



SHADOW OF EXPLOITATION: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ZAMBOANGA PENINSULA

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking remains a pervasive human rights issue in the Philippines, particularly in vulnerable regions such as the Zamboanga Peninsula. This qualitative multi-case study explored the lived experiences of survivors of human trafficking in Region IX, Philippines. Grounded in Trauma Theory and Resilience Theory, the study examined pathways to victimization, forms of exploitation, consequences of trafficking, and coping mechanisms employed by survivors. Ten purposively selected survivors of labor trafficking, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and cyber trafficking participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews, and data were analyzed through thematic cross-case analysis. Findings revealed that recruitment commonly occurred through deception, fraudulent job offers, and manipulation by trusted individuals, with structural poverty, financial hardship, and limited education increasing vulnerability. Survivors experienced coercion, excessive labor, wage deprivation, confinement, sexual exploitation, and psychological abuse, leading to persistent trauma, emotional distress, physical injury, mistrust, and disrupted livelihoods. Despite severe adversity, participants demonstrated resilience through survival-based compliance, strategic escape planning, spiritual coping, emotional acceptance, trauma recognition, and heightened vigilance toward recruitment schemes. The study underscores the need for trauma-informed, survivor-centered interventions, strengthened recruitment monitoring, economic empowerment initiatives, and coordinated justice responses, offering localized evidence to inform policy and prevention strategies in the Zamboanga Region.

Keywords: *human trafficking, coping mechanisms, trauma, resilience, qualitative multi-case study, Zamboanga Peninsula*

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking represents a grave violation of human rights, characterized by the illegal trade of individuals for purposes such as coerced labor, sexual servitude, and other forms of exploitation. This global issue ranks as the third-largest criminal activity after drug and arms trafficking, with significant growth among transnational criminal organizations. The practice is particularly prominent in the Philippines, which reported over 200 cases as of 2021, and is recognized as a source and transit hub for both sex and labor trafficking (Vageshjith & Kaur, 2022).

The methods utilized by traffickers include coercion, fraud, and abuse of vulnerable individuals, often exacerbated by economic decline and limited employment opportunities, luring people to seek work abroad. Many Filipino migrants, including undocumented individuals, fall victim to deceptive recruitment practices that can lead to severe exploitation. Women and children are particularly susceptible, often facing domestic servitude, labor exploitation, and even sexual abuse. This exploitation is further perpetuated by weak legislative enforcement and systemic barriers in the regions affected (Vageshjith & Kaur, 2022; Reid et al., 2019).

The narratives of human trafficking survivors provide critical insights into the dynamics of trafficking and underscore the need for victim-centered interventions. Personal experiences highlight the manipulation and coercive tactics used by traffickers, the challenges faced during and after trafficking, and the systemic deficiencies in care and support. Survivors' testimonies are essential for informing anti-trafficking strategies and for advocating systemic change (UNODC, 2024; Walk Free, 2023).

A multi-case study approach to research in the Zamboanga Peninsula serves to illuminate the lived experiences of trafficking victims across various contexts, enabling a comparative analysis of their recovery journeys. This qualitative methodology enhances the understanding of how local socio-economic factors influence vulnerability and recovery, emphasizing the necessity of culturally sensitive and contextually relevant interventions (UNODC, 2024; Walk Free, 2023, Leones & Caparas, n.d.).

Moreover, this research bridges a significant gap in empirical studies on human trafficking, particularly within the Filipino context, where many forms of trafficking remain underexamined. By focusing on individual narratives and systemic factors, the study aims to facilitate comprehensive, evidence-based policy reforms. Importantly, the study's findings align with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those addressing gender equality, decent work, and poverty reduction. The links between trafficking's root causes—such as poverty, unemployment, and discriminatory practices—and the need for effective prevention strategies are underscored, reinforcing the necessity of an integrated approach to combating trafficking through legal, social, and economic reforms.

The multi-case study also identifies limitations such as participant recruitment challenges, ethical considerations, and potential biases, all of which are addressed through rigorous ethical standards and supportive practices. Ultimately, the research highlights the critical importance of centering the voices and experiences of trafficking survivors to inspire meaningful change and elevate societal awareness.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of victims and survivors of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula, this year 2025.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the key informants?
2. What are the experiences of the human trafficking victims in Zamboanga Peninsula region?
3. What are the contributing factors that lead to human trafficking in the region?
4. What are the effects of human trafficking on the victims?
5. What coping mechanisms employed by the victims?
6. What are the cross-case analysis on experiences of victims of human trafficking?

METHODOLOGY

This section discussed the study participants, research instruments, and procedures utilized in examining the lived experiences of survivors of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines. The study focused on Region IX due to its socio-economic vulnerabilities, geographic isolation, labor mobility, and proximity to international borders, which increase susceptibility to trafficking and exploitation.

The participants consisted of ten (10) survivors of labor trafficking, sex trafficking, cyber trafficking, domestic servitude, and related forms of exploitation. Each participant served as a distinct case unit in the multi-case qualitative design, reflecting unique trafficking pathways, forms of abuse, recruitment strategies, and recovery experiences. Despite these differences, participants shared common characteristics such as economic vulnerability, deceptive recruitment, restricted freedom, and enduring psychological and socio-economic consequences. Both male and female survivors from diverse socio-economic backgrounds were included to capture varied dimensions of trafficking experiences.

