of Personal Autonomy***

This theme Involves one partner dictating the other’s identity, capabilities, and life choices. Victims express a fundamental inability to navigate life independently. Their responses reflect a loss of autonomy rooted in a long-term relationship.

This is captured by T5 who admits, *"I don't know how to be independent"*. Similarly, LE2 notes, *"I treat him like a father. I feel like I can't survive in this world without his guidance"*.

The data shows that the victims feel completely trapped and unable to make their own choices. They have reached a point where they don't just see their abuser as a partner, but as someone they literally cannot live without. For T5, it shows how years of abuse have stripped away their confidence and sense of self. This feeling of being stuck is even stronger for LE2, who describes her partner like a father figure. By viewing him this way, she falls into a child-like role where she believes his control is the only thing protecting her from the world. These responses show that the trauma has deeply rewired their minds, making the idea of living alone feel not just scary, but impossible.

This psychological rewiring creates a fundamental disconnect between the victim and the justice system. Without a mental shift, even the best legal protection is a solution to a problem the victim’s brain is not yet allowed to solve. Therefore, the legal system will continue to see high rates of withdrawn cases and failed interventions because it is treating a

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psychological crisis as a purely administrative one. The necessary action is to mandate trauma-informed counseling as a prerequisite or parallel track to legal proceedings. They could shift resources away from immediate courtroom action and toward rebuilding the victim's internal sense of safety, ensuring they are psychologically empowered to participate in their own legal defense.

When someone is controlled by another person for a long time, they start to doubt their own ability to make choices or take action, which is a drop in self-confidence known as a loss of self-efficacy (Balyer & Özcan, 2020). In the Philippines, this situation is hidden behind cultural traditions. As Garcia (2022) explains, society frequently labels male control as fatherly guidance, which makes it very hard for a person to break free. This mix-up of roles creates what Casassa et al. (2021) call a traumatic bond, where the person being controlled starts to see the one controlling them as a protector instead of someone who is hurting them.

### ***Emotional impasse***

This theme is about the victims' struggle to let go even after the relationship has physically or legally ended. Even when a relationship is characterized by fear, legal battles, or abuse, the psychological muscle memory of the partnership remains a powerful force that dictates the survivors' emotional stability and decision-making. Victims struggle with the transition of their partner from a confidant to an adversary, finding themselves caught in a cycle where, despite a connection defined by fear, they still crave the attention of the person

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who once held their deepest secrets. This extends to a form of emotional phantom pain, where ingrained instincts persist even in the face of betrayal.

L3 captures this internal conflict, noting, *"Our connection now is filled with nothing but fear, but there is still a part of me that seeks his attention because he was my last partner"*.

T2 describes this vividly: *"The emotional connection is severed, yet a phantom pain still remains. During the first hearing, when I saw him looking sad, I still felt the urge to approach and comfort him, even though he was the one who hurt me"*.

For others, the abuser remains a constant, looming figure in their mental landscape, dictating their behavior long after the relationship has ended. This lingering attachment is particularly acute during moments of isolation.

As LE1 explains, *"Even though we're far apart, it feels like there's still a leash around my neck. Every move I make, I still find myself wondering how they would react"*.

The same sentiments as T4 shares, *"Now, the emptiness I feel exists because I am still emotionally leaning on them. Every night, I try my best not to text"*.

Even after leaving an abusive relationship, victims feel a deep, painful pull back toward the person who hurt them. This is because the mind struggles to separate the person who was once a close friend from the person who became a threat. For example, L3 explains that she still misses the attention of her abuser, showing how old habits of sharing secrets are hard to break. Similarly, T2 describes a feeling like phantom pain, where the urge to comfort the abuser remains even during a tense court case. This psychological tie is so strong that LE1 compares it to wearing an invisible leash, where the victim still feels controlled and watched even when they are physically alone. This constant battle is seen in T4, who feels a

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deep emptiness every night, proving that moving on is a long, difficult fight against emotional dependency.

The current data shows that victims share deep emotional bonds with their abusers, which suggests that the legal process alone is not enough to ensure their cooperation. This implies that the primary barrier to justice is the unresolved psychological trauma that keeps victims tied to their offenders. Specialized protection units could change their workflow to treat mental health as a part of the legal process. Specifically, they should embed licensed counselors directly into the reporting phase. Instead of waiting until after a trial to offer help, emotional support must be provided the moment a victim walks through the door. This ensures that the victim has the mental strength and clarity needed to stay in the program and see the legal process through to the end.

When trying to understand why it is so hard to leave a difficult relationship, experts point to traumatic bonding (Reid et al., 2022). This bond is made even stronger by the cognitive anchor theory (Arntz & de Groot, 2020), which explains why the brain gets stuck and finds it very hard to let go. In the Philippines, this situation is made more complex by the cultural value of *pagdamay*, or the deep act of sharing in another person's pain. According to Aguila and Carandang (2021), this tradition of empathy is so powerful that it can sometimes cause a person to ignore their own need to stay safe.

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## ***Self-Worth Dependency***

In this theme point out that financial survival and personal value are entirely tied to the partner's provision. The response suggests that the relationship has shifted from mutual support to a transactional survival mechanism where the victim has been entirely surrendered to the other person.

*This is clearly illustrated by L2's experience: "Because I get everything from him, even my worth as a person depends on him. It's only when he praises me that I feel like I have any purpose. When he is silent, I feel worthless".*

This response describes L2 who relies entirely on someone else to feel good about themselves. Their happiness and confidence aren't built from within; instead, they act like a mirror that only reflects what the other person gives them. When they receive praise, they feel valuable, but the moment that person goes silent, their self-esteem completely crashes, making them feel worthless. Because they don't have a steady sense of who they are on their own, their entire value as a human is tied to another person's opinion.

The legal system currently prioritizes paperwork and procedures over the intense emotional collapse a victim experiences when losing their primary source of support. Because the law ignores this psychological trauma, victims will continue to withdraw from the legal process, leading to lower conviction rates and a society where abusers are never held accountable. The necessary action is for institutions to shift their resources away from mere processing and toward long-term mental health recovery. By helping victims rebuild their self-

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esteem and independence, the system can empower them to finally break the cycle of silence and fully participate in seeking justice.

According to research by Dannisworo et al. (2024), needing constant praise to feel like you have a purpose is a major sign of attachment anxiety. In these cases, the person has basically handed over their sense of self to their partner. This puts them in a shaky mental position because who they are isn't built from the inside. Instead, their self-image is just a reflection of what they think their partner sees in them.

### ***Recovery and Reclaiming Independence***

On this theme the participant tackled the transition from dependence to self-sufficiency. While the emotional bond was broken by the realization of self-sufficiency, the response suggests that healing is a dual process: achieving external freedom versus overcoming internal trauma. Even after physical or financial separation, victims deal with the internal residue of abuse. These response shows that healing from verbal and emotional trauma takes longer than achieving financial stability.

*As LE5 shares, "The gaslighting echoes are still there, that voice in my head telling me I'm worthless. But the moment I realized I could actually survive without him, that's when the emotional chains finally broke".*

LE5's story shows how the pain of an abusive relationship can stay with someone even after they leave. Even though the abuser is gone, their mean words stay behind like an echo in the victim's mind, making them believe they are worthless. This happens because the victim has spent so much time hearing those insults that they start to believe them as their own

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thoughts. But the story changes when LE5 realizes they are strong enough to make it on their own. By recognizing their own strength, the emotional chains that tied them to the abuser finally break. Even if those negative thoughts pop up occasionally, the abuser no longer has any real power once the survivor sees that they are capable, independent, and free.

The current system focuses mostly on physical protection, but the real implication is that legal justice will remain out of reach for most victims. Even the best laws are useless because victims won't feel capable of using them. Institutions should stop treating legal aid and mental health as separate things. They need to create a unified support system where building a survivor's self-worth and confidence is treated as a mandatory first step in the legal process, rather than just an optional afterthought.

When a person finally has the money or safety to leave an abusive situation, they still carry what Badenes-Sastre et al. (2025) calls the sociological and psychological residue of that trauma. The victim continues to hear the abuser's criticisms in their own head. Even though the abuser is gone, their voice remains a constant, negative influence that shapes how the survivor thinks and feels about themselves.

### **e. Financial dependence**

Financial abuse is a powerful tool of control. In these 15 responses from the victims, financial dependence acts as a golden cage or a direct barrier that prevents a victim from leaving, as the offender uses money to dictate behavior and limit autonomy.

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## ***Financial control***

The responses of the victim involve the abuser strictly monitoring every cent spent, holding onto the victim's own income, or demanding extreme transparency to strip away personal autonomy. For the victims, the traditional setup of a male breadwinner allows the partner to dictate even the smallest household needs.

*As L1 explains, "He is the breadwinner, while I have become a full-time mom. I can't take action or leave because I have no savings of my own for myself and my children". L5 echoes this lack of autonomy, noting, "I have no financial privacy. Even buying feminine pads or personal items requires his approval, so he controls my every move inside the house".*

The severity of this control is further illustrated by T3, whose own labor is weaponized against her; she shares, "He's the one who keeps my ATM card. He decides how much is left for me".

The responses show how money is used as a tool to control women at home, taking away their freedom whether they have a job or not. For women like L1 and L5, who do not work, being financially dependent becomes a trap; L1 cannot afford to leave a bad situation, and L5 even has to ask for permission and approval to buy basic personal items. Even when a woman does earn her own money, she can still be controlled. For example, T3's partner takes her bank card and only gives her a small allowance, keeping her poor despite her hard work. Together, these stories prove that when men control the finances, women lose their independence and must ask for permission to do almost anything.

This implies that legal rights are essentially ineffective if a person cannot afford the survival steps required to use them. This means that laws alone cannot stop domestic violence; as long as victims are financially tied to their abusers, the cycle of silence will

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continue regardless of how many protections are put in place. Institutions should create economic empowerment programs, such as immediate emergency grants, job placement assistance, or micro-loans specifically for survivors. By giving victims a guaranteed financial safety net the moment they report a crime, we remove the economic bars of their prison. The goal is to ensure that a victim's decision to seek justice is based on their safety and desire for help, rather than the balance of their bank account.

Postmus et al. (2020) explain that this lack of personal funds acts as a major roadblock because, without a safety net of money, a woman cannot physically or logistically afford to move out and start a new life. This problem is made even worse when an abuser watches every cent she spends. Ofreneo et al. (2022) point out that this kind of constant monitoring is actually a way to intentionally strip a woman of her financial privacy and control.

### ***Financial sabotage***

In this theme, the abuser actively prevents the victim from earning their own money or uses their provider status to silence the victim's voice. In all responses, financial dependence is not just a circumstance; it is a weapon used to strip the victims of their agency, dignity, and the ability to escape. The abusers ensure that their partners remain jobless to maintain a power imbalance.

