




## **Lived Experiences of Rape Victims in Criminal Justice Proceedings: Insights from a Regional Case Study**

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RESEARCH ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Received:</b> September 1, 2025  <b>Reviewed:</b> November 19, 2025  <b>Accepted:</b> December 20, 2025  <b>Published:</b> December 30, 2025</p> <p> Copyright © 2025 by the Author(s). This open-access article is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.</p>	<p>This study examined the lived experiences of rape victims during the Department of Justice (DOJ) proceedings as a regional case study in the Philippines, to identify challenges, assess the effectiveness of support mechanisms, and understand how these factors affected victims' trust in the justice system. Following a qualitative-exploratory research approach, the researchers interviewed seven rape victims who had first-hand experiences with the DOJ proceedings from 2018 to 2024, through personal and online semi-structured interviews. The data gathered were analyzed thematically, revealing key themes related to the study's objectives. The study found that rape victims who underwent the DOJ proceedings generally experienced respectful, supportive, and professional treatment from officials, which helped build their trust in the justice system. However, the victims encountered significant challenges such as lengthy case resolution due to delayed or rescheduled court hearings, emotional distress during testimonies, fear—especially during initial court appearances—and trauma caused by exposure to the accused in court. Support mechanisms, including shelters, counseling, legal assistance, financial aid, and family support, played a critical role in helping victims cope throughout the process. These mechanisms were largely effective in promoting healing and encouraging victims to continue pursuing justice, although gaps in trauma-informed practices and</p>

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system efficiency remained. Thus, reforms in the justice system are crucial for improving the experiences of rape victims who undergo legal proceedings. This includes promoting efficient case resolution, identifying the causes of delays, recognizing effective practices already in place, and highlighting areas where trauma-informed approaches can be further strengthened. In particular, ensuring that victims' psychological and emotional well-being remains a central concern throughout the legal process can help minimize the systemic and procedural challenges they experience.

**Keywords:** *rape victims, lived experiences, Department of Justice proceedings, legal process, support mechanisms*

### Introduction

The prevalence of rape around the world emphasizes its continuing presence as one of the human rights violations recorded for many years. According to the World Health Organization, one in three women, or around 736 million worldwide, are subjected to physical or sexual violence (WHO, 2021). Within the Philippines, rape ranks among the top five crimes, with the highest incidence rates of over 37,495 rape-related cases between 2020 and 2023 (Balita, 2024).

The justice system, particularly the Department of Justice (DOJ) in the Philippines, is responsible for dealing with these cases. It is an institution that investigates, prosecutes, and punishes those guilty of crimes, aiming to deliver justice and assist the victims. However, the effectiveness of the system largely depends on how the victims are treated throughout the legal process. The victims' strong determination to pursue justice is influenced by their interaction with the officials and other actors within the legal system. As Hohl et al. (2025) emphasized, victims are more likely to trust the justice system, remain committed to pursuing justice, and report future crimes when they perceive authorities as trustworthy, and when the system provides them with consistent encouragement and trauma-informed care (Hester & Lilley, 2018) contributing to the healing process of the victims. Similarly, the criminal justice system plays a crucial role in victims' recovery by recognizing their rights, ensuring their protection throughout the case, and offering them counseling and therapy, and other necessary assistance and services, allowing them to restore their emotional well-being (Kunst et al., 2014).

Despite these, several studies revealed significant procedural and systemic barriers within the Philippine Justice System. Rivero and Tionko (2021) emphasized that evidence-gathering and victim protection measures remain inadequate to support the victims fully. These challenges are further compounded by the very slow, costly, and often complicated legal process (Lim-Jardeleza, 2014), posing additional burdens to victims who are seeking justice. Moreover, according to Boateng and Abess (2017), victims are continuously disregarded and insufficiently supported at every stage of the criminal process. This is because most legal systems fail to understand the social,

emotional, and psychological dimensions of rape, resulting in deficiencies in the delivery of justice (Carline et al., 2020).

