



THE UNSEEN STRUGGLES: WCPD INVESTIGATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INVESTIGATIONS IN THE PROVINCE OF CAMARINES NORTE

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) investigators handling domestic violence cases in Camarines Norte. It examined their emotional and psychological struggles, experiences in coordinating with other agencies, coping mechanisms, and aspirations for strengthening violence against women and children response systems. Fifteen active WCPD investigators with at least one year of experience in handling cases under Republic Act No. 9262 were purposively selected. Data were gathered through researcher-developed, expert-validated, and pilot-tested semi-structured key informant interviews conducted in English, Filipino, or Bicol. Interviews were transcribed, translated when necessary, member-checked, and analyzed thematically following the six phases of Braun and Clarke. The findings showed that investigators experienced emotional distress related to victim withdrawal, heavy workloads and multiple designations, absorption of victims' trauma, safety risks, resource limitations, persistent psychological carryover, and cognitive demands. Coordination was affected by victim ambivalence, limited support services, delays in accessing medico-legal and social welfare assistance, and inadequate shelter resources. Republic Act No. 9262 and PNP operational manuals were regarded as essential guides, although their effectiveness depended on implementation, institutional capacity, and inter-agency collaboration. Investigators coped through emotional regulation, professional detachment, peer support, self-care, spirituality, teamwork, and organizational interventions. They called for continuous professional development, stronger resources and manpower, improved coordination, and sustained investigator-welfare programs. Based on these findings, Project KALINGA is proposed as an enhanced psychological wellness, professional capacity, and

institutional support program for WCPD investigators. This research was completed in August 2026.

Keywords: *Unseen struggles, WCPD investigators, Overcoming challenges, Domestic violence, Investigation*

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence remains a significant social, public-health, human-rights, and criminal-justice concern. International guidance emphasizes survivor-centered and gender-responsive policing, yet law-enforcement responses continue to be affected by resource limitations, organizational constraints, cultural barriers, and the complexity of victim circumstances (Devries et al., 2018; UN Women, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2021). Investigators handling domestic violence must simultaneously protect victims, assess risks, document incidents, gather evidence, communicate with survivors, and coordinate with other service providers. These responsibilities make domestic violence investigation both procedurally demanding and emotionally taxing.

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 9262, or the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004, provides a legal framework for protection and accountability. The 2022 Philippine National Demographic and Health Survey reported that 17.5% of Filipino women aged 15–49 had experienced violence from an intimate partner, while only a minority sought formal assistance (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA] & Department of Health [DOH], 2022). The continuing presence of violence despite a formal legal framework indicates that effective protection depends not only on legislation but also on the capacity of institutions and frontline personnel to implement it (Republic Act No. 9262, 2004; Philippine National Police [PNP], 2018).

WCPD investigators occupy a critical position in this response system. Their work involves receiving complaints, interviewing victims and witnesses, documenting incidents, gathering evidence, coordinating referrals, and facilitating access to justice and protective services. The PNP Women and Children Protection Center Manual provides operational guidance for these functions (PNP, 2018). However, the existence of legal and procedural guidance does not eliminate the practical difficulties associated with victim cooperation, heavy workloads, limited personnel, emotional exposure, field risks, and coordination with agencies whose services may not be continuously accessible.

Research on police responses to domestic violence indicates that investigators may experience operational stress, emotional labor, and secondary traumatic stress when repeatedly exposed to violence and trauma. Studies of police well-being emphasize the importance of resilience, self-care, peer support, and organizational resources in sustaining effective performance (Patterson & Swan, 2019; Violanti et al., 2018; Pérez et al., 2020). Trauma-informed training can also strengthen police responses by helping officers understand victims' behavior, communicate more effectively, and avoid interpreting trauma-related reactions simply as unwillingness to cooperate (Goodman-Williams et al., 2020; Millar et al., 2019).

The literature further indicates that domestic violence cases frequently require collaboration among police, health services, social welfare offices, prosecutors, barangay authorities, shelters, and other community organizations. When these systems are fragmented or difficult to access, investigators may carry additional responsibilities and victims may experience delays in receiving assistance. In geographically dispersed and resource-constrained settings, these institutional conditions may be particularly consequential. The Camarines Norte setting therefore provides an important context for examining how specialized investigators experience and manage the operational and emotional realities of domestic violence investigation.