Snowball sampling was employed because trafficking survivors are considered a hard-to-reach and vulnerable population. Initial participants were identified through local organizations, social workers, and community advocates. The sample size of ten participants was determined through data saturation, wherein no new themes emerged

from additional interviews. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully established to ensure ethical rigor, participant protection, and relevance of the data gathered.

The study utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary data gathering method. Open-ended interview questions allowed participants to narrate their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe for deeper insights. The interview guide underwent expert validation to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and alignment with the research objectives. Member checking, triangulation through field notes and reflective journals, and expert review strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

A multi-case qualitative research design was employed to facilitate both individual case analysis and cross-case synthesis. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted in private and secure environments, either face-to-face or online, depending on participant preference and safety considerations. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis was applied through coding, categorization, and theme development, followed by cross-case analysis to identify recurring patterns and variations among participants' experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presented a comprehensive account of the research findings, followed by an in-depth discussion of the emergent themes. It offered a systematic analysis of the results through descriptive tables aligned with the research objectives articulated at the outset of the study. The discussion focused on the lived experiences of the ten (10) victims and survivors of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula who voluntarily participated in the research.

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the ten (10) key informants involved in the study on human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula. The participants were categorized according to participant code, gender, age during the trafficking incident, and type of trafficking experienced. The table reveals that both males and females became victims of trafficking, indicating that human trafficking affected individuals regardless of gender. Among the participants, five were male and five were female, showing balanced gender representation among the survivors.

In terms of age, the findings indicate that most participants were trafficked during adolescence. Several participants were between 14 and 17 years old at the time of victimization, specifically P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, and P8. This finding suggests that minors and adolescents constituted one of the most vulnerable sectors to trafficking and exploitation. Only a few participants were adults during the trafficking experience, such as P5 who was 36 years old and P10 who was 33 years old. These findings imply that while trafficking commonly targeted adolescents, economically vulnerable adults were also susceptible to exploitation.

The findings are supported by recent literature emphasizing that children and adolescents remain highly vulnerable to trafficking because of poverty, emotional immaturity, lack of awareness, and economic dependence. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Explainer on Child Trafficking reported that approximately one in every three trafficking victims globally is a child and that girls are commonly trafficked for sexual exploitation while boys are frequently trafficked for forced labor (UNODC, 2024).

With respect to the type of trafficking experienced, the table shows that labor trafficking and sex trafficking were the most prevalent forms of exploitation among the participants. Four participants experienced sex trafficking, four experienced labor trafficking, one participant experienced cyber trafficking, and one participant's exact age was not specified. These findings demonstrate that trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula occurred in multiple forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, and cyber-enabled exploitation.

Recent studies support the prevalence of labor and sex trafficking among vulnerable populations. A recent scoping review on labor trafficking among migrant populations explained that labor trafficking disproportionately affects economically disadvantaged individuals and often involves coercion, deception, unsafe working conditions, and abuse (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2025). Similarly, studies on sex trafficking survivors revealed that traffickers commonly use deception, manipulation, and fraudulent employment offers to lure victims into exploitative conditions (Islam & Khan, 2025).

The findings further reveal that deceptive recruitment was a common factor among trafficking victims. Participants were recruited through promises of employment, financial opportunities, or migration assistance. This finding is consistent with the 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report of the U.S. Department of State, which emphasized that traffickers increasingly use deceptive recruitment practices, fraudulent online advertisements, and social media platforms to target vulnerable individuals (UNODC, 2024). Also, the experiences of the participants also reflected the use of deceptive recruitment practices, such as false promises of employment and financial opportunities. Recent literature supports this finding, explaining that traffickers frequently exploit vulnerable individuals through fraudulent job offers, migration promises, and manipulation by trusted acquaintances or recruiters. Studies further indicate that deceptive recruitment increasingly occurs through informal labor arrangements and online platforms targeting economically disadvantaged populations (Jiménez-Lasserotte et al., 2025; Recknor et al., 2022).

Moreover, the findings align with studies emphasizing the severe psychological and emotional effects of trafficking. Survivors frequently experienced trauma, fear, anxiety, shame, emotional distress, and long-term mental health consequences. Research on trafficking survivors found that victims often suffer from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and disrupted social functioning even after escaping exploitation (Lino-Kelly, 2025; Recknor et al., 2022).

Thus, the table demonstrates that human trafficking affected both male and female participants across various age groups, although adolescents appeared to be the most vulnerable. The findings also highlight the complexity of trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula, where multiple forms of exploitation, including labor trafficking, sex trafficking, and cyber trafficking, continued to affect economically and socially vulnerable individuals. Recent literature strongly supports these findings by emphasizing the vulnerability of adolescents, the prevalence of deceptive recruitment strategies, and the lasting psychological and socio-economic effects of trafficking on survivors (UNODC, 2024).