Victims' interactions with various agencies within the system often lead to retraumatization (Jordan, 2015). The police interviews, rude and insensitive questioning, delays in trials, stigmatization, and lack of post-trial support contribute to secondary victimization which retraumatizes the victims (Burman et al., 2021), severely affecting their mental and emotional states, often leading them to withdraw from the legal process (Lorenz et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2022; Sleath & Bull, 2017; Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Moreover, fear, guilt, and shame during and after the abuse further discourage the victims from reporting their experiences or even continuing with their cases (Quing, 2021).

On the other hand, studies show that when victims' experiences are heard and validated, their trust in the system strengthens, which encourages their greater participation and cooperation within the system (Herman, 2023), implying the importance of trauma-informed processes within the system. McKenna and Holtfreter (2021) highlighted that trauma-informed courts implement person-centered approaches that acknowledge victims' histories of trauma and integrate these insights into procedural practices to promote healing and engagement and avoid further traumatization and secondary victimization on the part of the victim. However, this trust is easily undermined by the inefficiencies in the judicial process. As Otano (2020) argued, the delayed criminal justice process, which often is due to postponed or rescheduled hearings, posed significant stress and anxiety to both defendants and victims. For victims, efficient proceedings are particularly crucial as they have already suffered significantly from the crime itself. Once the criminal justice system becomes involved, they are at risk of secondary trauma, which is made worse by delays in the case (Burman et al., 2021).

Recognizing these concerns, reforms have been made within the Philippine justice system. The DOJ launched the Training and Education Program for Law Enforcement Officers (TEPLEO) in 2024, which improved the coordination between law enforcers and prosecutors during the case build-up to ensure that evidence is gathered in a manner likely to lead to a conviction (Bacelonia, 2024). As a result, 94% of the 21,423 rape cases that went to court in 2023 were resolved, marking notable progress in the system. Nevertheless, despite this progress, the problem of anti-online sexual abuse or exploitation of children (OSAEC), particularly in incestuous rape, has worsened, affecting about 500,000 individuals (Bacelonia, 2024).

Given this staggering number of victims, many are likely to undergo the DOJ proceedings and experience similar challenges in their pursuit of justice in the Philippines. While existing literatures have examined systemic issues and challenges, there remains a significant gap in the experiences of rape victims throughout the DOJ proceedings in the Philippines, particularly at the regional level. Recognizing and upholding the rights of victims is important to ensure the delivery of justice (Das, 2023). As victims who are treated with respect and fairness (Hohl et al., 2025), they are more likely to have a positive perception of the outcome of their cases, and greater trust and hope in the justice system (Greenson et al., 2015). Although Lorenz et al. (2019) reported that interactions with the police and legal system often lead to secondary victimization, which discourages victims from continuing with their pursuit of justice, studies suggest that when trauma-informed, respectful, and efficient processes are implemented, victims remain engaged and committed to seeking justice.

Hence, this study examined the lived experiences of rape victims during the Department of Justice (DOJ) proceedings in Region 2, Philippines, to provide details on their experiences within the regional justice system and to contribute to the DOJ itself by revealing the efficiencies that need improvement in the system. This study sought to answer the following: (1) What are the lived experiences of rape victims during the DOJ proceedings in Region 2? (2) How do these experiences affect the victims' trust in the judicial system and their willingness to pursue justice? (3) What support mechanisms are available to rape victims during DOJ proceedings? (4) How effective are the support mechanisms in addressing their needs?

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative-exploratory research approach to reveal the processes that rape victims underwent during DOJ proceedings in Region 2, Philippines. This approach highlighted the victims' experiences and interactions with the justice system. The data was gathered through one-on-one interviews conducted online and in person using a semi-structured interview guide. The semi-structured interview guide, which consisted of open-ended questions, was validated by two Social Science researchers as experts.

### **Participants of the Study**

The respondents of this study were seven rape victims who had undergone the DOJ proceedings in Region 2, Philippines, from 2018 to 2024. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling. Among the seven respondents, two were minors aged 17 years old, while five were of legal age. All respondents were provided with informed consent, which was signed for their approval to participate in the study. For the minor respondents, informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians. Specifically, the consent form for one minor respondent was signed by her parent, while the consent form for the other minor respondent was signed by her guardian.