*As L2 shared, "When I tried online selling, he made me stop and told me to just focus on the house". And T1 noted, "What used to be our equal contribution to the household vanished when he forced me to resign so I could take care of him. That was when the blatant abuse began".*

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In more extreme instances, this control manifests as direct sabotage, as described by T5: *"When I got a part-time job, he got angry and tore up my contracts because he didn't want me to have the upper hand over him when it comes to money".*

Furthermore, when financial resources are provided, financial support is framed as a tool for emotional blackmail, making the victim feel indebted or bought.

As captured by LE2: *"He is my sugar daddy. As time went on, he started using his gifts to shame me whenever we fought, as if he had already bought my very soul".*

The responses of L2, T1, and T5 show how abusers purposely ruin their partner's chances of being independent. They might do this by mocking their business ideas, making them quit their jobs, or even tearing up their work contracts. This forces the partner to rely entirely on the abuser, turning what should be a partnership of equals into a situation where one person has all the control. Even when an abuser gives money or gifts, it usually isn't out of kindness. As LE2's experience shows, these gifts are often used to make the victim feel like they owe the abuser. This debt is then used to guilt-trip the victim into staying quiet or accepting more mistreatment.

Because legal fixes don't solve the underlying problem of enforced debt, the implication is that the justice system is currently designed to fail the very people it is supposed to protect. As long as victims are trapped by money, they are effectively silenced. Without financial safety, a legal right is just a piece of paper that no one can afford to use. Policymakers need to move beyond just passing laws and start providing direct economic support. This means the required action is to integrate mandatory financial aid, debt forgiveness programs, and guaranteed job placement into the legal process. Instead of just offering a lawyer, the system should offer a

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financial exit ramp. They must treat economic independence as a core part of a victim's legal rights, rather than an optional afterthought, to finally break the barriers to reporting.

Experts call this economic sabotage, which is a planned way to hurt someone's ability to be financially independent (Adams et al., 2020). As Pineda (2021) explains, this happens when someone uses money as a weapon. They turn financial help into a way to make their partner feel trapped, forever in debt, or obligated to them.

### ***Economic dependence***

This theme focuses on how financial support for children is used as a bargaining chip or a way to maintain access to and control over an ex-partner. Across these responses, money is no longer a resource for the child's welfare; it is a tactical instrument used to bypass physical separation and maintain power over the survivor. Victims describe a shift from stable support to a performance-based or mood-dependent system. Financial power is also used to prevent the victims from seeking justice or gaining true independence.

For instance, L4 explains, *"If the child needs new shoes, I have to coax him and endure his insults just to get him to give anything"*. This conditional support is mirrored in LE3's experience, who notes, *"He only gives money when I let him inside the house or when I'm 'nice' to him"*.

This is also articulated by LE1, *"I am still tied to him through money. He actually became more generous when I moved away, but I know it's just a bribe so that I won't follow through with reporting him to the police"*.

The data shows how money changes from a regular source of support into a cruel way to control someone. For LE3 and L4, getting help with bills or basic needs is no longer a shared duty; instead, it depends entirely on the abuser's mood. This power struggle turns basic

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survival into a reward for staying quiet or giving in. In LE1’s case, this control even interferes with the law; the abuser acts more generous after the breakup, but only as a bribe to keep her from going to court. These stories prove that abusers use money as a leash to keep their victims trapped and silent, even after the relationship has ended.

When an abuser controls access to basic needs like food and housing, they effectively privatize the legal system, making a victim’s right to safety dependent on their bank account. This implies that the current legal framework is fundamentally flawed because it assumes all citizens have the same freedom to seek help. If the law offers protection but the victim cannot afford to leave, the law is technically a paper tiger, it exists in theory but has no power in reality. Therefore, to truly break the cycle of domestic violence, policy makers and courts need to integrate financial support (like emergency housing funds, immediate temporary alimony, or job placement) directly into the restraining order process.

Abusers use money as a way to keep power over their victims, even if the victim tries to leave the relationship (Postmus et al., 2020). This is also a common problem in the Philippines, where abusers use money as a weapon to stop victims from being able to take care of themselves (Sabri, Lee, & Francisco, 2024). These studies show that a victim's ability to get help is controlled by whether the abuser is in a good or bad mood.

### ***Coercive Control***

The narrative of the victims illustrates their fall off when they leave, and how the legal/financial system can be used to punish those who try to escape. The responses reveal

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that financial instability is not just a byproduct of separation, but a tactic used by abusers to maintain power, force reconciliation, or punish the victim for seeking independence. Victims highlight the immediate loss of access to shared assets and the drastic shift from comfort to poverty.

T2 explains, *"Ever since I filed for annulment, he cut off all my credit cards and my access to our joint account"*, while T4 echoes this financial isolation by stating, *"I had a zero balance when I left home because all our savings were under his name"*.

L3 illustrated the cost of leaving, as she notes, *"My life used to be luxurious when I was with him, but the trade-off was being beaten. Now, I am poor, but I am free"*.

While others suffer from a lack of funds, other victim highlights a different form of financial shackle: coerced debt.

This was emphasized by LE4, who shares, *"I can't leave because I'll be dragged down by the debts he made me sign for. He has me by the throat because of those legal obligations to the bank"*.

The data shows that abusers use money as a tool to keep their partners trapped. When T2 and T4 tried to leave, their partners immediately cut them off by canceling credit cards or draining shared bank accounts, leaving them with nothing. L3 had to give up a comfortable or luxury lifestyle just to be safe, choosing to live in poverty rather than stay in a violent home. Beyond just taking cash, some abusers forced their partners to sign for loans and take on debt. This legal entrapment means that even after leaving, the women like LE4 are still tied to their abusers through bills they can't afford to pay, using the banking system to keep them under control.

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Even the strongest laws, such as RA 9262, are effectively ineffective if the victim cannot afford to eat or house themselves after reporting a crime. The legal system is currently designed only for those with financial security, which unintentionally punishes the poor for being victims. The government and legal institutions should move beyond just providing lawyers. They need to integrate mandatory economic safety nets directly into the filing process of RA 9262 cases. This includes emergency basic income; debt freezes and bridge housing.

When someone tries to leave an abusive relationship, the abuser may use a tactic called active economic control. As described by Postmus et al. (2020), this is when an abuser purposefully tries to ruin a victim's ability to support themselves financially right when they are trying to get away. This can cause a person's life to go from stable to very difficult very quickly. Research by Agaton (2023) calls this sudden drop into financial struggle transitional poverty. In some cases, abusers also use forced debt, which is a harsh way of trapping a survivor in money problems, fitting into the larger pattern of economic exploitation mentioned by Postmus et al. (2020).

### ***Economic stability***

This theme represents the successful transition away from abuse and the reclamation of self-worth through financial autonomy.

*This was captured by LE5, who shared, "After a long time, I finally have control over my own finances. I am free to make all my own decisions. Even if it's difficult and requires working overtime, it feels much better knowing that every meal I eat comes from my own hard work".*

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For LE5, being independent is more than just a change in routine; it is a hard-earned freedom. By saying "After a long time," she suggests that she was stuck or relying on her abuser for far too long. Now, she feels truly free because she gets to make all her own decisions. Even though the work is hard and requires long hours of overtime, she don't mind the exhaustion. To her, the sweat of her labor makes their success taste better. Working hard for her own money isn't a burden; it is a source of pride that helps her rediscover who she is.

This implies that as long as a victim's survival depends on their abuser's income, legal rights exist only on paper and not in reality. If this continue to focus only on courtrooms and lawyers without addressing poverty, the cycle of abuse will never truly be broken, and legal reforms will remain ineffective for those who need them most. Government and support organizations could provide immediate and sustainable livelihood programs alongside legal aid. By prioritizing the victim's financial independence first, they give them the actual power to choose legal action without the fear of ending up homeless or hungry. Justice cannot be achieved in a vacuum; it requires a bank account just as much as it requires a judge.

Self-determination theory posits that feeling in control of our own lives is a basic human need. Building on this idea, Borjas et al. (2021) point out that making your own money acts like a psychological safety net, which helps you feel more independent and in charge of your path. A 2025 study by Ipsos Philippines shows that local culture puts a lot of value on hard work. In the Philippines, putting in effort to earn a living is seen as more than just a way to pay the bills; it is a powerful symbol of being self-reliant and standing on your own two feet.

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### 3. Underlying factors influencing the refusal to File VAW cases

The refusal to file VAW (Violence Against Women) cases is influenced by underlying factors such as psychological and social factors, cultural belief and the victims' economic conditions. These factors can make victims feel unsafe, powerless, or unsure about seeking legal help, even when abuse is present.

#### a. Psychological factors

Psychological factors act as invisible chains that are harder to break than physical ones. In these responses, the decision to file a VAWC (Violence Against Women and Their Children) case is blocked by internal battles of shame, guilt, and the complex nature of emotional ties.

#### *Internalization of maternal guilt*

These responses revolve around the welfare of the children and the internal conflict of breaking up a family unit. The delay in seeking justice is not caused by a lack of evidence, but by the interplay of psychological guilt, social stigma, and the idealized myth of the complete family. The victims are trapped in a cycle where their role as a mother is weaponized against their own safety.

For instance, L1 articulates a paralyzing fear of causing long-term harm to her children's prospects, stating, *"I feel like I am ruining the children's future if I have their father imprisoned"*. Similarly, L4 reflects a sense of profound emotional depletion, noting, *"My patience has run out, and I often get irritated with my child, which makes me feel even more like a bad mother"*.

On the other side, others forcefully covering up the abuse to maintain her abuser's good father façade.

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LE3 exemplifies this struggle to preserve a distorted family narrative, admitting, *"He is kind to the child. I am clinging to his ideal image as a father, so I find myself making excuses for his abusive behavior"*.

The responses of L1 and L4 show how deeply these mothers blame themselves for not being perfect. Though they are victim of abuse, they still carry a heavy weight of guilt, feeling that their children's happiness is entirely their responsibility. For example, L1 feels trapped because she believes that seeking justice against the father will ruin her children's lives; she feels guilty for a situation he created. L4 shows how constant stress wears a person down; when she loses her patience or gets irritable, she immediately labels herself a bad mother. These experiences prove that the pain of abuse doesn't just come from the abuser—it also creates a second battle inside the mother's mind, where she punishes herself for simply being exhausted and human.