Table 1
Profile of the Key Informants

Case	Participant Code	Gender	Age (During the Crime Committed)	Type of Human Trafficking
1	P1	Male	17 years old	Sex Trafficking
2	P2	Female	15 years old	Sex Trafficking
3	P3	Female	16 years old	Sex Trafficking
4	P4	Male	17 years old	Labor Trafficking
5	P5	Male	36 years old	Labor Trafficking
6	P6	Male	21 years old	Labor Trafficking
7	P7	Female	17 years old	Labor Trafficking
8	P8	Female	14 years old	Cyber Trafficking
9	P9	Male	Not Specified	Labor Trafficking
10	P10	Female	33 years old	Sex Trafficking

Table 2
Experiences of the victims of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula Region

Sub-Themes	Significant Statements
Recruitment through Deception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was persuaded by my friends. They invited me to go out and drink. I didn't realize it was already very late, we were already drunk, and then they forced me. I was drunk, confused, and scared. I had no choice. [P1] I asked my friend if she knew of any job, even for minors. She said there was one in Dipolog, so we went there. [P2] I had a friend who offered me a job as a house helper. I agreed because I wanted to help my family, and they promised me a salary...After we arrived there, she never showed up again. [P3] Because of our needs, I agreed to my friend's offer to go to Malaysia. [P10]

Fraudulent Employment Promises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were told to entertain customers. We did not know it was a karaoke bar and brothel. [P2] • We were promised a salary of 7,000 pesos and 2 days off per week. Work hours were from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. However, upon arrival, everything changed. The salary was 3,000 pesos; there were no days off; work started at 4:00 a.m. and ended at 12:00 midnight. [P4] • When I arrived there, the situation was very different. We had many employers, and I did all the work. I woke up very early, cooked, cleaned, washed dishes, and had no rest. We were not paid and were not allowed to go home. [P7] • When we arrived there, the job turned out to be different. [P10]
Labor Exploitation by Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even though we did not want to, we were forced because our employer threatened us. [P2] • I was very scared. I did not expect the job to be like that. We were threatened that if we did not obey, we would be punished. I had no other choice. [P3] • There were no fixed hours. We worked nonstop until all the trucks were loaded. If you stopped, you would be scolded. If you asked for rest, the boss would get angry. [P5] • The work was extremely heavy. We were not allowed to rest. Sometimes, we were covered with tarpaulin inside trucks while traveling, barely able to breathe. We could not complain because we were afraid. [P6]
Sexual Exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were told to entertain customers. We did not know it was a karaoke bar and brothel. [P2] • We were made to drink, changed into sexy clothes, given makeup, and then brought to rooms to entertain men. [P3] • We were forced to entertain men in a beer house. I had no choice and received no payment. [P10]

Table 2 presents the experiences of victims of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula Region. The findings revealed four major sub-themes that characterized the lived experiences of the participants, namely: recruitment through deception, fraudulent employment promises, labor exploitation by employers, and sexual exploitation. The significant statements reflected how traffickers manipulated trust, poverty, and vulnerability to recruit and exploit victims. These experiences demonstrated the complex and multidimensional nature of human trafficking in the region.

The first sub-theme, Recruitment through Deception, revealed that victims were recruited through manipulation, peer influence, and false promises of employment or financial assistance. Participants narrated that friends or acquaintances persuaded them to leave their homes or travel to unfamiliar places by offering jobs and opportunities to help their families. Some participants were minors during recruitment and were unaware of the risks involved. Participant P1 described being intoxicated and forced into

exploitation, while P3 and P10 shared that trusted friend offered them employment opportunities that later resulted in trafficking. These findings suggested that traffickers exploited personal trust relationships and economic hardship to lure victims into exploitative situations.

The findings are supported by recent literature emphasizing that deceptive recruitment remains one of the most common strategies used by traffickers worldwide. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024), traffickers frequently use fraudulent promises of employment, migration opportunities, and peer recruitment to manipulate vulnerable individuals, particularly adolescents, women, and economically disadvantaged populations. Recent studies also revealed that traffickers commonly utilize social networks, friendships, and informal recruitment channels to gain the trust of victims before exploitation occurs (Villacampa, 2024).

The second sub-theme, Fraudulent Employment Promises, demonstrated that victims were deceived regarding the true nature of their work, salary, working conditions, and freedom. Participants initially expected lawful employment with fair compensation and humane treatment; however, the conditions changed drastically upon arrival at their workplaces. Victims experienced reduced salaries, excessive working hours, denial of rest days, non-payment of wages, and restrictions on movement. Some participants discovered that the jobs offered to them were linked to prostitution and exploitative labor. These findings indicated that traffickers intentionally misrepresented employment arrangements to gain control over victims.

The findings are consistent with the 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report of the U.S. Department of State, which emphasized that traffickers commonly advertise fake employment opportunities to attract vulnerable individuals seeking financial stability (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Recent literature further explained that migrant workers and economically disadvantaged individuals are especially vulnerable to fraudulent recruitment due to unemployment, poverty, and limited labor protection mechanisms (Tambini Stollwerck et al., 2024).