### **Data Gathering Procedures**

The researchers followed all the protocols needed in the conduct of the study. Permission was sought from the concerned authorities of the Department of Justice Region 2. Informed consent was also secured from the research participants. The interviews were conducted using two modes of communication: the personal communication, which involved in-person or face-to-face interviews with the respondents, and the online communication, which was conducted through the Messenger application. The mode of communication was determined based on the respondents' availability, location, and personal preference. Two respondents were interviewed online, while the remaining five were interviewed in person. Among the two minor respondents, one was interviewed online without the presence of the parent due to personal reasons, while the other was interviewed face-to-face under the supervision of the respondent's guardian.

Moreover, a combination of Filipino and English was used during the interviews to ensure that the respondents clearly understood the questions and were able to express their thoughts and experiences freely.

**Analysis of Data**

The interviews were all recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify the themes that answer the research questions. Thematic analysis (TA), according to Ahmed et. al. (2025), is one of the most widely used methods for analyzing qualitative data. It involves a process of coding data; the codes are then organized into themes, and relationships and patterns among these themes are identified (Jowsey et. al., 2021). An inductive approach was employed in the analysis, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data. Following the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), the transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to ensure familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated and subsequently grouped into broader themes, which were reviewed to ensure that they were accurate, relevant, and reflective of the respondents' narratives. Themes were refined and clearly defined, and the findings were presented in a structured narrative linking findings to the research question and related literature. Using thematic analysis, this study contributes new insights into the experiences of the rape victims and provides an understanding of what the respondents said, did, and experienced within the legal process.

**Ethical Considerations**

Given the sensitive nature of the study, which involved rape victims whose cases had been resolved through DOJ proceedings, several steps were taken to ensure the ethical integrity of the research. Informed consent forms, including details on the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, were provided to all participants. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

For those under 18, consent was obtained from a parent or legal guardian. To ensure anonymity, respondents were assigned aliases, and identifying information was removed or disguised. Access to the data was restricted to the researchers only, and all records were securely stored. The respondents were assured of confidentiality throughout the research process. Due to the potential emotional impact of the discussions, extra care was taken to ensure that participants were not harmed in any way. Furthermore, the researchers secured ethical clearance from ISU's IRB/Ethics Committee to ensure compliance with institutional ethical standards. By adhering to these ethical principles, the study safeguarded the rights, dignity, and emotional well-being of all participants.

**Results and Discussion**

This section presents the specific themes emerged during the analysis of the qualitative data which address the research objectives of the study.

**Lived Experiences of Victims during the Department of Justice Proceedings**

The lived experiences of the rape victims within the judicial system encompass the victims' interactions with the Department of Justice (DOJ) officials, including the manner of treatment they received, the challenges they encountered, and the effects of their involvement in the judicial process on their psychological and emotional well-being. From these experiences, four major themes have emerged that collectively describe the experiences of the victims throughout the DOJ proceedings: (1) Professional and Parent-Like Treatment, (2) Rescheduled and Delayed Hearing, (3) Fear and Nervousness Brought by the First Hearing, and (4) Psychological and Emotional Distress to Healing.

**Professional and Parent-Like Treatment**

According to Lorenz et al. (2019), victims who had interactions with the police and legal system experienced secondary victimization, which discouraged them from continuing their pursuit of justice; however, the respondents revealed otherwise. Respondents have shared that they had good and proper interactions with the DOJ officials because they were treated professionally and, in a parent-like manner, from the beginning to the end of their cases. Officials have shown commitment and willingness to help the respondents with their cases, as they were approachable and supportive.

Moreover, they also assured the respondents that they would get the justice they deserved and that it would be served accordingly. One respondent stated, *"The officials were approachable, and they ensured that justice would be served. They were truly supportive, especially to someone like me who had been abused. They gave assurance that something would happen with the case"* (Respondent 2, via Online Communication).