Although existing literature provides substantial discussion of domestic violence, victim experiences, police procedures, and officer well-being, fewer studies center on the lived experiences of WCPD investigators in a provincial Philippine setting. The present study addresses this gap by examining the perspectives of WCPD investigators in Camarines Norte, with particular attention to their emotional and psychological struggles, coordination experiences and identified gaps, coping mechanisms, and aspirations for improving domestic violence response. The study is intended to provide context-specific evidence that can inform investigator support, professional development, institutional strengthening, and more responsive victim-centered services.

The study is informed primarily by Feminist Criminology, which situates violence against women within gendered power relations and highlights the need for gender-sensitive institutional responses. Social Learning Theory, Routine Activity Theory, and Strain Theory provide additional perspectives for understanding the persistence and context of violence, while trauma-informed policing emphasizes the importance of recognizing trauma in interactions with victims. Phenomenology supports the focus on lived experience, and a pragmatic orientation underscores the study's goal of generating practical recommendations. Taken together, these perspectives frame domestic violence investigation as a function shaped by individual, interpersonal, organizational, and institutional conditions.

Research Questions

1. How do WCPD investigators narrate their emotional and psychological struggles when dealing with victim trauma, threats from perpetrators, and continuous exposure to high-stakes cases?
2. How do WCPD investigators describe their experiences of coordination with barangay officials, social workers, medical professionals, prosecutors, and other agencies, and what gaps do they identify?
3. What coping strategies do WCPD investigators develop to manage stress and emotional strain when dealing with sensitive domestic violence cases?
4. What aspirations do WCPD investigators have for dealing with domestic violence cases in the Province of Camarines Norte?
5. Based on the findings, what program may be proposed to strengthen the capacity and well-being of WCPD investigators?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of WCPD investigators handling domestic violence cases. Phenomenology was appropriate because the study sought to understand how investigators interpreted, experienced, and made meaning of the challenges encountered in their professional practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2017). The qualitative approach allowed participants' narratives, perceptions, emotions, and coping responses to remain central to the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Fifteen active WCPD investigators assigned in the municipalities of Camarines Norte participated in the study. Participants had at least one year of experience handling domestic violence cases under Republic Act No. 9262. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals with direct and sufficient experience of the phenomenon. Officers on temporary assignment, those not directly engaged in domestic violence investigation, those inactive during data collection, and individuals who declined or withdrew consent were excluded.

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Profile of Participants

Municipality	Participants
Daet (Capital)	3
Labo	2
Jose Panganiban	1
Vinzons	1
Basud	1
Mercedes	1
Paracale	1
Sta. Elena	1
Talisay	1
San Vicente	1
San Lorenzo Ruiz	1
Capalonga	1
Total	15

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted across the Province of Camarines Norte in the Bicol Region, Philippines. The province has twelve municipalities—Basud, Capalonga, Daet, Jose Panganiban, Labo, Mercedes, Paracale, San Lorenzo Ruiz, San Vicente, Sta. Elena, Talisay, and Vinzons. The setting provided varied rural and semi-urban contexts in which investigators work with differences in workload, resource availability, distance, and access to partner services.

Instrument and Validation

Data were collected through a researcher-constructed semi-structured interview guide designed around the research questions. The guide was reviewed by three experts: an academic representative, a WCPD officer from the Camarines Norte Police Provincial Office, and a WCPD officer serving as a field investigator and acting chief of police. The validators assessed clarity, relevance, alignment with the research objectives, and ethical appropriateness. The instrument was also pilot-tested with non-participant investigators and refined before formal use. Because the study was qualitative, internal-consistency testing such as Cronbach's alpha was not used; credibility and dependability were strengthened through expert validation, peer debriefing, documentary triangulation, and member checking.

Data Gathering Procedure

Academic and institutional approvals were secured before data collection, followed by permits from the appropriate Philippine National Police units. Participants received information about the study and provided written informed consent. Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience and conducted in private, neutral venues or through secure online platforms when necessary. Each key informant interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in English, Filipino, or Bicol according to participant preference. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. Transcripts were prepared verbatim, translated into English when necessary, and returned to participants for member checking. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis focused on recurring patterns related to emotional and psychological struggles, coordination challenges, coping strategies, aspirations, and institutional needs. An audit trail of coding notes, analytic memos, theme-development records, and decision logs was maintained. Documentary sources, including Republic Act No. 9262, PNP operational guidance, case-related statistics, and local reports, were used for triangulation.

Scope and Ethical Considerations

The study focused specifically on the professional experiences of WCPD investigators in Camarines Norte and did not attempt to measure the prevalence of domestic violence or evaluate individual case outcomes. The study followed informed-consent procedures, respected participants' right to withdraw without penalty, maintained anonymity through codes or pseudonyms, and stored research records in encrypted, password-protected files. Identifying information concerning victims, witnesses, investigators, and ongoing cases was excluded from the presentation of findings. Formal institutional permissions were secured before data gathering.