The third sub-theme, Labor Exploitation by Employers, showed that victims experienced threats, coercion, unsafe working conditions, excessive workloads, and deprivation of rest. Participants narrated being forced to work under fear of punishment and intimidation. Victims worked long hours without proper compensation and were unable to complain or escape because of fear and dependence on their employers. Participants P5 and P6 specifically described nonstop labor, physically exhausting conditions, and unsafe transportation practices that endangered their health and safety. These findings highlighted how traffickers and exploitative employers-maintained control through fear, coercion, and physical exhaustion.

Recent studies strongly support these findings. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) identified forced labor, coercive work practices, intimidation, and excessive working hours as major indicators of labor trafficking. Contemporary research further revealed that victims of labor trafficking frequently experience unsafe working conditions, wage withholding, threats, deprivation of rest, and physical abuse, which prevent them from escaping exploitative environments (Recknor et al., 2022).

The fourth sub-theme, Sexual Exploitation, revealed that victims were forced into prostitution, sexual entertainment, and exploitative sexual activities against their will. Participants narrated being deceived into working in karaoke bars, beer houses, and brothels where they were required to entertain men, wear revealing clothes, consume alcohol, and engage in exploitative activities without proper compensation. These narratives reflected severe violations of dignity, autonomy, and human rights.

The findings are supported by the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2024), which reported that women and girls continue to comprise the majority of detected victims of sex trafficking worldwide. Studies also showed that traffickers frequently use deception, coercion, manipulation, and abuse of vulnerability to force victims into commercial sexual exploitation and prostitution (Reid et al., 2019). Furthermore, survivors of sexual exploitation commonly experience trauma, anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and long-term psychological consequences resulting from abuse and coercion. Also, importance of early intervention programs, trauma-informed counseling, and multidisciplinary support systems. Schools, social workers, healthcare providers, law enforcement agencies, and family members all play important roles in protecting children and facilitating recovery. The authors concluded that effective recovery requires a holistic approach that addresses not only the psychological consequences of abuse but also the social and environmental factors affecting the child's well-being (Bakar et al., 2024)

Thus, Table 2 demonstrated that victims of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula experienced multiple forms of deception, coercion, exploitation, and abuse. The findings highlighted how traffickers exploited poverty, trust, and vulnerability to recruit victims into labor and sexual exploitation. Existing literature strongly supports these findings by emphasizing that deceptive recruitment, fraudulent employment, labor exploitation, and sexual abuse remain dominant patterns in contemporary human trafficking cases worldwide (Acharya, 2025)..

Table 3

Contributing Factors that lead to human trafficking in the region.

Sub-Themes	Significant Statements
Aspiration for higher income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="505 1780 1399 1850">• We were promised a salary of 7,000 pesos and 2 days off per week. [P4]

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We were promised good jobs with high pay [P5]• We were told there was a job in Manila paying six hundred pesos per day. [P6]
Extreme Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our situation was very difficult. We barely had food, only bananas and sweet potatoes. [P2]• I stopped studying because of financial hardship. I went to school without food, and sometimes we had nothing to eat. [P3]• We were very poor. I was studying, but our situation was very difficult. Sometimes I went to school without food, slippers, or viand. [P7]• Our situation was very difficult because we were poor. Sometimes there was no food on our table, and we really had to struggle just to eat. [P8]• I used to study, but because of financial hardship, I stopped and worked in the fields after finishing high school. [P6]

Table 3 presents the contributing factors that led to human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula Region. The findings revealed two major sub-themes that increased the vulnerability of the participants to trafficking, namely: aspiration for higher income and extreme poverty. The participants' narratives demonstrated that economic hardship, unemployment, and the desire for better financial opportunities pushed them to accept risky job offers and migration opportunities that eventually resulted in exploitation and trafficking.

The first sub-theme, Aspiration for Higher Income, revealed that the participants were motivated by promises of better salaries and improved living conditions. Participants accepted job offers because they hoped to earn enough income to support themselves and their families. P4 shared that they were promised a salary of 7,000 pesos with rest days, while P5 and P6 narrated being offered high-paying jobs and employment opportunities in Manila. These findings suggest that traffickers exploited the participants' aspirations for economic mobility and financial stability by offering deceptive employment opportunities.

The findings are supported by recent literature emphasizing that the desire for better employment and higher income is one of the major drivers of human trafficking. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022), traffickers commonly target individuals who are seeking economic advancement and stable employment opportunities, particularly those from marginalized and low-income communities. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) further explained that deceptive job offers and promises of high salaries remain common recruitment strategies used by traffickers to manipulate vulnerable individuals into exploitative labor and trafficking situations. Similarly, Necchi and Bradford (2025) noted that unemployment and

aspirations for economic mobility increase the likelihood of individuals accepting unsafe migration and labor arrangements, thereby heightening trafficking vulnerability.

The second sub-theme, Extreme Poverty, revealed that severe financial hardship significantly contributed to the vulnerability of participants to trafficking. Participants narrated experiences of hunger, lack of food, inability to continue schooling, and extreme deprivation. P2 described surviving on bananas and sweet potatoes due to poverty, while P3 and P7 disclosed attending school without food or basic necessities. P6 shared that financial hardship forced him to stop studying and work in the fields after high school. These findings indicate that poverty created desperation among participants, making them more susceptible to deceptive recruitment and exploitative opportunities.