The current reality is that many women stay in or drop legal cases because they feel like pursuing justice makes them a bad mother. This implies that the legal system ignores the internal emotional battle victims face. If it only fixes the physical locks on the doors but leave the mother feeling like a criminal for seeking help, the cycle of abuse will likely continue because the psychological barriers are just as strong as the physical ones. The necessary action is to integrate specialized mental health counseling directly into the legal process. This means creating programs that help women understand that protecting themselves legally *is* an act of being a good mother, not a betrayal of their family. By decoupling their identity from the legal case, this empowers them to follow through with the justice system.

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In many violent homes, women end up being the only ones providing emotional support to the family, as noted by Bansen and Overlien (2021). This heavy responsibility becomes even harder due to cultural expectations pointed out by Ofreneo (2023), which push women to put the family's image and reputation above their own personal safety.

### ***External pressure***

This theme focuses on external judgment, community standing, and the pressure of traditional or religious vows. This external pressure forces them into a state of living a lie, where the exhaustion of pretending to have a perfect life becomes more painful than physical injury.

As L5 shared, *"Shame before the community and fear of being punished by God because I broke the vow of marriage"*. This sentiment of apprehension extends to familial relationships, with T5 adding, *"I'm also afraid of being humiliated in front of my parents, who had warned me against this before"*.

Furthermore, the modern landscape of public scrutiny introduces a digital dimension to their trauma; as LE4 noted, *"I am afraid of being cancelled or becoming the talk of social media once his true colors are revealed"*.

These responses from the victims explain why it is so hard to leave a bad relationship: the fear of what others will think keeps them trapped. They describe a triple threat of shame that makes staying feel safer than leaving. For L5, there is the religious and community pressure, where people fear being judged by God or their neighbors for breaking a sacred promise. For T5, there is family pride, where someone might stay in a bad situation just to avoid hearing their parents say, "I told you so." And LE4, there is the fear of social media,

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where the risk of being publicly shamed or canceled online turns a private problem into a global scandal. These pressures create a heavy wall of silence that makes asking for help feel impossible.

Because victims are silenced by a triple threat of religious shame, family pride, and digital scandal, the law cannot work as intended. This means that the legal system's power is currently being blocked by social fear. Therefore, simply having laws on the books is not enough to protect people. Local authorities should create community support groups that act as a buffer, protecting victims from social judgment so they feel safe enough to actually use the legal tools available to them.

As Cleofas (2023) explains, your private life isn't really just yours; it is deeply connected to how your community and your church view you. Getting married is seen more like a public duty to prove you are a good person rather than just a private promise between two people. Today, the fear of bringing shame to your family or being canceled on social media hits just as hard, which matches the research by Al-Adawi et al. (2024). Whether you are worried about what your relatives will say at dinner or what strangers will post about you online, the result is the same: you feel like your value as a human being is being attacked.

### ***Psychological Manipulation***

This theme highlights the mental traps set by abusers, including gaslighting, isolation, and the cycle of sweet moments. These factors create a dependency where the survivor looks to the abuser for validation because they feel misunderstood or judged by the outside world.

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This is exemplified by T3, who shared, *"He repeatedly tells me that I'm crazy and that no one will believe me, so I've started to believe him too"*. This struggle to distinguish reality from deceit is echoed by T1, who admitted, *"I no longer know what is real and what is just his manipulation"*.

Furthermore, the attention creates a false sense of hope that prevents the victims from seeking legal recourse or leaving the relationship.

LE1 described this conflict sadly: *"The crumbs of attention he gives me are enough to stop me from filing a case; I keep thinking that, just maybe, he might change"*.

The responses from T3, T1, and LE1 show how abusers use mind games to trap their victims. By constantly calling someone crazy, the abuser eventually makes the victim believe it's true, causing them to lose trust in their own thoughts. This leaves the victim feeling lost and unable to tell what is real anymore. To make things worse, the abuser will occasionally show small moments of kindness, which gives the victim a false sense of hope that things will get better. These tactics aren't just mean; they are a calculated way to break a person down.

The psychological manipulation known as gaslighting, combined with cycles of intermittent kindness, creates a state of deep emotional confusion that physically and mentally prevents victims from pursuing legal action. Because this confusion acts as a functional barrier to the law, the justice system's current reliance on legal literacy programs is ineffective on its own. Without addressing the victim's mental state first, even the most accessible legal system will remain out of reach for those who need it most. Therefore, the state should shift its strategy by integrating psychological stabilization into the very first step of the legal reporting process.

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Gaslighting is a powerful way for an abuser to make a person doubt their own reality, which Badenes-Sastre et al.(2025) explains is the main goal: to break down how you see yourself. When this happens, it is common to start holding onto tiny crumbs of attention or moments of kindness, as Fernandez and de Castro (2022) have noted. This creates a trap called relational hope, where the abuser uses those small, occasional bursts of warmth to make you feel safe again. By doing this, they keep you stuck in a painful cycle where you are always waiting for them to act kind, even though the overall relationship is harmful.

### ***Power imbalance***

These responses from the victims focus on the literal and figurative size of the abuser either through money, age, or social standing. Victims highlighting how the lack of financial resources creates a barrier to justice and fuels a fear of systemic dismissal.

L2 expressed a profound vulnerability, stating, *"I am afraid that the police might just laugh at me because I can't afford a lawyer"*.

This sentiment is heightened by the perceived overwhelming nature of the perpetrator, with LE2 noting, *"I feel like he is too powerful for me to fight in court"*.

The responses shows that people face two main mental hurdles when trying to get justice: money worries and fear of the system. First, there is a deep feeling of being left out because of poverty. When L2 says, *"I'm afraid the police will just laugh at me,"* they aren't just worried about money, they feel that being poor carries a social stigma. They believe that legal rights are only for those who can afford them, and without a private lawyer, they expect to be mocked instead of helped. Second, there is a belief that the system is rigged in favor of

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the too powerful. This creates a David vs. Goliath mindset where the victim feels the scales of justice are tilted toward those with status or political connections. Because they feel they can't win against someone with more influence, they choose to stay silent and give up on their case before it even begins.

Because victims believe that social status and political power matter more than the rules, they naturally stop seeking help to protect themselves from further disappointment. This implies that as long as the justice system appears biased or unreachable, it will continue to lose its legitimacy and fail in its core mission to provide order. Consequently, if the legal system does not actively bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the law will remain a tool for the powerful, while the vulnerable will stay trapped in silence. The legal system should implement mobile courts or free, community-based legal clinics in high-poverty areas. By bringing the law to the people, the state can begin to prove that legal protection is a basic right for everyone, not just a privilege for those who can pay for it.

People with less money often feel scared to go to the police or court because they worry, they won't be taken seriously or will be treated poorly. This matches research by Sandefur (2020), who found that many low-income people feel the legal system is not built for them and makes them feel like outsiders. In the same way, when someone feels like they cannot possibly beat a powerful opponent in court, it shows the kind of unfair power gap that Golub (2021) studied regarding how the law works in the Philippines.

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## ***Psychological entrapment***

This theme covers the narratives that the decision to pursue justice is hindered by a heavy mix of terror, exhaustion, and a distorted sense of concern for the perpetrator. These responses indicate that without targeted support to address both the body's involuntary trauma responses and the mind's emotional distortions, survivors may remain perpetually tethered to their abusers, unable to prioritize their own safety or legal recourse.

L3 notes that fear is what keeps the connection alive, resulting in extreme hyper-vigilance, and shares, *"Even though we are separated, he still controls my mind. Even the slightest rustle at the door makes me tremble with anxiety"*.

Simultaneously, T2 struggles with a lingering concern for the abuser and describes a constant depressive feeling, explaining, *"It feels like there's always something heavy weighing down on my chest. Even though he is my opponent, there is still a part of me that worries about him, and that's what discourages me from pushing through with the annulment"*.

The responses show how abuse leaves a lasting mark on the mind and body in two very different ways. For L3, the pain has turned into a constant state of high alert; her body reacts to small, everyday noises—like a door moving—as if she is in immediate physical danger. Her fear is no longer just a memory but a physical reflex that keeps her trapped in a state of panic. On the other hand, T2 struggles with a heavy feeling of sadness and misplaced guilt. Even though she was harmed, she still worries about her abuser's well-being. This sense of pity acts like an anchor, making it difficult for her to move forward with legal action or end the relationship.

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The current legal system treats all victims the same, regardless of their mental state. This matters because when the law ignores how trauma paralyzes a person, victims freeze up or become overwhelmed during the process. By sticking to rigid, business as usual rules, the justice system is actually re-traumatizing victims and causing many valid cases to be dropped or never filed at all. Institutions should stop focusing only on paperwork and start using trauma-informed care. This requires providing victims with mental health stabilization and emotional support first. Only after a victim feels safe and grounded can they be expected to handle the stress of a complex legal battle.

People who are being hurt live in a state of constant fear. Aguila and Resurreccion (2021) explain that this happens because the victim starts to feel controlled by the person hurting them, which can physically feel like a heavy weight on their chest. Surprisingly, they might still feel worried about the person who is harming them. This is what Reid et al. (2022) call a traumatic bond. Even though the victim knows deep down that they are being treated badly, they still feel a strong emotional connection to the abuser. This bond is so powerful that it stops survivors from going to the police or seeking help.

### ***Psychological guilt-trap***

The responses of the victims deal with the aftermath of a breakup and the slow process of reclaiming one's life. This highlights the psychological struggle inherent in recovery from violence. The transition from victim to survivor is marked by a battle between self-blame and

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the realization of self-worth. This internal bargaining leads to a hesitation to file charges because the victim fears that cutting the connection will lead to total loss.

Exemplified by T4, who reflects on the internal turmoil of early trauma by stating, *"I keep wondering if I went too far or if I had only been better, maybe we wouldn't have ended up like this"*.

In contrast, others represent the progression of this journey. While still battling post-traumatic stress and the lingering anger and resentment that steal one's peace.

LE5 highlights the shift from victimhood to empowerment, noting, *"It was only when I broke the emotional connections to him that I realized filing for legal separation isn't about revenge, it's about protecting yourself"*.

The difference between T4 and LE5 shows how a person moves from blaming themselves to standing up for their rights. At first, in the T4 stage, the victim is stuck in a bargaining phase, thinking that if they had only been a better person, the abuse wouldn't have happened. This misplaced guilt makes it hard to seek help because they feel responsible for the conflict. However, LE5 represents a major shift where the person finally breaks their emotional ties to the abuser. By letting go of the old emotional connection, they move from feeling guilty to using the annulment as a shield for their own safety.

When a victim is stuck in emotional bargaining or self-blame, they are mentally unable to engage with the law, which explains why many legal protections exist on paper but are rarely used in practice. This implies that legal success cannot be measured by the quality of the laws alone, but by the emotional readiness of the people those laws are meant to protect. This requires the justice system to partner with mental health professionals to provide

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immediate psychological intervention. The goal is to help victims navigate the bargaining phase and reframe a lawsuit not as an act of betrayal against a partner, but as a necessary step for personal safety. Specifically, legal offices should include trauma-informed counselors who can assist victims in breaking emotional ties before they are expected to sign formal legal documents.