RESULTS

Analysis of the narratives generated four broad areas of findings corresponding to the research questions: emotional and psychological struggles; coordination with other agencies and identified gaps; coping mechanisms and strategies; and aspirations for strengthening domestic violence response. Across these areas, the experiences of the 15 investigators reflected the interaction of personal empathy, repeated trauma exposure, operational demands, victim circumstances, institutional limitations, and the availability of support mechanisms.

Emotional and Psychological Struggles

Six interconnected themes emerged. First, investigators experienced emotional distress when victims withdrew complaints or became unwilling to continue. Participants described frustration after investing time and effort in preparing cases, while also recognizing that victims' decisions were often shaped by fear, emotional attachment, financial dependence, and family considerations. Second, heavy workloads and multiple designations created operational and emotional strain because investigators had to balance WCPD responsibilities with administrative, field, and other police duties.

Third, investigators reported emotional absorption of victims' trauma. Repeated exposure to narratives involving violence, injury, and vulnerable women and children could affect investigators personally, particularly when they identified with victims as women, parents, or family members. Fourth, safety risks, resource limitations, difficult field conditions, transportation concerns, and limited access to essential services contributed to uncertainty and stress. Fifth, some investigators experienced persistent mental preoccupation after work, including rumination and psychological carryover. Sixth, the simultaneous management of investigation, documentation, victim assistance, administrative compliance, and critical decisions produced cognitive burden and mental fatigue.

Table 2. Major Themes on Emotional and Psychological Struggles

Theme	Core Finding
1. Emotional distress from victim withdrawal	Withdrawal and changing decisions created frustration, discouragement, and helplessness.
2. Heavy workload and multiple designations	Competing assignments reduced time, attention, and emotional capacity for WCPD work.
3. Emotional absorption of victims' trauma	Repeated exposure to traumatic narratives produced empathy, personal identification, and emotional strain.
4. Safety risks and resource limitations	Field risks, transportation difficulties, and inadequate resources increased stress and uncertainty.
5. Persistent mental preoccupation	Case experiences could remain mentally present beyond working hours.

6. Cognitive burden and role conflict	Multiple responsibilities and constant decision-making generated mental fatigue.
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Overall, the findings indicate that the emotional burden of WCPD work cannot be separated from the operational environment. Investigator distress was associated not only with exposure to traumatic narratives but also with workload, safety, resource availability, victim circumstances, and organizational expectations. This pattern is consistent with literature describing stress, resilience demands, and secondary traumatic stress among law-enforcement and trauma-exposed professionals (Patterson & Swan, 2019; Violanti et al., 2018; Pérez et al., 2020).

Coordination With Other Agencies and Identified Gaps

Three themes emerged in relation to coordination. The first was victim cooperation and emotional ambivalence as barriers to case continuity. Twelve informants described situations in which victims initially intended to pursue legal action but later hesitated or withdrew. Investigators attributed these changes to fear, emotional attachment, concern for children, financial dependence, and family stability. The finding suggests that victim withdrawal should be understood within the broader social and psychological context of domestic violence rather than treated simply as noncompliance.

The second theme involved inter-agency coordination challenges and institutional limitations. Eleven informants identified delays associated with the availability of medico-legal personnel, restricted operating hours of social welfare offices, and insufficient temporary shelter and support facilities. Because domestic violence incidents can require immediate intervention, delays in medical examination, social welfare assistance, shelter, or referral services can affect both victim safety and case progression. Participants nevertheless noted that training, clearer policies, and improved communication had contributed to better coordination in some circumstances.

The third theme concerned the perceived effectiveness of Republic Act No. 9262 and PNP operational manuals. All 15 informants regarded the law and operational guidance as important references for investigation, documentation, and case handling. However, they emphasized that the practical impact of legal and procedural frameworks depends on enforcement, professional competence, resources, victim cooperation, and collaboration among agencies. This finding reinforces the principle that a formal legal framework requires functioning institutional systems to achieve its protective objectives (Republic Act No. 9262, 2004; PNP, 2018; UNODC, 2021).

Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Three themes described how investigators managed the emotional and operational demands of their work. The first was emotional regulation and professional detachment. Investigators described consciously controlling emotional reactions and maintaining professional boundaries so that empathy would not prevent them from performing investigative responsibilities. Self-care activities such as family bonding, physical activity, relaxation, and prayer were also described as ways of restoring emotional balance.