The findings are strongly supported by recent literature identifying poverty as one of the root causes of human trafficking. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2024) emphasized that individuals living in extreme poverty are more likely to become victims of trafficking because of limited livelihood opportunities, educational disadvantages, and economic desperation. Research further revealed that traffickers often prey on individuals and families struggling with food insecurity, unemployment, and lack of access to education (Walk Free, 2023). Studies also noted that adolescents from impoverished households are especially vulnerable because they may leave school early and seek employment despite unsafe or uncertain working conditions (UNICEF, 2024).

Moreover, the findings align with studies showing that economic inequality and lack of social protection mechanisms contribute significantly to trafficking risks in developing regions. According to Recknor et al. (2022), structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, unemployment, and limited educational attainment increase susceptibility to labor trafficking, sexual exploitation, and coercive migration. Contemporary research also highlighted that financial hardship often compels victims to trust recruiters and acquaintances offering employment opportunities, despite limited knowledge of the associated risks (Villacampa, 2024).

Thus, Table 3 demonstrated that economic vulnerability played a major role in exposing participants to human trafficking. The aspiration for higher income and the experience of extreme poverty pushed victims to accept deceptive job offers and risky opportunities in hopes of improving their lives. Existing literature strongly supports these findings, confirming that poverty, unemployment, financial instability, and economic aspirations remain among the most significant contributing factors to human trafficking globally and within vulnerable communities.

Table 4
Effects of human trafficking on the victims

Sub-Themes	Significant Statements
Psychological Trauma and Emotional Distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was traumatized. I was always afraid, and what happened kept replaying in my mind. It was very difficult. [P1] • The fear and shame that I felt. [P3] • The difficulty of the work, not being paid, and being far from my family. The stress and fear were extreme. [P7] • I felt extreme fear and shame. I did not know what to do and was influenced by her promises that my life would improve...Until now, I cannot forget it, and it was very traumatic. [P8]
Physical Injury, Illness, and Bodily Exhaustion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was extremely difficult. It felt like we were imprisoned. I became weak, got sick, and my mental health was seriously affected. [P4] • Because of this, my finger was amputated [P5] • The impact is very significant. I get tired easily, I have trauma, and it is difficult to find work now. [P6] • Hunger and exhaustion. Sometimes I slept on the streets and went for several days without food. [P9]

Table 4 presents the effects of human trafficking on the victims in the Zamboanga Peninsula Region. The findings revealed two major sub-themes describing the consequences experienced by the participants, namely: psychological trauma and emotional distress, and physical injury, illness, and bodily exhaustion. The significant statements demonstrated that trafficking produced long-lasting emotional, psychological, and physical suffering among survivors, affecting their overall well-being, health, and capacity to reintegrate into society.

The first sub-theme, Psychological Trauma and Emotional Distress, revealed that victims experienced severe fear, shame, stress, anxiety, and persistent traumatic memories as a result of trafficking. Participants narrated that they continuously relived their traumatic experiences even after escaping exploitation. P1 disclosed being traumatized and constantly fearful because the incident repeatedly replayed in his mind. Similarly, P3 and P8 described feelings of shame, fear, and emotional suffering that remained difficult to forget. P7 also emphasized the emotional stress caused by exploitative labor conditions, non-payment of wages, and separation from family members. These findings suggest that trafficking produced deep psychological wounds that continued to affect survivors long after the trafficking experience ended.

The findings are strongly supported by recent literature emphasizing that psychological trauma is one of the most common and long-term effects of human

trafficking. According to Recknor et al. (2022), trafficking survivors frequently experience anxiety, depression, fear, shame, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emotional distress, and recurring traumatic memories due to prolonged abuse, coercion, and exploitation. Similarly, Villacampa (2024) found that survivors of trafficking commonly suffer from severe psychological consequences, including chronic stress, trauma, suicidal thoughts, emotional instability, and social withdrawal. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) also emphasized that survivors often continue to experience emotional suffering and difficulty reintegrating into normal life because of persistent trauma and stigma associated with trafficking experiences.

The second sub-theme, Physical Injury, Illness, and Bodily Exhaustion, revealed that participants suffered serious physical consequences due to exploitative labor conditions, abuse, hunger, and deprivation. P4 described becoming physically weak and sick because of harsh conditions, while P5 narrated that his finger was amputated as a result of the work he endured. P6 explained that the trafficking experience caused ongoing physical exhaustion and difficulty finding employment, whereas P9 described suffering from hunger, homelessness, and prolonged deprivation of food. These findings indicate that trafficking not only caused emotional suffering but also resulted in serious bodily harm, illness, fatigue, and long-term health complications.

Recent literature strongly supports these findings. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024) identified hazardous working conditions, physical abuse, sleep deprivation, hunger, and excessive workloads as common experiences among victims of labor trafficking. Research further revealed that trafficking survivors frequently suffer injuries, chronic fatigue, malnutrition, untreated illnesses, and long-term physical disabilities resulting from exploitative labor and abuse (Recknor et al., 2022). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), victims of trafficking are exposed to severe occupational hazards, violence, deprivation, and poor living conditions that negatively affect both physical and mental health. Studies also emphasized that prolonged exploitation often leads to exhaustion, weakened immunity, and difficulty maintaining future employment due to physical trauma and emotional instability (Nodzinski et al., 2024).