In this stage, victims struggle with a mix of guilt and shame. This is part of what Dalisay and Reyes (2024) call the cycle of *kahihyan* in Filipino culture. Because of this deep feeling of shame, many people are afraid to seek help or report the abuse. They worry that if they leave or take action against the person hurting them, they will lose the support of their family or community. As Wendt and Zannettino (2023) explain, this feeling that the situation is somehow their own fault is the biggest thing stopping them from going to the authorities for help.

**b. Social factors**

Social factors in the Philippines, such as *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), *pakikisama* (getting along), and the fear of *tsismis* (gossip), play a massive role in a victim's decision to seek justice. Here are the responses from the victims:

***Preservation of social face***

This theme focuses on the pressure to keep the family unit intact for the sake of children, elders, or the reputation of the lineage. Social and familial pressure functions as a barrier to justice, used the victim's love for their children and their need for community

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belonging to ensure silence. The response from the victims prioritizes the children, whether young or old, over their personal safety.

As exemplified by L1, who shared, *"My family is the first to tell me to swallow my pride for the sake of the children. The fear of being isolated from my own family is what holds me back"*.

L4 noted the crushing weight of public perception, stating, *"I am terrified of the gossip at my child's school. I don't want my child to be labeled as the child of a criminal or coming from a broken family"*.

Even when children reach adulthood, the burden remains, as mothers feel the need to protect their children's social circles and professional reputations.

LE1 explains, *"My children are already of legal age. I am afraid of them being shamed or embarrassed in their respective jobs and social circles."*

This cycle is reinforced by systemic and relational ties, as described by LE3, *"Our families remain intertwined because of their grandchild. Filing a case would trigger a war between the two families"*.

These stories show that when a mother chooses to stay in a painful situation, she isn't just acting on her own. Instead, she is forced by her relatives to tough it out to avoid bringing shame to the family. Many mothers feel they must hide their suffering because they are terrified that society will judge their children as coming from a broken home or being related to a criminal. This weight doesn't go away as the children grow up; mothers continue to sacrifice their own happiness to protect their adult children's reputations and careers.

The fact that victims choose silence over legal action due to cultural pressure means that laws like RA 9262 are currently failing to protect the people they were built for. Because the fear of family shame is stronger than the desire for legal justice, the law remains a paper tiger. This gap proves that providing legal help is not enough if the community still punishes

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the victim with social judgment. The justice system should stop looking at cases as simple fights between two people and start launching community-wide programs that normalize seeking help and reduce the stigma of broken homes.

Families put pressure on their members to hide problems just to keep the family looking good to others. According to Kaur and Garg (2022), people sacrifice their own happiness or safety to protect the group's reputation. Spencer et al. (2020) explain that this happens because mothers, in particular, may feel that keeping the family's social standing intact is the most important way to stay safe. This shows how deep the problem goes; as Tadifa (2021) points out, in close-knit communities, reporting a crime is wrongly seen as turning your back on your own blood or breaking the Filipino value of family unity, instead of being seen as the right thing to do to get justice.

### ***Social survival***

This theme involves the fear of gossip, viral culture, and the need to maintain a perfect facade to the community or on social media. Social pressure and the fear of reputational damage are more paralyzing than the physical or emotional abuse itself. In these responses, the social cage created by friends, family, and the community acts as a primary barrier to seeking justice.

For instance, L3 explains, *"My friends are his friends, too. This pressure is what's delaying me from filing a case; I feel like I'll end up looking like the bad person in the eyes of our friends"*.

This struggle for image preservation is further complicated by the pressures of digital and public perception, as noted by LE4: *"I don't want*

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*our private life to become the center of online gossip. The pressure to maintain the aesthetic of our life comes from both of our social circles”.*

Moreover, when the perpetrator holds significant social capital, the power dynamic becomes even more daunting; LE2 shares, *“He is a well-known figure in the community. The fear of being judged as a gold digger if I report him is overwhelming”.*

This burden is compounded when the couple maintain the community's illusion, as T5 shares, *“The community views us as young and happy couple, which makes it difficult to admit to the violence. Hiding the truth for the sake of pride is becoming the fuse for prolonged abuse”.*

The data shows that community acts like a cage where shared friends and public image make it almost impossible for victims to speak out. For L3, having the same social circle creates a loyalty trap; if they report the abuse, friends see them as a traitor or the bad guy rather than someone seeking justice. This fear of being kicked out of the group is made worse by the pressure to look perfect online and in person; LE4 notes that survivors choose to keep up a flawless image rather than admit they are in danger. Power and reputation also play a huge role in keeping victims silent. LE2 points out that if a perpetrator is well-liked, they can easily flip the script and use mean labels, like calling the victim a gold digger, to ruin their credibility instantly. As T5 explains, everyone around them wants to believe the lie of a happy couple, which acts like a gag order on the survivor.

The fact that family loyalty outweighs individual safety means that even the best laws are currently failing to protect victims. Without changing how society views family honor, legal help will remain a hollow resource that victims are too afraid to use. The law is powerless if the victim’s own community acts as a shield for the abuser. Authorities should stop treating domestic violence as a strictly legal issue and start treating it as a social one. This means

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creating programs that actively protect a victim’s reputation and provide them with a new, supportive community so they don’t have to rely on a toxic one. The goal is to make it socially and financially safe for a victim to leave, ensuring that their standing in the community is protected even when they challenge the perpetrator.

According to Baly (2021), when victims and abusers share the same friends and family, victims face social secondary victimization. This means they aren't just hurt by the abuse, but also by the judgment of their community. This pressure is even stronger because of the Filipino values of hiya (shame) and protecting one’s reputation. Ofreneo (2023) explains that many victims stay silent to avoid bringing collective shame to their families or communities. Today, this pressure is even worse because of social media. Aguila (2022) describes this as a digital panopticon, where people feel like they are constantly being watched by their online followers.

### ***Environmental pressure***

This theme highlights how lack of a local support network, or the abuser's local influence creates a cage of silence. The testimonies reveal that a victim’s decision to seek justice or leave an abusive situation is not just a personal choice, but one heavily dictated by their environment. The victims are bound by a collective sense of helplessness rooted in their environment.

*L2 captures this dread, noting, "I am afraid of being judged by the neighbors as someone who is just living under someone else's roof, so I feel like I just have to endure it". This isolation is further mirrored by T3, stating, "Because I am an outsider in this place, everyone is on his side. I feel like I have no voice in this community, which is why I don't attempt to seek legal help".*

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This community bias is further complicated by the power dynamics mentioned by T2: *"His family has influence in our barangay. I'm afraid that no one will believe me because they are seen as kind people by many"*.

The data shows that staying silent about abuse is a careful choice made to survive a difficult environment, rather than a lack of courage. For L2, the fear of being judged for their living situation creates a deep sense of shame and debt, making them feel they must endure the pain instead of fighting back. This feeling of being an outsider is echoed by T3, who found that being a newcomer in the neighborhood made it impossible to speak up; when the community sides with the abuser, the victim is left without any support or a fair chance at justice. Furthermore, as T2 points out, a perpetrator's high social status or kind reputation can act as a shield, making the victim afraid that no one will believe them. In these small, tight-knit communities, the abuser's influence carries more weight than the truth, leaving victims trapped by the fear of being labeled a liar.

The current data reveals a gap in how we protect victims: the justice system assumes that if you give a victim a lawyer, they will speak up. However, this ignores the fact that many abusers hold high status or power in their neighborhoods. When an abuser is a well-liked or powerful figure, they don't just use physical force; they use their reputation to silence the victim. Institutions could launch programs that educate neighbors and barangay leaders to recognize manipulation, reducing the stigma that keeps victims quiet. Instead of just waiting for a victim to be brave enough to come forward, social services must work to dismantle the abuser's social shield. They must make the community a place where the victim's safety is more important than the perpetrator's reputation.

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Many survivors choose to keep their experiences quiet because they are afraid of being judged by others, a feeling experts call anticipated stigma (Murvartian, 2024). This fear leads survivors to feel like they do not belong in their own neighborhoods. As Ofreneo et al. (2021) point out, this feeling of being alone is made worse because many Filipino communities value keeping peace and social harmony so much that they may ignore or fail to support those who are seen as different or as outsiders.

### ***Institutional pressures***

This theme reflects the weight of traditional beliefs, religious doctrines, and the exhaustion that comes from repeated cycles of abuse. Social and institutional pressures create a culture of silence that effectively traps survivors in abusive cycles or prevents them from seeking justice.

For instance, L5 highlights the heavy influence of the church and community elders, she explains, *"The church and our community believe that marriage is sacred. The elders tell us to carry the cross and to forgive over and over again"*.

This aligns with the broader societal pressure mentioned by T4, *"My friends tell me, 'Just let it go; after all, you've already broken up.' This is what makes me second-guess my decision; sometimes I think that maybe filing a case really is a waste of time since it's over anyway"*.

Furthermore, the cycle of returning to an abuser can lead to a profound loss of social support, as illustrated by T1, *"It's so embarrassing to face my friends. They've helped me so many times only for me to keep going back, so now I can't even show my face to them"*.

The responses show that seeking justice is blocked by the heavy influence of the Church and community leaders. Many victims, like L5, are told that marriage is sacred and that they must carry the cross, which makes their pain feel like a religious duty they have to

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accept. This pressure is made worse by people around them who don't seem to care; for instance, T4 noted that friends call seeking legal help a waste of time. This attitude forces victims to focus only on surviving rather than holding the abuser accountable, under the false idea that the harm no longer matters once the relationship is over. Over time, these victims also lose their safety nets. T1 shared that because the abuse keeps happening, the resulting shame leads to a total loss of social support. When victims go back to an abuser, their exhausted friends and family often pull away, leaving the victim isolated and without the help they need to finally leave.

The current justice system is failing because it treats seeking help as a personal choice, when it is actually a social struggle. Because religious narratives and social pressure turn abuse into a private duty, the law becomes irrelevant to the victim. No matter how many laws we pass, the justice system will remain ignored by those who need it most as long as the community continues to reward silence and punish those who speak out. Legal authorities and social services need to work directly with religious and local leaders to rewrite the sacred duty narrative, turning faith into a tool for protection rather than silence.

When people use religious beliefs to justify mistreatment, it can be very harmful. According to Beiswanger (2020), some religious groups might claim that suffering is a divine test, which pressures victims to stay in abusive situations to prove their faith. This is made even harder in Filipino culture because of the concept of *Hiya*, or shame. As Palicpic and Aruta (2021) explain, if a victim goes back to an abuser after the community has tried to help, the community feels frustrated and stops offering support. This causes the victim to lose face or

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feel deeply embarrassed, leading them to feel alone and trapped, which unfortunately keeps the cycle of abuse going.