Likewise, the DOJ officials' treatment became the respondents' source of comfort and empowerment throughout the process because they were respectful and attentive toward the victims, like parents toward their children. One respondent shared, *"Maybe if I were to describe them, it is like they are parents, honestly, because they're not too formal, and the way they treat you is like you are their child"* (Respondent 3, via Online Communication).

Furthermore, people's perception of the legal system varies, given that not all individuals are aware of how the system works, especially for the victims who were minors at the time they underwent the DOJ proceedings, wherein their interactions with the officials could influence their cooperation with the system. The respondents described these interactions between the officials and victims as good and proper, which showed how the duties and responsibilities of the DOJ officials were properly executed. The officials were able to uphold the rights of victims, with how they treated them with empathy and professionalism, which brought comfort and empowerment to the victims and significantly helped them throughout the DOJ proceedings. Das (2023) emphasized that recognizing and upholding the rights of victims is important to ensure the delivery of justice. When they are treated with respect and fairness (Hohl et al., 2025), they are more likely to have a positive perception of the outcome of their cases, increasing their trust and hope in the justice system (Greenson et al., 2015).

**Rescheduled or Delayed Hearings**

On the other hand, challenges in their legal journey still existed. For the respondents, rescheduled or delayed court hearings were one of the challenges they encountered, which happened not only once but multiple times. Respondents revealed that these delays happened primarily due to the absence of the prosecutor or the judge during the trial. However, these delays were inevitable and would only happen in the meantime and continue eventually. As one respondent stated, *"Sometimes, especially when the fiscal is on vacation, or the judge is not around, that's why the hearing gets delayed. But afterward, it usually proceeds as scheduled"* (Respondent 4, via Personal Communication).

Despite that, respondents also emphasized the importance of patience in pursuing justice because it is a necessary quality that every person who demands fairness should possess, since problems happen within the process. When asked how these delays affected them, several respondents said that while the long waiting time before the next hearing was difficult and sometimes frustrating, it did not affect their decision to continue pursuing the case because they knew the trial would eventually

push through. A respondent shared that after the delay, she had to wait for a month for the next hearing. Likewise, another respondent expressed similar sentiments, noting that although delays did not stop her from pursuing justice, the waiting period between hearings made her feel impatient, as she had mentioned: *“No, not really. I was really willing to continue no matter how long it took. It’s just that I get a bit impatient when there were too many delays”* (Respondent 7, via Personal Communication).

On the other hand, one respondent shared that she became unresponsive upon knowing that the court hearing was delayed. As a result, she underwent counseling the following day. Moreover, this delay affected her willingness to continue pursuing justice due to the fear of losing the case and the stigma she had to face. As she has stated: *“I remember thinking at the time that I might lose the case or that they might say something bad about me”* (Respondent 1, via Online Communication). Nevertheless, after counseling, the respondent shared that she felt better and motivated to continue with the case.

The absence of the judge or prosecutor as key legal personnel, which caused delayed and rescheduled court hearings, impacted the victims differently. While some have remained optimistic throughout the process despite the exhausting and frustrating waiting time, one of the respondents was devastated, which led her to undergo counseling, and she became uncertain about continuing with the case. This procedural challenge may not have completely affected their willingness to pursue justice. However, they had to experience emotional burdens, which added to their stress. Moreover, they had to bear this stress to get the justice they wanted.

As Otano (2020) argued, when the criminal justice process is delayed, which often is due to postponed or rescheduled proceedings, both defendants and victims experience significant stress and anxiety. For victims, efficient proceedings are particularly crucial because they already suffer significantly from the crime itself. Once the criminal justice system becomes involved, they are at risk of secondary trauma, which is made worse by delays in the case (Burman et al., 2021). Considering these circumstances, institutional reform is necessary to improve the pace of the legal process and reduce unnecessary delays. This would lessen the psychological and emotional harm on the victims, thus improving their situation throughout the process. Nonetheless, these delays in the process did not affect them to the point that they had to withdraw from the case; this is also due to the immediate help and support provided by the officials whenever they needed it. The delays, instead, became a way for them to continue and fight for the justice they deserve.