Moreover, the findings align with Trauma Theory, which explains that traumatic experiences can produce both psychological and physiological consequences that persist long after the traumatic event. Survivors may continue to experience fear, anxiety, bodily exhaustion, and emotional instability because trauma affects cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning simultaneously (Herman, 1992).

Thus, Table 4 demonstrated that human trafficking had devastating psychological and physical effects on victims. Survivors experienced persistent trauma, fear, shame, stress, illness, injury, hunger, and bodily exhaustion that continued even after exploitation ended. Existing literature strongly supports these findings by emphasizing that trafficking

produces severe and long-term consequences on survivors' mental health, physical well-being, social functioning, and quality of life.

Table 5

Coping Mechanisms Employed by the Victims

Sub-Themes	Significant Statements
Trauma Recognition and Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had trauma. [P6] • I had trauma...there are lots of pain in my mind. [P7] • The trauma is still there. [P9]

Table 5 presents the coping mechanisms employed by victims of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula Region. The table specifically highlights the sub-theme of Trauma Recognition and Self-Awareness, which emerged from the narratives of the participants. The significant statements revealed that survivors acknowledged the existence of trauma and recognized the emotional pain and psychological burden caused by their trafficking experiences. Participants openly expressed that the traumatic experiences continued to affect them emotionally and mentally even after the exploitation had ended.

Participant P6 directly stated, "I had trauma," while P7 shared, "I had trauma...there are lots of pain in my mind." Similarly, P9 disclosed that "The trauma is still there." These statements indicate that survivors developed awareness of their psychological suffering and recognized the lasting emotional consequences of trafficking. The findings suggest that acknowledging trauma became part of the survivors' coping process, as recognizing emotional pain allowed them to gradually understand their experiences and begin psychological recovery.

The findings are strongly supported by recent literature emphasizing that trauma recognition and self-awareness are important coping and recovery mechanisms among survivors of human trafficking. According to Recknor et al. (2021), survivors often experience persistent psychological effects such as fear, anxiety, shame, emotional distress, and recurring traumatic memories. Recognizing these emotional and psychological symptoms is considered a significant step toward healing and recovery because survivors become more aware of their mental health condition and coping needs. Recent studies also explained that survivors of trafficking commonly develop trauma awareness after prolonged experiences of abuse, coercion, and exploitation. Research by Nodzinski et al. (2024) found that trafficking survivors frequently acknowledged symptoms of trauma, including intrusive memories, emotional pain, stress, and psychological instability. This recognition of trauma allowed survivors to seek emotional support, reflect on their experiences, and gradually rebuild their sense of identity and safety.

Moreover, trauma recognition aligns with Trauma Theory proposed by Herman (1992), which explained that recovery from traumatic experiences begins when survivors acknowledge the reality and impact of the trauma they endured. Self-awareness enables survivors to process emotional suffering, recognize triggers, and understand the psychological effects of exploitation. Through this process, survivors may become more capable of developing resilience, seeking support systems, and adapting healthier coping strategies.

Contemporary literature further supports the importance of self-awareness in post-trafficking recovery. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), survivors who recognize and understand their trauma are more likely to engage in psychological interventions, counseling, and community support programs that promote healing and reintegration. Similarly, studies emphasized that self-awareness contributes to emotional regulation, trauma processing, and long-term psychological recovery among survivors of violence and exploitation (Nodzinski et al., 2024).

Thus, Table 5 demonstrates that trauma recognition and self-awareness served as important coping mechanisms among victims of human trafficking. Although survivors continued to experience emotional pain and psychological distress, acknowledging their trauma represented an important step toward healing, recovery, and resilience. Existing literature strongly supports these findings by emphasizing that awareness of trauma is essential in helping survivors process their experiences, seek support, and begin psychological recovery following exploitation and abuse.

Table 5
Cross-Case Analysis on Experiences of Victims of Human Trafficking

Themes	Case Unit		Remarks
	Similar	Different	
Recruitment through Deception	P1, P2, P3, P6, P10	P4, P5, P8	Most victims were recruited through deception by friends, acquaintances, or family connections.
Fraudulent Employment Promises	P2, P4 P7, P10	P1, P8	Deceptive job offers with false information about salary, work conditions, and job nature were a common experience across cases.
Labor Exploitation by Employers	P2, P3, P5, P6	P1, P4, P8, P9, P10	Labor exploitation manifested through threats, excessive workloads, lack of rest, and intimidation, though not all victims experienced direct labor abuse.
Sexual Exploitation	P2, P3, P8, P10	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9	Sexual exploitation occurred in fewer cases but involved severe coercion, deception, and lack of consent, both offline and online.

Table 5 presents the cross-case analysis of the experiences of victims of human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula Region. The table highlights the similarities and differences among the case units across four major themes, namely: recruitment through deception, fraudulent employment promises, labor exploitation by employers, and sexual exploitation. The findings reveal recurring patterns of deception, coercion, and exploitation among the participants, while also showing variations in the forms of trafficking and abuse experienced by each victim.

