

Challenges Faced by Social Workers Handling Violence Against Women and Their Children

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges encountered by social workers in handling Violence Against Women and Their Children (VAWC) cases within the culturally distinct context of Ifugao Province. Anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the study utilized a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to explore how institutional, cultural, and legal factors shape social workers' experiences. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected registered social workers serving as VAWC focal persons in the Municipal and Provincial Social Welfare and Development Offices. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2019) was employed to identify patterns within the data. Findings revealed six major challenges: workload and staffing constraints, emotional toll and professional strain, cultural norms and informal justice practices, threats and safety risks, procedural and legal system barriers, and institutional and resource constraints. These challenges collectively affect the timeliness, quality, and continuity of VAWC interventions. Cultural practices such as informal settlements were found to intersect with formal legal systems, influencing case outcomes and victim participation. Emotional strain and safety risks further impact the well-being and effectiveness of social workers. The study concludes that these challenges are interconnected and structurally embedded, requiring strengthened institutional support, culturally responsive approaches, and protective mechanisms. It recommends improving workforce capacity, institutionalizing psychosocial support, enhancing inter-agency coordination, strengthening safety protocols, and increasing resource allocation. The study aligns with Sustainable Development Goals SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by addressing gender-based violence, promoting well-being, and strengthening justice systems. It contributes to socio-economic, institutional, and community sustainability by improving service delivery systems and supporting the well-being of frontline social workers in culturally complex settings.

Keywords: Case Study Design; Ifugao Province; Social Workers; Thematic Analysis; VAWC Case Management; Violence Against Women and Children

1. Introduction

Violence Against Women and their Children (VAWC) remains a pervasive global and national concern, deeply rooted in structural inequalities, cultural norms, and institutional limitations. Despite legal frameworks and policy efforts, the persistence of abuse, underreporting, and implementation gaps continues to challenge both victims and frontline responders such as social workers. This study examines the challenges faced by social workers in handling VAWC cases, particularly within the culturally distinct context of Ifugao Province, where traditional practices intersect with formal legal systems.

1.1 Background of VAWC and Social Workers' Roles in Ifugao Province

Violence against women is a critical public health and human rights issue worldwide, affecting approximately one in three women and resulting in severe physical, psychological, and social consequences (Stöckl & Sorenson, 2024; Mannell et al., 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022). It is driven by interconnected factors such as gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and socioeconomic disparities (Lomazzi, 2023; Mannell et al., 2022). In the Philippines, despite policies such as Republic Act No. 9262 and the Magna Carta of Women, VAWC remains prevalent, with one in four Filipino women experiencing gender-based violence (Alibudbud, 2024). Abuse commonly occurs within intimate relationships and includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm (De Guzman, 2023; Alibudbud, 2024). Structural barriers such as economic dependence, absence of divorce, and cultural expectations of female submissiveness further perpetuate violence (Valdez et al., 2022; De Guzman, 2025). Social workers play a crucial role in responding to VAWC but face emotional strain, burnout, and systemic challenges such as high caseloads, limited resources, and threats to personal safety (Respicio & Co., 2025; Social Workers, Burnout, and Self-Care, 2023). These challenges are intensified in culturally complex settings like Ifugao, where traditional conflict resolution practices influence responses to domestic violence (Najarila, 2018).

1.2 Key Challenges in Handling VAWC Cases: Insights from Related Literature

Literature consistently identifies VAWC as a multidimensional issue shaped by structural, cultural, and institutional factors (Mannell et al., 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022). Common themes include the prevalence of intimate partner violence, underreporting due to stigma and fear, and the normalization of abuse within certain communities (Balahadia et al., 2022). For social workers, key challenges include insufficient resources, high caseloads, bureaucratic constraints, and lack of institutional support (Dominelli, 2002; Imboden, 2020; E Limon, 2018). Emotional and psychological burdens such as compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and burnout are also widely documented (Figley, 2002; Isham & Adams, 2025). Additional issues involve safety risks, inadequate training, and difficulties in inter-agency coordination (Pamburayi & Abdullah, 2025; Corradini, 2025; Hempel, 2022). Victim-related barriers, including reluctance to report abuse due to stigma and cultural pressures, further complicate intervention efforts (Balahadia et al., 2022). Ethical dilemmas and complex case dynamics also require social workers to balance professional responsibilities with client autonomy (Reamer, 2018; Olsson et al., 2024).