### ***Social isolation***

This theme represents the turning point where the victim prioritizes safety over societal expectations. Because social environments are not neutral, they either fuel or hinder a victim's pursuit of justice.

*This is clearly reflected in the experience of LE5, who noted, "When I filed for legal separation in court, many people distanced themselves. But my true friends and family became my strength to continue the fight. There is still pressure to just forgive, but I no longer listen to it. Leaving that toxic social network was the key to gaining the courage to take action and ask for help".*

LE5's response shows that a survivor's ability to take action depends heavily on the people around them. When LE5 decided to seek legal help, many people walked away, but this actually helped reveal who their real friends were. LE5 faced two big challenges: a culture that pressured them to just forgive and toxic friends who tried to stop them from going to court. LE5 didn't just find courage out of nowhere; they found it by walking away from unsupportive people. By cutting out those who made them feel guilty and leaning on true family and friends, they felt safe enough to fight for justice.

Because victims are pressured to stay silent by their own circles, the legal protections of RA 9262 become useless for them. No matter how good the laws or police desks are, they will remain empty if the community acts as a wall that prevents victims from reaching the door. The required action is to build local support systems that provide survivors with a safe

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exit from toxic social networks. By creating these community-based safety nets, they can neutralize the influence of social gatekeepers and ensure that victims feel empowered to actually use the legal rights available to them.

Having people who care about them, like friends and family, gave the victim the strength to keep going during hard times. This matches what Malik et al. (2021) found: having a close support system act like a safety net that helps people when they are struggling. Additionally, research by Claire (2025) shows that for Filipino survivors, getting better is really about becoming independent and learning to see life in a new way. Claire explains that changing how you think is the main way to feel better mentally.

### **c. Cultural belief**

In our country, especially at the barangay level, cultural norms strongly influence how victims understand and respond to abuse. The saying “Ang labada ng pamilya ay sa loob lang ng bahay nilalabhan” reflects the belief that family problems should remain private, discouraging victims from reporting violence to authorities. At the same time, the idea of *martir* (martyrdom) promotes enduring suffering for the sake of family unity, children, or social approval. Together, these norms can make victims feel that staying silent and tolerating abuse is expected or honorable, which often prevents them from seeking help or filing formal complaints.

### ***Prioritization of the complete family***

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The victims' responses focus on the belief that a complete family is paramount at the expense of the mother's safety. It is deeply embedded in our cultural norms and social pressures to prioritize the image of a complete family over the physical and mental safety of the mother.

This pressure is deeply rooted in traditional expectations, as reflected by L1, who noted, *"The belief here is that the whole family is what matters most, no matter what happens. If I file a complaint, they will say that I am the one who ruined the children's future"*, and echoed by LE3, who highlighted the harmful trope that *"The belief that 'A child needs a father,' regardless of the father's behavior. A culture that prioritizes the presence of a father often forgets the safety of the mother"*.

This cultural mandate creates a climate of fear, where seeking protection leads to victim-blaming, a sentiment captured by L4: *"There is a traditional belief that a father should have access to his child no matter what happens. If I sent him to prison, I'm the one who ends up looking like the villain in the community because they say I am depriving the child of a father"*.

Furthermore, community views domestic conflict as a normal part of marriage or mere drama as T1 affectingly stated, *"People view everything as just drama because they are used to seeing us reconciled tomorrow after a beating tonight. A culture where you are just mocked or called fragile drains the courage needed to take filing a case seriously"*.

The data shows that many people value keeping a family together more than they value a woman's safety or her right to make her own choices. In the response of L1, LE3, and L4, mothers feel forced to stay because of the strict belief that children must have a father around, no matter how badly he behaves. For instance, L1 is terrified of being blamed for destroying her children's future, while L4 fears the community will hate her for taking the father away. Additionally, LE3 and T1 point out that this obsession with keeping the family whole ignores the mother's pain entirely. By calling domestic violence drama or mocking a

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woman for being weak, the community blames the victim instead of the abuser. This turns a woman's struggle to survive into something people laugh at or judge.

Because motherhood is judged by the presence of a man, many women feel they have no choice but to stay quiet and endure pain to avoid being shamed by their neighbors. This is made worse by a community that treats domestic violence as family drama rather than a crime. As long as the community lacks empathy, the abuser stays protected by the silence of others, while the victim is left entirely alone. The action needed is to build community-based support systems by launching public campaigns that redefine motherhood as providing a safe environment rather than providing a father. They could also train community leaders to stop treating violence as drama and start treating it as a public health crisis that requires immediate intervention.

Society puts too much pressure on the idea that every child must have a father in their life. Lombard (2021) points out that this obsession creates a trap for women, making them feel guilty for things that aren't their fault. This guilt is what Crossman et al. (2022) call the weaponization of motherhood. They explain that when a mother tries to keep her children safe by removing them from an abusive father, society wrongly turns that act of bravery into a reason to blame her for breaking the family. This problem gets worse because of the strong cultural belief that families should always stay together, no matter what happens inside the home. Enriquez (2020) shows how local systems, like the barangay, sometimes make this harder. Instead of focusing on the safety of the children, these systems push for parents to

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get back together just to keep the family unit intact. This puts the goal of a complete family above the actual health and safety of the people living in it.

### ***Culture of indebtedness***

These themes highlight how financial dependency, age gaps, and local insider status create a hierarchy where the victim feels they have no right to complain. Socio-economic dependence and local power dynamics create a culture of indebtedness that invalidates a victim's right to safety. In these responses, abuse is not seen as a crime, but as a right exercised by those who hold financial, social, or generational power.

*As L2 poignantly shared, "There is a custom that the man is the pillar of the home and he must be obeyed because he is the provider. If the neighbors found out he was hurting me, they would just say, 'Be grateful he's supporting you,' as if the physical abuse is the payment for the food I eat".*

This sentiment is echoed in the justification of violence as an educational tool; as T5 noted, *"Young couples are supposedly meant to be disciplined by their elders or by their spouse. Slapping or shouting is viewed merely as a part of teaching me because I am supposedly still young and have much to learn".*

This is further reinforced by the community's imposition of *utang na loob*, which LE2 described by saying, *"Because he is older, the community views him as my mentor. If I report him, I will be seen as the one who has no sense of gratitude".*

Furthermore, the victims face an uphill battle against localized power structures, as T3 observes, *"In this barangay, an outsider is always expected to defer to the locals. Whenever my partner hurts me, the people take his side because they have known him since childhood".*

These responses show a sad reality where money and age are used as excuses for abuse. Because the husband is seen as the provider or the pillar of the home, some believe

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he has the right to demand total control, almost as if providing food gives him permission to be violent. This gets worse when the community expects the younger spouse to show gratitude to the older one, viewing the abuser as a teacher rather than a partner. In these cases, reporting the abuse is seen as being ungrateful. Victims who are outsiders in a neighborhood face even more trouble because the neighbors have known the abuser their whole lives. Instead of helping the victim, the community protects the person they know, leaving the victim isolated and without any help.

The research shows that abuse is excused because people feel a debt to an abuser who provides financial support. At the same time, tight-knit neighborhoods protect these abusers to keep the peace, which leaves victims trapped and unable to use the law. As long as money is seen as a valid excuse for control, and as long as community loyalty outweighs victim safety, legal protections will remain useless symbols rather than actual tools for justice. This requires community-led programs that redefine support and prioritize victim safety over neighborhood reputation, ensuring the legal system can finally reach those who need it.

Many men feel that because they earn money for the family, they have the right to control or hurt their family members. According to Ofreneo (2023), this belief acts like a shield that lets men claim they are just acting as the head of the house, even when they are being violent. This links to what Jewkes et al. (2021) call the provider-corrector complex, where a man thinks that being the breadwinner gives him the power to correct or punish those he supports. Victims are made to feel guilty if they speak up, as if they should be thankful for the guidance their abuser is giving them. Victor et al. (2021) explains that when a community

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treats a relationship like a teacher and student rather than partners, it becomes very hard to report abuse. People view complaining not as seeking justice, but as betraying a mentor.

### ***Prioritization of family honor***

This theme revolves around the fear of public scandal and the heavy burden of maintaining a perfect family image. The responses provided by the victims reveal a deeply rooted cultural phenomenon in the country where social perception and face-saving act as systemic barriers to legal justice.

For instance, LE1 notes that, *"Seeking legal help is viewed as destroying the family's honor, so it feels better to suffer in silence"*.

This pressure to preserve an image is further exacerbated by societal values, as LE4 explains: *"The belief that a family's success is measured by their wealth and beauty as seen from the outside. If I post a complaint or file a case, people will say that the image we've built has gone to waste"*.

Beyond the fear of destroying family honor another common deterrent is the label of being troublesome and the misconception that legal steps are only for the wealthy.

T4 describes that, *"Reporting past abuse is seen as being scandalous or stirring up trouble over something that is already over"*. Similarly, T2 shares, *"The belief that annulment is only for the wealthy. Because of this, they view my filing for one as overreacting."*

For many people, the fear of what others might think is a huge wall that stops them from seeking help in abusive marriages. In families that value honor and looking perfect to the public, keeping up a wealthy and successful image is treated as more important than an individual's safety (LE1, LE4). This forces victims to suffer in silence because going to court is seen as a way of shaming the family's dignity. On top of this, there is a harsh social stigma:

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victims who try to get legal help are insulted as being "eskandalosa" (T4) or told they are overacting (T2). These labels brush off real pain as if it's just a social bother and wrongly make people feel that legal rights, like annulment, are only for the rich instead of being a tool for everyone's protection.

This implies that when a legal system is only accessible to a few, it loses its power and its moral authority. If the average person feels that the law cannot or will not protect them without destroying their social life, they will stop reporting crimes altogether. This leads to a society where cycles of abuse and injustice continue in secret, and the law becomes an empty promise that exists on paper but has no impact on real life. Government need to train legal professionals and police to handle cases with radical empathy so that victims don't feel dismissed when they come forward. Additionally, public awareness campaigns are needed to shift the culture away from victim-shaming. By lowering the social cost of seeking justice, they can ensure that the legal system functions as a universal tool for protection rather than an exclusive club for the elite.

In these communities, people care more about how they look to others than about keeping everyone safe. This happens because, as Cleofas (2023) explains, a Filipino family is like a group project where the family's overall reputation, or *dangal*, is seen as more important than the health or safety of one person. The pressure to fit in goes even further because victims are afraid that if they speak up, they will be called troublemakers. This is what Zamani et al. (2023) call social devaluation. By labeling those who have been hurt as people who just cause trouble, the community uses shame as a weapon to force them to stay quiet.