The first theme, Recruitment through Deception, showed that most participants, particularly P1, P2, P3, P6, and P10, were recruited through deceptive means involving friends, acquaintances, or family connections. Victims were persuaded through false promises of employment, migration opportunities, or financial assistance. This finding indicates that traffickers commonly exploited trust relationships and personal connections to manipulate vulnerable individuals into exploitative situations. However, cases P4, P5, and P8 demonstrated different recruitment experiences, suggesting that trafficking pathways varied depending on the victims' circumstances.

The findings are supported by recent local literature emphasizing that deceptive recruitment remains a dominant strategy used by traffickers in the Philippines. According to the Philippine Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT, 2024), traffickers frequently recruit victims through acquaintances, relatives, friends, and informal labor recruiters to establish trust and minimize suspicion. Local studies further revealed that economic vulnerability and close social relationships often increase susceptibility to deceptive recruitment, especially among adolescents and low-income families (Islam & Khan, 2025).

The second theme, Fraudulent Employment Promises, revealed that participants P2, P4, P7, and P10 experienced deceptive job offers that misrepresented salary, work conditions, and the actual nature of employment. Victims expected legitimate work opportunities but later discovered exploitative conditions involving overwork, restricted movement, non-payment of wages, and coercion. In contrast, P1 and P8 did not primarily experience fraudulent labor recruitment, indicating variations in trafficking experiences among victims.

The findings are consistent with recent Philippine literature showing that false employment opportunities remain among the most common methods used by traffickers. The Department of Migrant Workers (DMW, 2024) reported that many trafficking victims in the Philippines are recruited through fake job advertisements and illegal recruitment schemes promising high salaries and safe employment. Local studies also found that individuals from economically disadvantaged communities are more likely to accept risky job offers due to unemployment and financial hardship (Albert, 2023).

The third theme, Labor Exploitation by Employers, demonstrated that participants P2, P3, P5, and P6 experienced threats, excessive workloads, intimidation, and deprivation of rest. Victims were forced to work under harsh conditions with little freedom to complain or escape. However, participants P1, P4, P8, P9, and P10 did not report the same degree of labor exploitation, indicating that not all trafficking experiences involved direct labor abuse.

The findings are supported by recent local studies emphasizing that labor trafficking in the Philippines commonly involves excessive workloads, physical exhaustion, unsafe working conditions, and employer intimidation. According to the International Labour Organization Philippines Office (ILO Philippines, 2023), labor trafficking victims frequently experience wage withholding, threats, deprivation of freedom, and coercive work practices in informal labor sectors. Similarly, research conducted in vulnerable Philippine communities showed that labor exploitation remains prevalent among workers recruited through informal and unregulated employment arrangements (Esguerra et al., 2024).

The fourth theme, Sexual Exploitation, revealed that participants P2, P3, P8, and P10 experienced severe forms of sexual exploitation involving coercion, deception, and lack of consent. Victims were forced into exploitative sexual activities both offline and online. In contrast, participants P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P9 did not report direct experiences of sexual exploitation, showing that trafficking experiences varied according to the type of exploitation imposed on victims.

The findings are supported by recent Philippine literature indicating that sexual exploitation remains a serious trafficking concern in the country, particularly among women, adolescents, and minors. According to the Commission on Human Rights Philippines (CHR, 2024), traffickers frequently exploit vulnerable women and children through online sexual exploitation, prostitution, and entertainment-related establishments. Local studies further revealed that poverty, family vulnerability, and lack of education increase susceptibility to sexual exploitation and online abuse (Gill, 2021).

Thus, Table 5 demonstrated that while victims shared common experiences of deception, exploitation, and coercion, the forms and severity of trafficking differed across cases. The cross-case analysis highlighted that human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula involved multiple pathways and forms of abuse, including deceptive recruitment, fraudulent employment, labor exploitation, and sexual exploitation. Recent local literature strongly supports these findings, confirming that trafficking in the Philippines continues to be driven by poverty, unemployment, deceptive recruitment practices, and weak labor protection systems.

Conclusions

The study concluded that human trafficking in the Zamboanga Peninsula remained a serious social and human rights issue affecting both male and female victims across different age groups, although adolescents were found to be the most vulnerable sector. The findings revealed that labor trafficking, sex trafficking, and cyber trafficking were prevalent forms of exploitation experienced by the participants. Economic vulnerability, lack of awareness, and limited opportunities significantly increased susceptibility to trafficking.

The study further concluded that victims were commonly recruited through deception, fraudulent employment promises, and manipulation by trusted individuals such as friends, acquaintances, and informal recruiters. Traffickers exploited the victims' aspirations for better income and improved living conditions by offering false employment opportunities and misleading promises regarding salaries, working conditions, and migration opportunities. These deceptive recruitment practices became primary pathways leading victims into exploitative situations.

Moreover, the study concluded that poverty, unemployment, financial hardship, and limited educational opportunities were major contributing factors that heightened vulnerability to human trafficking. Participants experienced severe deprivation, hunger, interrupted schooling, and economic instability, which compelled them to accept risky job offers and migration opportunities in hopes of improving their lives and supporting their families.