### ***Fear and Nervousness Brought by the First Hearing***

Another challenge that some of the respondents experienced was during the first hearing. One respondent shared that because it was her first time testifying inside the court, it was challenging, and she admitted that she felt nervous and unsure about what questions would be asked and whether she could answer them correctly. As she mentioned:

*Challenge? Maybe, it was just during my first hearing. Of course, it was my first time to testify, and I did not really know what questions they would ask or if I would answer them correctly. I was so nervous.* (Respondent 6, via Personal Communication).

Additionally, another respondent shared that she was scared and worried during the first hearing. Despite this, she believed that the officials were there to guide her.

The presence of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty during the first court hearing was normal, especially for individuals who had never been exposed to a legal process before, like the victims. However, the emotional distress the victims had to experience could be brought by the pressure and burden to testify well inside the court, especially since they had already experienced trauma from the incident. This also shows that their initial involvement in court proceedings could be intimidating. Therefore, a trauma-informed system must be practiced wherein the well-being of the victims in court hearings is protected. According to McKenna and Holtfreter (2021), trauma-informed courts implement person-centered approaches that acknowledge victims' histories of trauma and integrate these insights into procedural practices to promote healing and engagement and avoid further traumatization and secondary victimization on the part of the victim. Consequently, when victims' experiences are heard and validated, their trust in the justice system strengthens, which encourages greater participation and cooperation within the system (Herman, 2023).

### **Psychological and Emotional Distress to Healing**

Consequently, the respondents' involvement in the DOJ proceedings had an impact on their emotional and psychological well-being. Initially, respondents perceived the justice system as weak and biased and were concerned about the possibility of being ignored and unheard. However, their direct engagement with the system gradually reshaped these perceptions. The data revealed that their involvement in the process triggered their range of emotional responses from anger, sadness, and anxiety to emotional and psychological healing. As stated by one respondent, *"In my situation, yes, literally, from my pre-trial up to the fourth hearing, I was extremely anxious, and I couldn't express myself properly. There were even times when I would scream"* (Respondent 3, via Online Communication).

Moreover, two respondents shared that the process was emotionally exhausting, especially during the hearings, wherein they got overwhelmed, scared, and anxious upon meeting the perpetrator inside the court. One respondent shared, *"There were times when I felt anxious during the hearings because whenever I saw the accused, that fear would come back"* (Respondent 2, via Online Communication).

On the other hand, the seven respondents revealed that they had found peace and healing within the DOJ proceedings. Based on their responses, the care and support they received from the social workers, house parents, fellow victims, the DOJ officials, and the process helped them throughout the case. Aside from that, the support, especially from their family and their faith, helped them get through the process.

One respondent shared that her emotional condition became lighter and more manageable when she was under the care of the DOJ compared to before. She recalled that it was more challenging to cope with back then because she had no one to talk to. However, once she entered the DOJ system, she met other victims who shared similar experiences, and that made her feel better. The DOJ also supported her through consultations, helping her open up about her condition. She shared:

*For me, things became lighter and more manageable compared to when I wasn't yet under their care. It was really hard to handle back then because I had no one to talk to. I could have consulted with someone before, but I didn't know anyone who had the same experience as I did, someone who was also a victim. So, I couldn't really open up. But it felt lighter when I got there and met others who were going through the same situation. They also helped me with the consultation, which made me open up more"* (Respondent 3, via Online Communication).



The attentive, supportive, and caring environment of the support systems, including the social workers, house parents, fellow survivors, other DOJ officials, and family members, played a crucial role in helping the victims cope with the emotional and psychological suffering they had experienced throughout the legal proceedings. Moreover, the physical security and sense of safety provided by the protection shelter and the haven throughout their stay had contributed to the victims' healing process. These experiences highlight how the support systems prioritized the well-being of the victims during their cases, fulfilling their responsibilities in the system. Quing (2021) revealed that victims felt fear, guilt, and shame during and after the abuse, which kept them silent about their experiences. In order to cope with this emotional distress, they sought support from their families and friends.