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## ***Spiritual obligation***

These responses are driven by the belief that marriage is a divine or unbreakable bond that must be endured as a spiritual trial. The safety of a survivor is not just threatened by the abuser, but by a cultural landscape that views separation as a failure and violence as a misunderstanding. A common thread between both victims is the systemic pressure to preserve the relationship at all costs, regardless of the danger involved.

L3 highlights a prevalent fatalistic mindset, noting, *"The belief that 'In the end, you'll still end up together' is common here, which is why breakups aren't taken seriously"*.

This mirrors the religious rigidity mentioned by L5, who cited a biblical mandate, and explains, *"What God has joined together, let no man put asunder." This is the law here in our community. Violence is viewed merely as a trial from Heaven that should be prayed over instead of reported to the police"*.

The data shows that many people view relationships as something that can never truly end, driven by two main ideas: fate and faith. For L3, breakups aren't seen as serious because of a belief in destiny. While this sounds romantic, it becomes more rigid when mixed with religion. L5 explains that because marriage is seen as a command from God, it is an absolute law that cannot be broken. This mindset leads people to choose spiritual endurance over actual help. Both respondents suggest that getting a legal separation or outside intervention is wrong. For L5, this is especially dangerous because it turns domestic abuse into a test from heaven. Instead of reporting violence to the police, victims are told to pray and endure the pain. These views value the holiness of the marriage more than the safety of the people in it, making it feel culturally and spiritually impossible to leave.

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The research shows that deeply held cultural and religious beliefs stop people from seeking legal help. Because victims value spiritual endurance more than physical safety, laws like RA 9262 are ignored. Having good laws is not enough to protect people if those laws clash with their personal faith. The government and legal advocates should partner with local religious leaders to reframe legal protection as something that supports, rather than contradicts, spiritual well-being. They need to create faith-based legal advocacy where religious teachings are used to support the idea that physical safety is a moral necessity. This way, seeking justice feels like an act of faith rather than a betrayal of it.

According to a study by Giesbrecht and Sevcik (2020), many religious women stay with their partners because they believe their suffering is a test from God or a spiritual duty they must endure. This matches the situation in the Philippines, where Pamaranglas (2023) explains that the strong Catholic belief that marriage can never be broken keeps women from seeking a separation. Because there is no divorce in the country, many women feel forced to keep the peace in the family even if they are in danger.

### ***Prioritization of personal safety***

This theme represents the transition from cultural victimhood to exercising legal rights. The law provides the necessary courage for individuals to dismantle oppressive cultural narratives.

*This shift in perspective is best illustrated by LE5, who shared, "A new realization is emerging—that women finally have rights. Before, I was afraid of tradition, but when I file for legal separation, I understood that harmful customs should not be an obstacle to my safety".*

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The way LE5's perspective changes show a powerful journey from feeling trapped to feeling empowered. At first, LE5 was afraid of tradition, meaning that old customs and social rules felt like a cage that kept them silent and stuck. Everything changed because she files for legal separation. This did more than just offer legal help; it gave LE5 a new way to think. It helped them realize that what was happening wasn't just a private family matter or a tradition, but a clear violation of their rights. LE5 understood that no custom or tradition is more important than a person's safety. They realized that if a tradition causes harm, it shouldn't stand in the way of being safe and protected.

The current situation reveals a misunderstanding: people aren't avoiding the law because they honestly believe their cultural traditions carry more authority than the legal system. This implies that as long as this belief exists, the law remain exists in books but has zero power to protect real people. If victims continue to prioritize cultural silence over their own legal rights, the cycle of abuse will stay hidden, and the justice system will continue to fail the very people it was designed to save. The required action is to launch community-led education programs that reframe legal protection as a tool that supports their community. They need to move the focus towards using the law to ensure the culture is safe for everyone. This means working with local leaders to teach victims that their personal safety is the foundation upon which their community is built, making it their highest priority.

According to Aguilar and De Castro (2023), the law empowers victims by helping them realize they aren't forced to stay in abusive situations. This change isn't just happening locally; it reflects a worldwide movement. RSIS International (2026) explains that clear laws are

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necessary to break down the cultural rules that let domestic violence continue. When we stop treating violence as a private family matter and start treating it as a public crime, we create the best path for keeping victims safe and changing society for the better.

#### **d. Economic conditions**

Economic and financial stability are also part of the deciding factors between remaining in an abusive home and seeking justice. In our country, the lack of immediate pocket money for transportation to the precinct or the fear of losing the family's sole breadwinner keeps many victims silent.

#### ***Enforced economic mobility***

This theme focuses on survivors whose primary obstacle is the lack of personal funds for daily needs like food, shelter, and transportation. These narratives explain that financial instability and economic abuse act as the invisible chains that trap victims in abusive relationships. While legal protections like the VAWC desk exist, they are rendered inaccessible when the victim lacks the liquid capital (money for fare, food, or basic survival) to initiate the process.

For many, the lack of financial independence is the primary barrier to seeking justice, as evidenced by L2, who noted, *"I have no savings, not even a single peso. Filing a case requires money for transportation and daily expenses; I don't have that, which is why I am tied down here"*.

This desperation is further underscored by the basic need for survival; T1 admitted by stating *"Every time I try to leave, I experience extreme hardship. When I go back to him, there is food again. It is hunger that keeps driving me back to him"*. While T3 described the total loss of

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autonomy: *"He is in control of my salary. I don't have any cash on hand to escape or to file a report".*

The struggle is not just financial but social. Victim faces the social pressure that the community views the abuser as a provider rather than a perpetrator.

This dynamic is described by LE2, who explained, *"He is the one who gave me everything I have. Filing a case is seen by others as biting the hand that feeds me".*

In contrast, LE5 provides a blueprint for breaking the cycle as she shares, *"Before, I thought I couldn't make it. But when I got a small loan from the cooperative, that's where I found the courage to fight back."*

Financial dependency is a trap that makes it nearly impossible for people to leave abusive situations. For many, like L2 and T3, the problem isn't just a general lack of money; it's that their abusers take direct control of their paychecks. This leaves them without even the small amount of cash needed for basic steps toward freedom, such as paying for a bus ride or legal filing fees. This economic paralysis is made worse by the struggle for survival. For example, T1 shows how the urgent need to find food outweighs the desire for safety. Furthermore, LE2 points out a social trap where the community expects victims to be grateful for the abuser's financial support, which pressures them to stay silent. However, the story of LE5 offers hope. By getting a loan through a local cooperative, LE5 gained the financial independence needed to stop just surviving and start fighting back. This proves that having your own money is often the first and most important step toward taking legal action and finding safety.

Legal protection is currently failing because it treats domestic violence as a purely judicial issue rather than a financial one. This means that even the strongest restraining orders

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are effectively useless if a victim cannot afford a place to sleep or food for their children.

Consequently, the legal system unintentionally reinforcing the abuser's power by leaving the victim with no choice but to return to the person who harmed them. The government must provide victims with instant, emergency funds the moment they file a report so they can secure housing and essentials and build local networks that offer job placement and long-term financial literacy.

According to Kaittila et al. (2022), when someone relies on another person for money, they feel they cannot ask for help or justice because they depend on that person for survival. This creates an invisible chain, especially when an abuser takes control of all the money earned by their partner. This kind of financial sabotage, as noted by Lanchimba et al. (2023), leaves victims feeling paralyzed because they do not have the cash needed to get away, find a safe place to stay, or hire a lawyer. Things get even harder because of social pressure. Research by Consignado et al. (2022) shows that in the Philippines, victims are told to stay quiet, especially if the person hurting them is the one earning the family's income. Because the community sees the abuser as a provider or helper, victims are pressured to put the family's money concerns ahead of their own physical safety. This expectation forces many people to stay in abusive situations just to keep the household running, which keeps the cycle of silence going.

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## ***Weaponization of financial dependence***

This theme centers on the fear that legal action will lead to the withdrawal of child support, tuition, or basic needs for the children. The responses the victims highlight a common, heartbreaking reality: economic dependency is being used as a weapon to silence victims of abuse. Legal and social protection systems are currently failing to address the financial barrier to justice.

T4 articulates this fear by stating, *"I am afraid to file a case because he might get even angrier and stop providing for the children, even if it's just a tiny amount"*.

This weaponization of resources is echoed by LE3, who explains, *"Every time I try to file a report, he reduces the financial support. He uses money as a punishment' whenever I seek protection"*.

L1 captures the heart-wrenching trade-off between safety and stability, questioning, *"He is the one sending the children to school. If I file a case and he gets imprisoned, who will pay the tuition?"*

The fear of getting back at someone isn't just about physical hurt; it's built into the way life is set up. Many victims stay silent because perpetrators use money as a weapon to keep control. For example, T4 shared the constant fear that even the smallest bit of financial help would be cut off entirely if a case was filed, showing how the threat of poverty alone acts as a muzzle. This isn't just a theory; LE3 confirmed that abusers actually carry out these threats, intentionally reducing child support as a punishment for seeking help. As L1 explained, victims are forced into a heartbreaking choice between survival and justice. They give up their legal rights because they know that if the provider goes to jail, the children will lose their chance at an education, and the family will have no way to eat.

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Because abusers use money and housing as tools for control, the legal system currently functions as a gatekeeper that only those with independent wealth can pass through. The justice system is unintentionally reinforcing a poverty trap, where legal rights exist on paper but are physically and financially impossible for low-income victims to exercise. The government and legal institutions need to provide survival bridge funding. This means that the moment a case is filed, the state must provide immediate, guaranteed access to independent housing, food stipends, and childcare support. By decoupling a family's basic needs from the outcome of a court case, they remove the abuser's primary weapon of control and finally make the pursuit of justice a realistic option for everyone, regardless of their bank balance.

Many people who have survived abuse are afraid to ask for help because they worry about losing the money they need to live. This is what experts call economic abuse. According to Kaittila et al. (2022), abusers control all the money as a way to keep their victims trapped and isolated, making it much harder for them to reach out for support. In the Philippines, this problem is even tougher when the person causing the harm is the one earning all the family's money. Alaman and Aurelio (2023) call this a structural trap. Because the family depends on the abuser's income to survive, victims feel like they have to stay silent. They know that reporting the abuse might cause the family to lose their only source of income and fall into deep poverty.

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## ***Financial instability***

This theme highlights the prohibitive cost of lawyers, the slow pace of the justice system, and the loss of existing legal benefits. Based on the responses of the victim, financial instability and a lack of trust in institutional efficiency act as significant barriers to seeking justice. Even when victims are aware of their rights and the available resources, practical survival needs and systemic skepticism outweigh the motivation to pursue legal action.