The second theme was peer support and collective problem-solving. Consultation with colleagues, teamwork, and shared problem-solving allowed investigators to manage difficult cases and reduce the sense of carrying challenges alone. The third theme was institutional support and organizational interventions. Stress-debriefing activities, psychological assessments, wellness initiatives, and organizational assistance were perceived as useful, although participants noted that these mechanisms were limited or inconsistently available. These findings align with research emphasizing peer support, resilience, self-care, and organizational resources as important components of police well-being (Patterson & Swan, 2019; Violanti et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2021).

Aspirations of WCPD Investigators

Participants expressed three interconnected aspirations. First, they called for continuous professional development, including refresher seminars, scenario-based training, legal updates, trauma-informed investigation, and practical learning opportunities. Second, they sought stronger institutional support through additional manpower, particularly women investigators, improved facilities, adequate budgets, transportation and logistical support, and clearer role specialization. Third, they advocated for investigator welfare through regular stress debriefing, mental-health support, stronger protective policies, and greater public understanding of the realities of WCPD work.

These aspirations indicate that investigators do not view effective domestic violence response as dependent on individual competence alone. Rather, they perceive effectiveness as a shared institutional responsibility requiring trained personnel, adequate resources, accessible support services, coordinated agencies, and sustained attention to investigator welfare.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide a coherent picture of domestic violence investigation as a form of specialized police work that combines legal enforcement, victim assistance, crisis response, evidence development, and emotional labor. The first research question revealed that investigators' emotional and psychological struggles are produced by the cumulative interaction of trauma exposure and organizational demands. Victim withdrawal can be especially difficult because investigators may interpret a discontinued case as an interruption of protection and justice efforts, while simultaneously recognizing the social and economic pressures that shape victims' decisions. Trauma-informed approaches are therefore important not only for victims but also for helping investigators understand victim behavior without reducing ambivalence to a lack of credibility or cooperation (Goodman-Williams et al., 2020; Millar et al., 2019).

The workload findings likewise suggest that investigator welfare is inseparable from organizational design. Multiple designations, competing compliance requirements, field duties, and case documentation can fragment attention and reduce the time available for sensitive investigations. The resulting cognitive and emotional burden is consistent with broader literature on police stress and resilience, which emphasizes the relationship between job demands, available resources, and occupational well-being (Patterson &

Swan, 2019; Violanti et al., 2018). In this context, adding wellness activities without addressing excessive workload and staffing limitations may provide only partial relief.

The emotional absorption and persistent psychological carryover reported by participants are also important because they may remain invisible in routine performance indicators. Investigators can complete required procedures while still experiencing emotional fatigue, rumination, or secondary traumatic stress. Research on professionals exposed to traumatic material similarly identifies the potential psychological consequences of repeated exposure, reinforcing the need for organizational mechanisms that normalize help-seeking, provide peer support, and make psychological assistance accessible (Pérez et al., 2020).

The coordination findings answer the second research question by showing that case continuity is influenced by a network of actors and services. Medico-legal availability, social welfare schedules, shelter capacity, and referral systems can directly affect what investigators are able to accomplish. The findings therefore support a systems perspective: improving WCPD performance requires strengthening the wider service network rather than placing responsibility solely on individual investigators. This is consistent with gender-responsive and multidisciplinary policing guidance that emphasizes coordination among police, justice, health, social welfare, and community services (UN Women, 2021; UNODC, 2021).

The perceived effectiveness of Republic Act No. 9262 and PNP operational manuals further demonstrates the distinction between formal policy and implementation capacity. Participants recognized these frameworks as essential and useful, but they also observed that legal provisions achieve their intended impact only when personnel are adequately trained, services are accessible, agencies coordinate effectively, and victims can be supported throughout the process. Thus, the study does not indicate that the legal framework is inadequate in itself; rather, it highlights the institutional conditions required for the framework to function effectively.

The coping findings answer the third research question by demonstrating that investigators actively develop individual and collective strategies for maintaining functioning under pressure. Emotional regulation and professional detachment help preserve investigative objectivity, while family activities, physical activity, prayer, and other forms of self-care support recovery. Peer consultation and teamwork provide social resources that can reduce isolation and facilitate problem-solving. These strategies correspond with evidence that peer support and resilience resources can contribute to police well-being (Violanti et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2021). Nevertheless, individual coping should complement rather than replace organizational responsibility for safe workloads, psychological services, staffing, and resources.