Moreover, the criminal justice system contributes to the healing of the victims by recognizing their rights, providing them protection throughout the case, and offering them the necessary assistance and services, such as counseling and therapy, to ensure the victims are allowed to recover their emotional health (Kunst et al., 2014). In the Philippines, the DSWD Regional Haven for Women and Girls (RHWG) and the Witness Protection Shelter (DOJ, 2025) also provide protective custody for the victims not only in their physical aspect but also in their mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

### **Effects of Victims' Experiences in DOJ Proceedings on Their Trust in the Judicial System and Willingness to Pursue Justice**

Individuals' trust in the judicial system and their willingness to pursue justice vary depending on their experiences within the legal process. For rape victims, particularly those involved in Department of Justice (DOJ) proceedings, these experiences play a crucial role in shaping their trust in the judicial system and their willingness to pursue justice. For this section, the main theme was discussed in three individual parts: (1) Effects on Victims' Trust in the Judicial System, (2) Effects on Victims' Willingness to Pursue Justice, and (3) Lengthy Case Resolution's Impact on Victims' Trust in the Justice System and Willingness to Pursue Justice.

#### ***Effects on Victims' Trust in the Judicial System***

Initially, all the respondents had little trust in the system; however, their trust improved after their involvement. The findings showed that the improvement in the victims' trust was due to the support mechanisms provided to them and the result of the case that favored them. One respondent shared that her needs were provided inside the shelter. In addition, four respondents revealed that their trust in the justice system grew stronger because they were satisfied with the result of the case. Despite the long process, they got the justice they deserved. As mentioned by one respondent, *"Well, in our case, although the process took a while, it was worth it because the case was successful, that was the best thing that happened"* (Respondent 6, via Personal Communication). These findings are aligned with Hohl et al. (2025), who emphasized that victims are more likely to trust the justice system and report future crimes when they perceive authorities as trustworthy and feel they have been treated with respect and care.

#### ***Effects on Victims' Willingness to Pursue Justice***

The willingness of victims to pursue justice can be influenced by the people around them and their experiences in the process. The respondents were asked about the instances where they felt discouraged or unsure about pursuing the case and the

factors that influenced their decision to withdraw or continue. Three respondents shared that aside from the delays, their willingness to continue with the case was affected by the fear of dismissal of the case, and that their family might suffer from the impact of the process. Another was due to pressure from the family of the accused asking for forgiveness, and lastly, because the perpetrator was a family member or a close relative. One respondent shared:

*“The time when the hearing got delayed, that was when I started having second thoughts about whether I should still continue or if I would just end up losing. I also had this instinct or fear that my offender might get away and come after us, and there was also the pressure that it would be my family who would have to suffer through all of this. Because the one who did this to me is a family member”* (Respondent 1, via Online Communication).

On the other hand, four respondents were determined to continue with the case as their goal was to give justice to themselves. As for their motivation, one respondent shared that the DOJ officials were supportive of her, and they were her source of courage and strength throughout the process: *“They gave me strength, and they never really left me behind; they were fully supportive”* (Respondent 4, via Personal Communication). Moreover, another respondent mentioned that the officials’ pieces of advice were her motivation.

These instances, as provided by the respondents, do not indicate that their willingness to pursue justice was influenced negatively solely by the Department of Justice process. Instead, it was also influenced by their personal issues and conflicts. However, despite these, the respondents continue to pursue justice, showing that the officials effectively supported and encouraged the victims. As Hester and Lilley (2018) discussed in their study, victims have a strong determination to pursue justice when supported by consistent encouragement and trauma-informed care from the justice system.