L4 articulated this painful dilemma by stating, *"Filing a case is expensive and takes a long time. I would rather spend the money on milk for my child than on paying a lawyer to handle the case"*.

This exhaustion of resources is further echoed by T2, who described the compounded burden of multiple legal processes: *"My money has been drained by the annulment. Adding a VAWC (Violence Against Women and Their Children) case feels like digging my own grave because of the hardship it entails"*.

Beyond just the cost of a lawyer, there is a fear of losing existing support systems.

This is exemplified by LE1, noting, *"I am afraid of losing my benefits as a spouse such as PhilHealth and insurance if I file a lawsuit and things get messy"*.

Financial barriers make it incredibly hard for victims to seek justice. For many, it starts with a choice between survival and the law; as L4 points out, the money needed for a lawyer is the same money needed to buy milk for her child. Beyond just the initial cost, the process itself can be exhausting. T2 shared that after spending everything on a previous annulment, starting a new legal case felt like digging her own grave because she had no financial resources left to give. Finally, there is the fear of losing basic security. LE1 explained that pursuing a case could mean losing access to her husband's PhilHealth and insurance benefits.

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This leaves victims stuck, fearing that seeking a legal remedy will actually destroy the healthcare and financial safety nets they need to survive.

While laws like RA 9262 exist to protect survivors, they are essentially locked behind a financial wall. The implication is that legal protection is currently a privilege of the wealthy, because a survivor who depends on their abuser for money cannot afford to use the law. The government could create a system where a survivor can access financial aid, health insurance, and legal help that is not connected to their partner's job or income. Specifically, the state should fund legal aid subsidies—essentially making lawyers free for survivors—and provide direct economic support so that leaving an abuser does not mean entering poverty. The law must be paired with a financial exit ramp to be truly functional.

Adams et al. (2020) explain that the legal system is too difficult and overwhelming for survivors to navigate. Because of this, many people are forced into a heartbreaking choice: they must decide between staying safe or having enough money to live. This situation gets even worse because legal fees can be incredibly expensive and financially damaging. These findings match Tadiar's (2021) research about the justice gap in the Philippines, which shows that for people who are already struggling, the legal system is basically off-limits because they simply cannot afford the high costs.

### ***Weaponization basic survival needs***

This theme deals with external influences like family, religion, reputation, and the complexities of shared assets. Economic dependence acts as the primary tool for silencing

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victims and perpetuating abuse. The victims are paralyzed by the threat of losing their basic needs if legal action is taken.

*As L3 shared, "He is using money to blackmail me. He says he will stop paying for the room I'm renting if I report him", and T5 echoed this sentiment, stating, "We don't have our own money; both of us rely on his parents. If I file a case against him, his family will stop supporting us".*

For those with more established lives, the fear shifts to total loss of status and shelter.

*L5 expressed the terrifying uncertainty, noting, "Our assets are all in his name. If I file a case, I might end up with nothing and find myself out on the streets". While LE4 reflected on the professional fallout, explaining, "My career is tied to him. If I file a case, it'll ruin our business image and we'll both lose our income".*

The responses shows that abusers use money as a weapon to keep victims quiet and avoid legal trouble. For some, like L3 and T5, the threat is a matter of basic survival; their abusers hold food and housing over their heads like ransom to prevent them from reporting the abuse. However, this control isn't only used against those with very little. People with more resources, like L5 and LE4, face a different kind of pressure where the abuser threatens to take away their assets or ruin their careers. Whether it is the fear of losing a home because the abuser's name is on the deed (L5) or losing a business because of shared finances (LE4), the abuser intentionally mixes their money with the victims to make leaving feel impossible. Many victims see going to court not as a way to get safe, but as a fast track to losing everything they own.

When a legal system ignores the fact that a victim might lose their home or entire income by filing a report, it stops being a tool for safety. Instead, the law becomes a luxury

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that only the financially stable can afford. The justice system is unintentionally gatekeeping safety, effectively telling low-income victims that protection is a risk they must be rich enough to take. The legal process could be integrated with immediate economic safeguards. This includes mandatory emergency financial assistance, immediate access to transitional housing, and employment protection the moment a case is filed. The legal framework should be redesigned so that filing a case trigger not just a police response, but a financial safety net that ensures a victim does not have to choose between their safety and their survival.

Many people who are being mistreated stay quiet because they are terrified of losing their homes or the money they need to survive. This is a common tactic, as Postmus et al. (2020) point out that abusers use money as a weapon to keep total control over their victims and trap them in the relationship. This problem becomes even harder when a person feels they might lose everything they have worked for. According to Villarino and Villarino (2023), the legal system in the Philippines can actually make things worse for these victims. Because a victim's job or income is tied to their abuser, trying to get justice can feel like an act of financial suicide, leaving them with no choice but to stay.

#### 4. Victim's perception of Legal Process

The legal process in our country for VAWC (RA 9262) is designed to be protective, but survivors perceive a gap between the law and its implementation. These responses reflect a mix of hope, skepticism, and the reality of navigating the justice system.

#### *Systemic failure*

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On this theme are the responses of the victims about their perception that authorities treat domestic violence as a private family matter to be settled through reconciliation rather than legal accountability. Victims expressed that being forced to talk to their abusers in the barangay only leads to further intimidation, as officials fail to recognize the manipulation and power dynamics at play.

As LE3 expressed, *"We were enforced to talk at the barangay, and that's where he intimidated me even more just by the way he looked at me. I doubt whether the Kagawad in charge of our Barangay VAW (Violence Against Women) desk even understands the manipulation my husband is doing"*.

This sentiment of inadequate protection is echoed by L1, who noted, *"I have a neighbor who filed a complaint, but the barangay just sent them home because they said it's just a family matter anyway"*.

This cultural pressure is further aggravated by the influence of community leaders, as shared by L5: *"My cousin filed a case, but the elders in the barangay stopped her, saying it would ruin the family's reputation"*.

These victims feel let down not only by local officials but also by broader social services, which many perceive as performative rather than protective.

T5 captured this disappointment perfectly by stating *"I thought social services would take me in and get me away from the trouble, but it feels like all they do is conduct interviews"*.

The data shows a major breakdown in how barangay handle domestic violence. Instead of focusing on safety, barangay officials force victims to sit down and work things out with their abusers. This is dangerous because it ignores the power the abuser holds; for example, LE3 described being forced to speak while their abuser used threatening stares to keep them quiet, a tactic that staff at the VAW desk completely missed. This problem is made worse by a culture that values family reputation over individual safety. Respondents L1 and

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L5 shared that their cries for help were either ignored as private family matters or silenced by elders who didn't want to bring shame to the family name.

Because barangay officials treat these crimes as private family disputes, the community support system actually becomes a barrier to justice. As local practices ignore the criminal nature of domestic abuse, the legal protections guaranteed by national law will remain unreachable for the women who need them most. This creates a cycle where victims lose trust in the government, leading to underreporting and potentially fatal escalations of violence that the state is then unable to prevent. The barangay officials must need training to recognize physical or repeated psychological abuse. So that these cases should be automatically referred to the police or specialized social workers. The community also needs programs that reframe domestic violence as a public crime rather than a private shame, reducing the reputation pressure that keeps victims silent.

There is a big gap between the help that barangay officials offer and what victims of abuse actually need. As Hess and Romkens (2021) point out, it is a major mistake to force victims to make up with their abusers, as this shows a misunderstanding of how dangerous and controlling abusive relationships really are. This problem is made even worse by the local culture found in many barangays, which Aguirre and Delos Reyes (2022) studied. These leaders and elders are more concerned with keeping a family together than with the safety of the individual, which leads them to downplay or completely ignore reports of abuse.

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## ***Systemic crisis of confidence***

The belief that justice is a luxury accessible only to those with money, status, or political connections. The responses provided by the victims reveal a distrust in the legal and judicial system, driven by the belief that justice is a privilege reserved for the wealthy and well-connected rather than a basic right.

Expressing this frustration, L2 noted, *"In my view, justice is only for those who can afford a lawyer. If you don't have money, your case will take forever"*. This sentiment is echoed by LE2, who shared, *"I've seen cases here where the wealthy always win, even when the evidence is clear"*.

This fear of inequality is further compounded by the influence of personal connections and corruption as described by T3: *"Since I'm new here, I feel like the authorities are on his side because they all know each other. I've seen him drinking with some of the barangay officials, so I've lost trust"*.

The feedback from the participants shows that they simply do not trust the legal system because it seems to favor the rich and powerful. For example, L2 and LE2 both point out that getting justice depends on how much money you have; L2 mentions that cases take forever if you are poor, while LE2 fears that wealthy people use their connections to change the facts of a case. This feeling is backed up by T3, who describes a culture where officials and the accused are so close, even drinking together, that the authorities no longer seem fair. These stories show that these people see justice as something you have to buy or be well-connected to get, rather than a right that belongs to everyone.

When barangay leaders play favorites or social status is used to twist the truth, the law exists only on paper. Because of this, when a victim chooses not to report a crime, they

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are making a smart, calculated choice to protect themselves from a system they know is rigged. This creates a dangerous cycle where the law loses all its power because no one trusts it to actually work. The local authorities may build safe and anonymous ways to report crimes so that social hierarchies cannot be used to intimidate people.

Many victims are starting to feel that justice is something you have to buy, meaning it is only available to the rich. A 2026 report from the World Justice Project confirms this, explaining that because legal processes are so expensive, poor people cannot access them. This unfairness is made worse by findings from a 2025 study by the Ateneo Human Rights Center (AHRC), which points out that poverty makes these gaps in the justice system even wider. The AHRC also explains that when government officials care more about their own interests or helping their friends than doing their jobs properly, people stop believing that the law will protect them. In the end, for those who are struggling, the law no longer feels like a tool for protection; instead, it feels like a weapon that only works for people who have lots of money or the right powerful connections.

### ***Systemic inefficiency and complexity***

The exhaustion caused by slow court dates, excessive paperwork, and the long-term struggle for legal resolution. Based on the responses of the victims, legal and social support systems in our country act as a secondary source of trauma for victims of abuse, rather than a sanctuary for justice.

*L4 shares, "I know someone who got so exhausted by how long the case was taking that she just gave up and withdrew the complaint".*

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Similarly, T2 reveals the personal stakes involved, stating, *"I am currently in court for an annulment, and I see how difficult the process is. I am afraid that the VAWC case might affect my fight for custody of the children"*.

This sentiment is further echoed by LE1, who describes the overwhelming nature of the process: *"There are too many requirements and paperwork. For a victim who is already exhausted, it's demoralizing to face the system"*.