The aspirations of the investigators answer the fourth research question and point directly to the intervention proposed in the fifth. Their priorities—continuous professional development, adequate manpower and resources, stronger coordination, and investigator welfare—form a mutually reinforcing set of needs. A training-only response would be insufficient if investigators remain overloaded or unable to access partner services. Conversely, additional resources without professional development may not fully address the specialized knowledge and emotional demands of domestic violence

work. The findings therefore support a comprehensive program combining wellness, professional capacity-building, coordination, and institutional support.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, Project KALINGA is proposed as an enhanced psychological wellness, professional capacity, and institutional support program for WCPD investigators. The program is intended to address the interconnected emotional, professional, operational, and institutional needs identified by the participants.

Table 3. Project KALINGA: Proposed Program Components

Program Component	Key Activities	Expected Outcome
Psychological Wellness and Stress Debriefing	Regular psychological first aid, stress debriefing, wellness sessions, psychological assessment, and referral when needed.	Improved stress management, emotional regulation, and access to psychological support.
Professional Capacity Enhancement	Refresher training, scenario-based investigation exercises, legal updates, trauma-informed interviewing, evidence handling, and coordination training.	Improved confidence, competence, and preparedness in handling domestic violence cases.
Institutional Support and Coordination	Coordination meetings, referral-system strengthening, resource mapping, review of operational gaps, and linkage with partner agencies.	Faster referrals, clearer coordination mechanisms, and stronger institutional responsiveness.
Peer Support and Wellness Sustainability	Peer-support activities, team reflection, wellness activities, monitoring, and integration into continuing professional development.	Sustained peer support, resilience, and continuity of investigator-welfare initiatives.

The proposed program has an estimated total cost of Php 210,000.00 based on the thesis program plan. The largest allocation is directed to the Enhanced Psychological First Aid and Stress Debriefing Seminar, followed by professional capacity enhancement, institutional coordination activities, and peer-support and wellness sustainability activities. Potential funding sources identified in the study include the Philippine National Police, NAPOLCOM Regional Office V, local government units, Gender and Development funds, and partner agencies such as social welfare, health, nongovernmental, and academic organizations.

Table 4. Proposed Project KALINGA Budget Utilization

Program Component	Estimated Cost (Php)	Percentage
Enhanced Psychological First Aid and Stress Debriefing Seminar	110,000.00	52%
Professional Capacity Enhancement Trainings	45,000.00	21%
Institutional Support and Coordination Activities	30,000.00	14%
Peer Support and Wellness Sustainability Activities	25,000.00	13%
Total	210,000.00	100%

Project KALINGA should be integrated into the continuing wellness and professional-development activities of WCPD personnel. Sustainability requires coordination with PNP leadership, mental-health professionals, NAPOLCOM, local government units, and partner agencies. Program monitoring may focus on participation, perceived stress-management capacity, training outcomes, referral coordination, and institutional support indicators.

Conclusions

The study concludes that WCPD investigators experience significant emotional, psychological, cognitive, and operational challenges in handling domestic violence cases. Victim withdrawal, repeated exposure to trauma, heavy workloads, multiple designations, safety risks, resource limitations, persistent mental preoccupation, and continuous decision-making contribute to emotional and professional strain.

The study further concludes that case continuity and effective victim protection depend on sustained victim engagement and a functional inter-agency support system. Delays in medico-legal and social welfare services, limited shelter resources, and other operational constraints can affect timely intervention. Republic Act No. 9262 and PNP operational manuals remain important foundations, but their practical effectiveness depends on implementation capacity, professional competence, resources, and coordination.

The investigators demonstrate resilience through emotional regulation, professional detachment, self-care, spirituality, peer support, teamwork, and organizational interventions. These coping mechanisms help investigators continue their duties, but they should not substitute for institutional responsibility to provide safe working conditions, adequate staffing, psychological support, and manageable workloads.

Finally, WCPD investigators aspire to a more responsive and sustainable system characterized by continuous professional development, stronger institutional resources, improved inter-agency coordination, and comprehensive investigator-welfare mechanisms. These findings support the proposed Project KALINGA as a comprehensive

intervention intended to strengthen both investigator well-being and the effectiveness of domestic violence response.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study complied with ethical standards governing research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of participant codes and the removal of identifying details from transcripts and reports. Data were stored in encrypted, password-protected files, and access was restricted to the researcher. The well-being and privacy of participants were safeguarded throughout data collection, and information concerning victims, witnesses, and ongoing cases was protected. The study declared no conflict of interest. Plagiarism, fabrication, falsification, and intentional misrepresentation were avoided, and findings were interpreted on the basis of the collected data without deliberate bias. The results were used for research and scholarly purposes. AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this IMRAD-formatted manuscript for editorial organization, language refinement, and formatting support; the researcher retained responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, and integrity of the study and its findings.

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