1.3 Context of VAWC in Ifugao: Local, National, and Global Perspectives

Globally, progress in eliminating violence against women remains slow despite international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (Sardinha et al., 2022). In the Philippines, VAWC persists due to gaps between policy and implementation, underreporting, and limited access to support systems (Alibudbud, 2024; De Guzman, 2025). At the regional level, the Cordillera Administrative Region reports ongoing cases of gender-based violence, although data may underestimate the true prevalence due to underreporting (Philippine Information Agency, 2025). Cultural practices, including customary dispute resolution systems, influence how cases are handled, sometimes limiting access to formal justice (Commission on Human Rights, 2020). In Ifugao, traditional norms emphasizing family cohesion and avoidance of “hiya” shape responses to domestic conflict, often discouraging external intervention (Scroope, 2017; Najarila, 2018). These contextual factors create unique challenges for social workers who must navigate both formal legal systems and indigenous cultural practices.

1.4 Theoretical Foundations for Understanding Social Workers’ Challenges in VAWC Cases

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984). Ecological Systems Theory explains how social workers’ experiences are shaped by multiple interacting systems, including individual, organizational, and societal influences (Neal & Neal, 2020). These systems encompass workplace environments, inter-agency coordination, institutional policies, and cultural norms such as gender ideologies and legal frameworks like Republic Act No. 9262 (Philippine Commission on Women, 2023). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping highlights how social workers perceive and respond to stressors such as trauma exposure, high workloads, and ethical dilemmas. Coping strategies may be problem-focused, such as seeking support and collaboration, or emotion-focused, such as self-care and social support (Social Workers, Burnout, and Self-Care, 2023). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the systemic and psychological challenges faced by social workers in VAWC case management.

1.5 Research Gaps on Social Workers’ Experiences in VAWC within Ifugao

Despite extensive research on VAWC, there is limited focus on the lived experiences of social workers, particularly in culturally distinct settings like Ifugao. Existing studies rarely examine how traditional practices and indigenous beliefs influence the handling of VAWC cases or how these intersect with formal legal systems (Commission on Human Rights, 2020). There is also a lack of research on culturally appropriate intervention strategies and the mental health support systems needed to sustain social workers’ well-being and effectiveness (Respicio & Co., 2025). Furthermore, gaps remain in understanding how institutional limitations, cultural norms, and resource constraints collectively shape service delivery. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the challenges faced by social workers in Ifugao and how they navigate complex cultural, institutional, and legal environments.

1.6 Alignment of the Study on Social Workers and VAWC with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals. It supports SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by addressing violence against women and promoting women’s rights and protection. It also contributes to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) by examining the physical and mental health impacts of violence on both victims and social workers. Additionally, the study relates to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by highlighting gaps in justice systems, law enforcement, and institutional responses to VAWC. Strengthening social work systems and improving access to justice directly contribute to safer and more inclusive communities.

1.7 Importance of the Study on Social Workers’ Challenges to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

This study contributes to socio-economic and community sustainability by improving understanding of how violence affects individuals, families, and communities. By strengthening social worker capacity and well-being, it enhances the sustainability of social welfare systems. It also supports public health sustainability by addressing the long-term health impacts of violence and the psychological well-being of frontline workers. Furthermore, it contributes to institutional

sustainability by identifying gaps in service delivery, policy implementation, and inter-agency coordination. Finally, the study promotes cultural sustainability by examining how traditional practices can be integrated with formal interventions in a way that respects indigenous contexts while ensuring protection and justice for victims.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges faced by social workers in handling VAWC cases within Ifugao Province. This approach enabled an in-depth examination of a bounded system situated within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). The case was defined within the institutional, cultural, and legal environment of VAWC case management, allowing for an understanding of how social workers navigate challenges shaped by local cultural practices, organizational structures, and legal frameworks. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants directly involved in VAWC case management to obtain rich and contextualized insights.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Ifugao Province, located in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), Philippines. The province consists of two legislative districts and eleven municipalities, with social welfare services delivered through the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Offices (MSWDOs) and the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office (PSWDO). The site was purposively selected due to its distinct indigenous cultural context, where traditional practices and customary laws influence the handling of domestic and family-related concerns, including VAWC cases. Informal mechanisms such as clan mediation and elder involvement often shape dispute resolution, which may affect the implementation of Republic Act No. 9262. This context provides a relevant setting for examining the interaction between formal legal frameworks and indigenous cultural norms, as well as the challenges faced by social workers in navigating these dynamics.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were registered social workers designated as VAWC focal persons in the MSWDOs and the PSWDO in Ifugao Province. They were actively involved in managing and intervening in VAWC cases within their assigned areas. The participants were drawn from municipalities including Lamut, Lagawe, Asipulo, and Banaue, as well as the provincial office. All respondents were female social workers who collaborated with various sectors such as law enforcement agencies, health institutions, barangay officials, and the judicial system. Inclusion criteria required participants to be licensed social workers currently assigned as VAWC focal persons and directly engaged in case management, while those without direct involvement in VAWC functions were excluded. These respondents served as key informants, providing in-depth insights into VAWC case management in the province.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study population consisted of twelve registered social workers serving as VAWC focal persons in the MSWDOs and PSWDO in Ifugao Province. From this population, five participants were selected using purposive sampling. This method ensured that only individuals with direct involvement in VAWC case management were included, allowing for the collection of relevant and experience-based data.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a self-constructed semi-structured interview guide designed to gather detailed information on the challenges and coping strategies of social workers in VAWC case management. The instrument included sections on rapport-building and informed consent, demographic information, core open-ended questions on roles and challenges, and a closing section for additional insights. The interview guide was developed based on relevant literature, VAWC policies, and the study objectives. Content validity was established through expert review by three specialists in research, social welfare practice, and gender-related concerns, and their feedback was incorporated to refine the instrument. A pilot interview was conducted with a social worker from a neighboring province to assess clarity and flow, leading to minor revisions. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in capturing context-specific and in-depth responses.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the PSWDO, MSWDOs, and Local Chief Executives of the selected municipalities through formal communication. After approval, participants were invited and informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and informed consent was secured prior to participation. Data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews using the semi-structured guide. This approach allowed participants to describe their experiences while enabling follow-up questions for clarification. Interviews were conducted at convenient locations within the MSWDOs and PSWDO and lasted approximately one to two hours. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded, and observations were documented to ensure accuracy. Transcriptions were completed verbatim by a third party to ensure objectivity, and the researcher verified their accuracy. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, and

confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of all records. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw or decline participation at any time.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. This method enabled the examination of how contextual, institutional, and cultural factors influence the challenges and practices of social workers in VAWC case management. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly for familiarization. Significant statements and recurring ideas were identified and coded. The analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019): familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, definition and naming of themes, and report production. Codes were grouped into categories and themes representing shared patterns across participants. A third party assisted in the initial coding process to enhance credibility, while the researcher refined and validated the themes to ensure alignment with the study objectives. The final themes were interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges experienced by social workers.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants. Formal permissions were obtained from relevant offices, and participation was voluntary with informed consent secured prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the secure storage of data in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw or skip questions without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of VAWC cases, interviews were conducted in a respectful and supportive manner. All data were used solely for academic purposes and handled with integrity to accurately represent participants' experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Challenges Faced by Social Workers in Handling VAWC Cases

3.1.1 Workload and Staffing Constraints

The findings show that all respondents experienced heavy workloads due to multiple program assignments and limited staffing. Social workers handled various cases beyond VAWC, including PWD, CSAE, and other social welfare programs, which affected the timeliness, quality, and continuity of case management. This workload limited their ability to focus on VAWC cases and perform consistent monitoring and documentation. This finding indicates that insufficient staffing and overlapping responsibilities reduce service efficiency and responsiveness. High workloads are associated with increased stress and reduced effectiveness in service delivery (Boheim, R., Eppel, R., & Mahringer, H., 2023). As noted in the literature, understaffing leads to delayed interventions and prioritization of high-risk cases, which may leave some victims without timely support. This situation can perpetuate cycles of violence and reduce trust in the system.

3.1.2 Emotional Toll and Professional Strain

The results reveal that respondents experienced emotional exhaustion, stress, and frustration due to repeated exposure to trauma and unsuccessful case outcomes. Social workers reported burnout, self-doubt, and reduced motivation, particularly when cases were withdrawn or unsuccessful. Continuous exposure to abuse narratives and crisis situations contributed to psychological strain and emotional fatigue. This suggests that emotional strain is an inherent part of VAWC case management. Research shows that trauma exposure leads to compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout (Kinman, Teoh, & Harriss, 2020; Bride & Figley, 2007). Organizational stressors such as high workloads and limited support further intensify these effects (Lizano, Mor Barak & Meagher 2022; Ravalier et al 2021). These findings emphasize that emotional challenges are structurally embedded in the profession and require systemic interventions, including trauma-informed support systems (Figley, 2002; Bride et al., 2004; Truter, Fouché & Theron 2021).

3.1.3 Cultural Norms and Informal Justice Practices

The findings indicate that cultural norms and informal justice systems strongly influence VAWC case outcomes. Practices such as “paniyo,” barangay settlements, and family mediation often lead to case withdrawal, private resolution, and reduced reporting. Community members and relatives frequently encourage victims to settle disputes rather than pursue legal action. This demonstrates that cultural practices can undermine formal legal processes and victim protection. Informal justice systems prioritize reconciliation over accountability, contributing to underreporting and re-victimization (UN Women, 2022; Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2022; UNDP, 2020; World Bank, 2023). Cultural norms emphasizing family honor and social harmony further discourage reporting (UNICEF, 2022; UNFPA, 2023). These findings align with socio-ecological and feminist perspectives, which highlight how cultural structures influence responses to violence and limit the effectiveness of formal interventions (UNICEF, 2022).