The responses from L4, T2, and LE1 all point to a harsh reality: for many victims, the legal system feels more like a test of endurance than a source of safety. L4 explains that court cases take so long that victims eventually run out of energy and give up, showing that extreme delays can kill a case before it ever reaches a conclusion. LE1 adds to this by describing how the mountain of paperwork and complicated rules act as a wall, draining the spirit of people who are already exhausted from abuse. Finally, T2 highlights the impossible choices victims face, such as fearing that fighting for justice in a criminal case might accidentally ruin their chances of keeping their children in a custody battle. Together, these experiences show a system where the process itself becomes a secondary form of trauma.

The current legal system is so slow and complicated that it actually protects the cycle of abuse instead of the victims. Legal rights are essentially meaningless if the process of claiming them is traumatizing or impossible. If the government does not immediately simplify court procedures and speed up case timelines, it will be responsible for a permanent decline in public safety, as victims will stop reporting crimes entirely. Institutions should prioritize fast-track legal paths for domestic and personal violence cases to ensure justice happens quickly enough to actually protect the person involved.

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The legal system can feel like it is built to wear people down until they run out of money, time, and hope. Tadiar (2020) calls this litigation fatigue in the Philippine courts, where legal cases drag on for so long that people eventually give up on justice because they are too tired to keep waiting. On top of the long waits, the system itself can actually be harmful. Sullivan et al. (2022) explain that going through these complicated legal steps causes secondary injury. This means that the confusing rules, strict requirements, and mountains of paperwork do more than just create extra work; they cause further emotional pain to people who are already suffering and looking for help.

### ***Systemic secondary victimization***

The fear that authorities can only help inside the station, leaving the victim vulnerable to retaliation once they leave. The combined experiences of the victims imply that legal protections for victims of domestic violence (such as RA 9262) are undermined by the inconsistent and desensitized behavior of the people tasked with enforcing them.

For instance, L3 noted the performative nature of abusers, stating, *"I tried calling the police before, but when they arrived, my husband acted kind, so they didn't take him away"*.

This issue is compounded by victim-blaming attitudes, as highlighted by T4, who shared, *"I have a friend who, when she went to file a report, was actually asked by the police, 'What did you do to make them angry?'"*

Furthermore, the cycle of abuse and the complexity of these relationships lead to administrative fatigue, which authorities frequently misinterpret as a waste of resources.

This is evident in T1's account: *"I feel like the police are already annoyed with me because I've reported it several times, only to withdraw"*

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*the complaint whenever we make up. One officer even told me not to waste their time if we're just going to end up back together anyway."*

The data shows that the police and other authorities fail to help victims of domestic violence because they focus on outward appearances instead of following safety rules. In the case of L3, officers ignored the victim's cry for help simply because the abuser acted nice when they arrived. For T4, the authorities actually blamed the victim, suggesting they were the one who caused the trouble. This lack of support is made worse by officers who seem tired of their jobs; for instance, T1 was told they were wasting time, showing that police can be hostile toward victims who return to difficult situations. These stories show that survivors often stop asking for help because they are more afraid of being judged or shamed by the system than they are of their abusers.

When people feel the law is indifferent to their pain, they stop seeking help, which allows cycles of violence to continue unchecked. This implies that if victims don't report crimes, the law becomes a set of empty promises, and the community becomes less safe for everyone. The local authorities need to implement mandatory, empathy-based de-escalation training and provide mental health support for officers to prevent the burnout that leads to indifference. Only by changing the internal culture of policing can we turn the legal system back into a sanctuary for those in need.

When violence becomes a common part of daily life, it builds a culture where institutions stop caring or paying close attention to it, as Tancinco (2021) points out. In this environment, people who survive abuse face secondary victimization, which is when the

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systems meant to protect them end up hurting them again. This problem gets worse because officials are not trained to spot how abusers use specific tactics to control how victims and others see the danger. Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) explain that abusers carefully manipulate these threats to stay in control. Because of all this, many institutions start treating domestic abuse like a small, annoying problem that can be ignored, rather than the serious crime that actually requires immediate, protective action.

### ***Systemic unpredictability***

Issues regarding digital abuse and the rare instances where the system actually works. The core connection between these responses lies in the unpredictability of institutional response, which dictates whether a victim finds safety or further trauma.

LE4 points out a critical gap in the system's ability to address modern threats: *"I know a victim who, when they reported online harassment, was just laughed at and told to just block them"*.

In contrast, LE5 emphasizes that while the system is flawed, there are still pockets of excellence: *"Now that I've gone through the system, I can say that there are good people in social services, you just have to find them"*.

The current situation in the Philippine justice system is a luck-of-the-draw experience for victims. On one side, some officers downplay serious issues, as seen with LE4, who was simply told to just block an online harasser. This reaction ignores the legal seriousness of digital threats and forces the victim to handle their own safety. On the other hand, LE5 had a much better experience thanks some social services. This success happened because they met empathetic officers who actually believed and supported them, proving that specialized

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units can work well. However, because not all officers are trained this way, the quality of help a victim gets depends more on who they happen to talk to rather than a reliable, fair system.

Because officers currently rely on their own judgment rather than standardized training, many victims are afraid to come forward because they expect a negative reaction. This means the legal system is failing to provide equal protection to everyone. If this continues, this may imply that the community will lose all trust in the police, and many crimes will go unreported and unpunished. The department should implement mandatory, system-wide training that replaces individual guesswork with clear, supportive procedures for every officer.

Some police officers treat online harassment like it is just a small annoyance, failing to realize it can lead to real-life physical danger. This downplaying of digital harm is a big problem, as Hohl and Johnson (2024) point out. On the other hand, many victims feel much better after talking to the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD). As Tanhueco-Tumapon (2021) explains, this happens because our justice system has pockets of excellence—specific teams that are trained to handle sensitive situations with the care and speed that they truly need.

## 5. Develop a Victim Support and Empowerment Program

The researcher proposes a victim support and empowerment program, entitled “LAKAS-Pamilya: Paglaya, Pagbangon, at Pagkalinga” (“Strength of the Family: Liberation, Recovery, and Care”). This program is designed specifically for the barangay level to bridge

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the gap between knowing the law and feeling safe enough to use it. The goal of this program is to transform the Barangay into a proactive safety net where survivors are not just identified but are economically and psychologically supported to break the cycle of violence.

The program includes different pillars and activities such as psychological & social reframing, economic independence and legal literacy and justice navigation. Through program, local barangay may transform from a passive observer into an active, protective network that prioritizes the victim's safety and economic autonomy over traditional social preservation.

## Conclusions

This study on the victims' refusing to file VAW cases in the Province of Albay from 2022 to 2024 provides an analysis that addresses the study's objective. Legazpi City recorded the highest incidence of non-filing, specifically among married women over 30 with high school education. Most women who refused to file were housewives who depended on their partners for financial support.

The analysis of victim-offender relationships illustrates that abuse is sustained through systemic control, including financial manipulation and the exploitation of children as leverage. The cycle of abuse is reinforced by family members who prioritize the preservation of the family image over the victim's safety. Therefore, the home becomes a site of confinement where victims experience a loss of autonomy and enduring psychological trauma.

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Underlying the decision not to file are deep emotional, social, and economic barriers. Emotional manipulation by abusers convinces victims that reporting would destroy their families, while cultural and religious pressures instill a fear of community judgment. These personal struggles, intensified by the perception that the legal system is financially inaccessible, create an environment where the perceived risks of seeking justice outweigh the potential benefits.

The study further identifies that a victim's perception of the legal system serves as a significant hurdle. Many survivors perceive the justice process as slow, expensive, and bureaucratic, failing to address modern forms of abuse like digital threats. The reliance on the subjective attitude of individual law enforcement officers rather than a consistent, victim-centered institutional response further discourages victims from initiating formal proceedings.

The study proposes the "LAKAS-Pamilya: Paglaya, Pagbangon, at Pagkalinga" ("Strength of the Family: Liberation, Recovery, and Care"). By focusing on psychological reframing, economic independence, and legal literacy, the initiative aims to shift the role of the Barangay from a passive observer to an active, protective network. This program prioritizes the victim's safety and economic autonomy, effectively dismantling the barriers that prevent survivors from breaking the cycle of violence.

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## Recommendations

The analysis of the underlying factors behind victims’ refusal to file VAW cases highlight the prevalence of the non-reporting. To address this, it is recommended that the following stakeholders take targeted actions:

1. Local Government Units could consider implementing a “No-Mediation” policy for physical abuse. By establishing that physical violence cases should not be settled or mediated at the barangay level, officials can ensure these crimes are treated with the necessary legal gravity. Barangay officials might be trained to prioritize the immediate issuance of a Barangay Protection Order (BPO) upon intake. LGUs could also allocate a portion of the Gender and Development (GAD) budget to a “Survivor’s Emergency Fund.” This would provide immediate assistance, such as transportation costs, grocery vouchers, and mobile credits. LGUs could partner with NGOs to maintain a confidential directory of safe houses that remain unknown to the general public or potential offenders.

2. The Philippine National Police could integrate mandatory training on trauma bonding for Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) officers. This would help officers recognize that withdrawing a case is often a symptom of trauma rather than a reason to dismiss future complaints. In addition to this, Public Attorney’s Office (PAO) might explore a “VAWC Fast-Track Lane” to reduce the mental and financial exhaustion of long waiting periods. Also, Trial Courts could consider automatically including supported supervision in Temporary Restraining

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Orders (TROs), ensuring abusers remain legally responsible for child support while the case is pending.

3. The Department of Social Welfare and Development and relevant Non-Government Organizations could transition from seminars to direct livelihood placement. Partnering with local businesses to prioritize hiring survivors can break the cycle of economic dependence on the abuser. These agencies might also promote the use of secure mobile tools that automatically upload audio or photo evidence to a cloud server, preventing abusers from destroying proof. Moreover, a community-wide campaign using the slogan “Hindi mo Kasalanan” (It’s not your fault) could be launched to counter traditional pressures that often demand silence.

4. Religious leaders could be encouraged to emphasize that sanctity cannot exist where there is cruelty, guiding their assemblies toward legal recourse rather than just reconciliation counseling. Community members could be trained to recognize signs of domestic violence and provided with anonymous reporting channels to flag emergencies without exposing the victim to immediate retaliation.

5. This study proposes the implementation of the “LAKAS-Pamilya: Paglaya, Pagbangon, at Pagkalinga” (Strength of the Family: Liberation, Recovery, and Care) program. This barangay-level initiative aims to bridge the gap between legal theory and victim safety. By transforming the barangay’s role from a passive observer into an active, protective network, the program prioritizes a victim’s autonomy and physical safety over traditional social

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preservation. It is suggested that this shift is essential to effectively breaking the cycle of violence within the Filipino family structure.



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