### ***Lengthy Case Resolution’s Impact on Victims’ Trust in the Justice System and Willingness to Pursue Justice***

Valenzuela (2018) described the major issue of the Philippine criminal justice system as being slow due to its inefficiencies. Since rape victims are prone to secondary victimization and trauma, respondents were asked how long it took for their cases to be resolved; this is to understand how the duration of the process affected their trust in the justice system and their willingness to pursue justice and any possible implications to the victims. Respondents have shared that the shortest resolution time of the case was one year, while the longest took six years to be resolved. Despite the lengthy process, most respondents stated that their trust in the justice system and willingness to pursue justice had improved after their involvement. However, they shared that the delayed and rescheduled hearings, which further add to this lengthy process, have caused them emotional and psychological harm, posing a serious challenge to their experiences.

Nonetheless, the lengthy trial of rape cases may not have affected the trust of the victims in the judicial system, as they have mentioned. However, it is important to acknowledge that throughout the process, victims have suffered from psychological and emotional distress as a result of the prolonged waiting periods caused by delayed or rescheduled court hearings. Moreover, their exposure to the accused in court and having to recall and narrate the incident repeatedly is traumatizing for them. This indicates that the longer they are subjected to the proceedings, the longer they must

suffer from distress and trauma. Consequently, this may lead to doubt and hopelessness, affecting their trust in the system and willingness to seek justice in the future.

### **Support Mechanisms Available to Rape Victims During DOJ Proceedings**

The data revealed that the respondents had accessed different services that helped them throughout the process. These include psychological counseling, shelter (RHWG/WPS), legal assistance, livelihood training, financial assistance, and spiritual care. These support mechanisms addressed their emotional, psychological, and physical safety needs. Psychological and emotional care were the most emphasized supports, with all seven respondents highlighting the importance of counseling services and access to psychologists.

In addition to mental health services, livelihood training, seminars, and spiritual counseling, the program helped victims rebuild their self-worth, learn about their rights, and improve their day-to-day lives. Under the Republic Act No. 7309, victims may access financial assistance through the Victims' Compensation Program, which provides up to ₱10,000 for legal, medical, and psychological expenses (DOJ, n.d.). Moreover, the Republic Act No. 8505 mandates the Department of Justice to help establish Rape Crisis Centers (RCC) that provide legal aid, counseling, medico-legal services, and safe spaces for victims. The DOJ also participates in interagency councils against gender-based violence, as outlined in RA 9208 or the "Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003, and RA 9262, also known as the Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act of 2004, to coordinate victim protection and justice delivery. These support mechanisms provided during the DOJ proceedings ensured that victims received assistance for emotional, psychological, legal, financial, and spiritual recovery.

### **Effectiveness of Support Mechanisms**

The Department of Justice's support mechanisms showed success through their ability to meet the victims' psychological, emotional, and financial needs. Six of the respondents stated that the DOJ officials' affirmations, counseling services, and the availability of a psychiatrist proved crucial as coping mechanisms for trauma and emotional distress.

*"This also helped me a lot because I was able to improve myself. I took to heart and memorized all the lessons and services they shared. I realized that their services are free, so there's no reason to take them for granted. They truly pursue helping us and keeping us away from danger. They also encouraged me to pursue the path I want to take in life."* (Respondent 1, via Online Communication)

The emotional support she received helped her grow personally and gain more motivation. At the same time, others appreciated the emotional encouragement they received throughout the DOJ process.

In the aspect of financial support, all of the respondents shared that the regular monthly financial assistance they received played a significant role in helping them attend court hearings, provide their necessities, and continue with the legal process. Two of the respondents mentioned that the financial support allowed them to pay for their transportation and medical expenses. As one respondent stated, *"These really helped a lot because I was able to attend my hearings back then, thanks to the financial assistance they provided"* (Respondent 2, via Online Communication). Similarly, Respondent 3 shared, *"It really helped me a lot, because at that time, the case was just*

*starting to be processed and there were already so many expenses. You need medicine and more.”* (Respondent 3, via Online Communication).