3.1.4 Threats and Safety Risks

The results show that all respondents experienced safety risks, including threats, intimidation, and fear during case handling. These risks extended beyond the workplace to include home visits and even family members of social workers. Fear affected their ability to conduct fieldwork and required them to adopt precautionary measures such as seeking assistance from authorities during visits. This indicates that safety risks are a significant component of VAWC practice. Studies show that frontline workers in gender-based violence cases face threats and workplace violence, especially in environments with weak institutional protection (Ravalier et al., 2021). Lack of safety mechanisms increases stress and may limit service delivery (Ravalier et al., 2021; Lizano et al., 2022). These findings highlight the need for stronger institutional protection systems for social workers.

3.1.5 Procedural and Legal System Barriers

The findings reveal that legal and procedural barriers, such as court postponements, slow processes, and absence of key actors, delay case resolution. Respondents reported repeated rescheduling of hearings, long procedures, and difficulties in accessing medico-legal services, which discouraged victims from continuing their cases. These barriers also increased financial and logistical burdens for clients and social workers. This suggests that inefficiencies in the justice system weaken access to justice and reduce participation. Research indicates that delays and institutional inefficiencies discourage reporting and reduce case completion rates (World Bank, 2023; UN Women, 2022; Asian Development Bank, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). These challenges contribute to case withdrawal and reliance on informal settlements (UNDP, 2020; UNFPA, 2023). From an ecological perspective, weak institutional support reduces engagement and trust in formal systems, further reinforcing systemic barriers.

3.1.6 Institutional and Resource Constraints

The findings show that limited funding, inadequate logistics, and insufficient staffing affect the delivery of VAWC interventions. Social workers reported using personal resources to support clients and managing both victims and perpetrators in some cases, which created ethical and professional challenges. Resource limitations also restricted the scope and continuity of services. This indicates that institutional constraints are systemic issues affecting service delivery. Limited resources hinder effective intervention and support for survivors (Bourque & Bloom, 2006). Staffing shortages increase workload and reduce service quality, while inadequate support systems limit the ability of social workers to meet client needs (Respicio & Co., 2025). These findings highlight the importance of strengthening institutional capacity and resource allocation to improve VAWC case management.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

This study examined the challenges encountered by social workers in handling Violence Against Women and Their Children (VAWC) cases in Ifugao Province and found that these challenges are shaped by the interaction of institutional, cultural, and legal factors. The findings revealed that workload and staffing constraints limit the capacity of social workers to deliver timely and sustained interventions, while emotional toll and professional strain arise from continuous exposure to trauma and unresolved cases. Cultural norms and informal justice mechanisms influence case outcomes by encouraging private settlements, which intersect with formal legal processes. Safety risks and threats were also identified as part of the operational realities affecting social workers' fieldwork and decision-making. Additionally, procedural and legal system barriers delay case resolution and discourage client participation, while institutional and resource constraints restrict the scope and continuity of services. Overall, the study shows that these challenges are interconnected and structurally embedded, highlighting the need for adequate institutional support, culturally responsive approaches, and protective mechanisms to improve VAWC case management.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that local government units strengthen workforce capacity by hiring additional social workers, assigning dedicated VAWC focal personnel, and implementing workload management systems to ensure focused and timely intervention. Welfare offices should institutionalize psychosocial support mechanisms such as structured debriefing, clinical supervision, and access to mental health services, along with training on stress management and trauma-informed care. Culturally responsive and rights-based approaches should be reinforced through community education and engagement with local leaders to align customary practices with legal protections. Safety protocols must be strengthened through coordination with law enforcement, establishment of risk assessment procedures, and implementation of protective measures for social workers. Coordination among justice system actors should be improved to reduce delays, alongside providing client support such as transportation and legal guidance. Government agencies should also increase resource allocation for VAWC programs, improve logistical support, and ensure clear role delineation to avoid conflicts in case handling. Future research may further explore VAWC case management across different contexts and stakeholders to enhance understanding and improve intervention strategies.

This study is limited to a specific case context within Ifugao Province, focusing only on registered social workers assigned as VAWC focal persons, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other settings or populations. The qualitative case study design provides in-depth insights but does not capture broader quantitative patterns or perspectives.

from other stakeholders such as victims, law enforcement personnel, and community members. Additionally, the findings are based on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by personal perceptions and contextual factors within the study site.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study adhered to established ethical standards to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants. Formal permission was obtained from the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office, Municipal Social Welfare and Development Offices, and Local Chief Executives prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured before conducting interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of data in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw or decline participation at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of Violence Against Women and Their Children cases, interviews were conducted in a respectful and supportive manner, and all data were used solely for academic purposes and handled with integrity.

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