The findings also concluded that victims experienced various forms of exploitation and abuse, including labor exploitation, coercion, intimidation, excessive workloads, deprivation of rest, sexual exploitation, and restriction of freedom. Traffickers and exploitative employers-maintained control through threats, fear, manipulation, and dependence, preventing victims from escaping abusive environments.

Furthermore, the study concluded that human trafficking produced devastating psychological, emotional, and physical effects on victims. Survivors experienced trauma, fear, shame, anxiety, emotional distress, recurring traumatic memories, bodily exhaustion, illness, injuries, hunger, and long-term physical and mental health difficulties. These consequences persisted even after the trafficking experience ended and affected survivors' social functioning, employment opportunities, and reintegration into society.

Finally, the study concluded that trauma recognition and self-awareness served as important coping mechanisms among survivors of human trafficking. Although participants continued to experience emotional pain and psychological suffering, acknowledging their trauma enabled them to recognize the impact of their experiences and gradually begin the process of healing and recovery. The cross-case analysis further

revealed that while victims shared common experiences of deception, coercion, and exploitation, the forms and severity of abuse varied depending on the nature of trafficking and the circumstances of each case.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that Local Government Units (LGUs) strengthen anti-human trafficking programs through intensified awareness campaigns and community-based interventions, particularly in vulnerable barangays and rural communities. Information dissemination activities should focus on deceptive recruitment practices, illegal recruitment schemes, online exploitation, and trafficking prevention strategies in order to increase public awareness and reduce vulnerability among economically disadvantaged individuals.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), together with other social service agencies, should enhance survivor-centered rehabilitation and reintegration programs for victims of human trafficking. Trauma-informed counseling, mental health services, psychosocial interventions, livelihood assistance, and long-term recovery programs should be strengthened to help survivors cope with trauma, emotional distress, fear, and social reintegration difficulties resulting from trafficking experiences.

Law enforcement agencies and the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) should intensify monitoring, investigation, and enforcement efforts against illegal recruitment, labor exploitation, cyber trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation. Stronger coordination among government agencies, local authorities, and international partners should be established to ensure the protection of victims, prosecution of traffickers, and immediate intervention in trafficking cases.

The Department of Education (DepEd) and higher education institutions should integrate anti-human trafficking education, online safety awareness, and migration risk education into school curricula and community extension programs. Since adolescents were found to be highly vulnerable to trafficking, schools should strengthen educational campaigns that help learners identify deceptive recruitment practices and unsafe employment opportunities.

The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) should strengthen employment monitoring systems and ensure that recruitment agencies comply with labor laws and ethical recruitment practices. Sustainable livelihood programs, skills training, and employment opportunities should also be expanded to address poverty, unemployment, and financial hardship, which were identified as major contributing factors to trafficking vulnerability.

Community organizations, non-government organizations (NGOs), and faith-based institutions should continue providing emotional support, advocacy programs, safe

spaces, and community-based assistance for trafficking survivors. Community participation in identifying suspicious recruitment activities and supporting vulnerable families should also be encouraged to strengthen local anti-trafficking efforts.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct broader qualitative and quantitative studies involving larger samples and different geographical areas to further explore emerging forms of trafficking such as cyber trafficking and online sexual exploitation. Further studies may also investigate long-term recovery processes, survivor reintegration, and the effectiveness of existing anti-trafficking interventions and policies in the Philippines.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study strictly adhered to ethical standards in the conduct of research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the appropriate institutional ethics review body to ensure that the rights, dignity, safety, and welfare of the participants were fully protected throughout the study. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The researcher provided informed consent forms explaining the purpose of the study, research procedures, potential risks, benefits, and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or consequence. Participants were given sufficient time to understand the study before agreeing to participate.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Participants were assigned coded pseudonyms instead of real names to protect their identities, and all interview transcripts, recordings, and research documents were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Any identifying information that could compromise participant privacy was excluded from the study. Considering the sensitive nature of human trafficking experiences, trauma-informed interviewing procedures were carefully observed during data collection. Interviews were conducted in safe and private environments to ensure participant comfort and emotional security. The researcher remained sensitive to participants' emotional conditions throughout the interviews, and a licensed psychometrician was available during the data gathering process to provide immediate psychological support whenever necessary. A distress protocol was also implemented to address possible emotional discomfort or retraumatization among participants.

The study also ensured responsible and ethical use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the research process. AI-assisted technologies were utilized only for language enhancement, grammar checking, organization of ideas, and improvement of academic writing clarity. The researcher carefully reviewed, validated, and interpreted all generated content to ensure accuracy, originality, credibility, and alignment with the actual data gathered from participants. AI tools were not used to fabricate data, manipulate findings, or replace the researcher's critical analysis and interpretation. The final responsibility for

the integrity, authenticity, and scholarly quality of the study remained solely with the researcher. Furthermore, the study upheld the principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, respect for persons, and justice. The researcher ensured that no participant was exposed to unnecessary harm, coercion, discrimination, or exploitation during the conduct of the study. The findings were presented honestly, accurately, and responsibly to preserve the integrity, credibility, and ethical rigor of the research process.

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