Moreover, for the two respondents, the support was essential to their survival since they were not able to work during that period of time. Two of the respondents also mentioned that the assistance was provided fairly and consistently, which made it accessible for all victims who needed it. As one respondent shared:

*It's really a big deal for me because first of all, when you're there at the DOJ, everything is prohibited, so the financial support they give is already a big help. You can also buy things you want for yourself.* (Respondent 4, via Personal Communication).

These mechanisms supported the victims in their healing process and recovery; consistent emotional support and safe environments significantly contribute to recovery from rape trauma syndrome (Burgess & Holmstrom, 2022). Moreover, these led them to achieve the justice they deserved.

### **Conclusion and Future Works**

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of rape victims during the Department of Justice (DOJ) process in Region 2, Philippines, focusing on their interactions with the DOJ personnel throughout the proceedings, the challenges they encountered, and the available support mechanisms provided to them. Previous studies have largely revealed the negative experiences of the rape victims who have undergone the process, citing insensitivity of officials, lack of victim support, and the absence of trauma-informed practices in handling rape cases. In contrast, the findings of this study contribute a new body of knowledge as the results revealed generally positive experiences of the rape victims within the justice system.

Initially, the rape victims perceived the justice system as weak and biased, and they had little trust in the system. However, after their involvement in the DOJ proceedings, their perceptions and trust have improved. The Department of Justice officials treated the victims with professionalism, empathy, and respect. They were guided throughout the legal process, encouraged and motivated, and provided physical, emotional, and psychological safety and consistent support. However, challenges were encountered in the process, such as delayed and rescheduled hearings and fear during the first hearing, which caused emotional and psychological harm to the victims and partially affected their willingness to continue with their cases.

Moreover, the study also revealed that the resolution of the victims' cases took one year for the shortest one and 6 years for the lengthiest case resolved, which is concerning as this suggests that the span that the victims spent in their cases is the span that they experienced psychological and emotional distress and were exposed to the perpetrator in court. Aside from these systemic challenges, victims also encountered personal dilemmas, which also affected their willingness to continue with the case. Despite these, victims stayed determined to continue with the case to achieve the justice they deserved, and it is also because of the help of the support mechanisms provided to them.

Moreover, these support mechanisms included legal assistance, mental health services, such as counseling and psychological support, and financial support, including monthly stipends, food allowances, and post-case assistance. Furthermore, victims who were residents in shelters or RHWGs received necessities, livelihood training, and spiritual care. These support mechanisms were effective and satisfactory as they met the needs of the victims in different areas throughout the legal process.

Victims also acknowledged that these supports played crucial roles in their healing process, helping them stay emotionally stable and committed to pursuing justice. The support mechanisms enabled them to endure the legal process. On the other hand, some victims recommended increasing the financial support.

Nevertheless, regardless of the effective support mechanisms and positive experiences of the victims, this study revealed that there is a need for improvement in the Department of Justice in handling rape cases. Efficient case resolutions are one of the systemic reforms necessary for the victims to reduce the negative impact on them.

Moreover, identifying effective practices already in place and highlighting areas where trauma-informed approaches can be further strengthened, particularly in ensuring that victims' psychological and emotional well-being remains a central concern throughout the legal process. Improvements in the process can also be done by identifying and addressing causes of delay, which were mostly the problems of the victims during the judicial process. The improvements on this matter would contribute to minimizing the systemic problem and procedural challenges experienced by the victims.

For future studies, researchers may consider widening the scope of the study, such as including different victims from other regions to gain broader insights into the experiences of rape victims in the DOJ proceedings. Additionally, researchers may include the experiences of male and LGBTQ+ victims to provide new insights and a more inclusive perspective on the justice system. Such studies would contribute to a more gender-sensitive and inclusive understanding of victims' experiences. Furthermore, future studies may also include perspectives of DOJ officials such as prosecutors, judges, lawyers, social workers, house parents, and those who are directly involved in handling the case. This would help in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the judicial process.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI) Declaration Statement**

In the preparation of this manuscript, the author used AI to perform basic grammar and spelling checks and to ensure that the contents were clear and coherent. The authors edited the content of the manuscript accordingly.