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STORIES OF INJUSTICE: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VICTIMIZATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

Injustice remains a persistent dilemma affecting crime victims and their families, often resulting from financial constraints, systemic biases, or flaws within the criminal justice system. This study aimed to explore the experiences of injustice among crime victims in Zamboanga del Norte. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten (10) informants, comprising six (6) females and four (4) males from the province. Data analysis followed a six-step process: transcription, coding, selection of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering into themes, and generation of emergent themes. Findings revealed seven (7) dominant themes. Four (4) themes – phantom assailant, legal paperwork mishap, officer passivity, and unsettled litigation – captured the core injustices experienced. One (1) theme, conformity/lethargy, represented the coping mechanism adopted by informants in response to injustice. The remaining two (2) themes – official backing and legal parity – reflected the aspirations of informants to prevent future injustices. The study highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms to ensure equitable access to justice for all crime victims.

KEYWORDS: *Injustices, Crime Victim, Lived Experiences*

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Injustice remains a pervasive reality experienced daily by individuals across the globe (Stupnianek, 2021). It can be broadly defined as the absence of justice or the manifestation of inequities within legal systems. Mathur et al. (2022) further describe injustice as a violation of equity or fairness, identifying it as a fundamental driver of health and social disparities. Alarmingly, approximately 5.1 billion people—nearly two-thirds of the world's population—continue to be failed by their justice systems (Hodal, 2019). This finding closely aligns with the World Justice Project (2019), which estimated that around 5 billion people globally face unmet justice needs, whether due to exclusion from legal protections or living under conditions of extreme injustice.

Historical events in the Philippines vividly illustrate systemic injustice, particularly during the Martial Law era under Ferdinand Marcos Sr., widely regarded as a period marked by rampant corruption and human rights abuses. Records from Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP) reported 5,531 cases of torture, 2,537 summary executions, 783 enforced disappearances, and 92,607 public order violations and arrests during this time (Melencio, 2019). Despite the passage of decades, many Martial Law survivors continue to recount their struggles for impartial justice (Li, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed longstanding flaws in the Philippine justice system, with documented cases of illegal arrests, maltreatment of quarantine violators, violations of labor rights, and systemic barriers to legal access (Pago, 2020). Additionally, the slow proceedings of cases like the Maguindanao massacre—wherein 58 individuals were brutally killed, and several suspects remain unprosecuted even after a decade—reflect the deep inefficiencies in legal redress (Conde, 2019).

Contemporary incidents, such as the massacre in Zamboanga del Norte, where five individuals were shot and burned in their home while perpetrators fled justice, underscore that injustice is neither historical nor isolated. Without substantial reforms, crime victims may increasingly lose faith in institutional systems, potentially resorting to vigilantism or alternative forms of self-redress.To address these persistent challenges, this study seeks to explore and document the lived experiences of injustice among crime victims in Zamboanga del Norte. By understanding the depth and complexity of these experiences, the researchers aim to offer evidence-based policy recommendations and propose interventions that can strengthen victim support mechanisms and enhance the fairness and accessibility of the justice system.

2.0. OBJECTIVES

1. to investigate the injustices experienced of the informants;
2. to look into the coping mechanisms adopted by the informants;
3. to inquire as to the aspirations of the Informants to the Justice system; and
4. to find out the government's interventions received by the informants during the justice process.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of individuals. A descriptive approach was utilized to gather detailed accounts concerning the what, when, where, and why of events and experiences related to injustice. Since the study aimed to explore personal experiences of injustice, in-depth interviews served as the primary method of data collection. An in-depth interview is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive, individual conversations with a small number of participants to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, situation, or event.

The interviews were conducted personally by the researchers to fully capture and understand the informants' narratives regarding their experiences of injustice. In contrast to quantitative research, this qualitative study involved fewer participants, focusing on depth rather than breadth.

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Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study included ten (10) informants: four (4) males and six (6) females, aged between fifteen (15) and seventy (70) years old. Eligible participants were crime victims who had not attained justice due to various factors, including lack of police assistance or negligence, financial constraints that prevented them from filing cases, cases dismissed due to the financial influence of opposing parties, or losses incurred because of weak legal representation.

Individuals were excluded if they met any of the following conditions: refusal to sign the informed consent form; aged below fifteen (15) or above seventy (70) years old; not being victims of a crime; or not experiencing any form of injustice. Applying these criteria enabled the researchers to accurately identify and select qualified informants relevant to the study's objectives.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers, with input from their academic adviser, was utilized for data collection. The instrument consisted of three (3) parts: (1) participant characteristics, (2) interview procedures, and (3) open-ended questions related to the informants' experiences of injustice. The instrument underwent careful checking, editing, and revision to ensure its content validity and reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

Face-to-face interviews were conducted to ensure the richness and authenticity of the data collected. During the interviews, the researchers simultaneously took notes and recorded the conversations using an audio recorder, with the participants' consent. This dual approach ensured that no critical information was lost and that the data collected accurately reflected the informants' experiences.

4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data that were gathered from the informants were transcribed and were read several times. Significant statements that were related to the research problems were extracted, clustered and formulated meanings to construct a theme.

To explicitly connect the coverage of the study, each informant was allowed to speak their own dialect to express their experiences orally. These were translated for general readability and understanding. Likewise, all the statements from the informants were selected from the transcribed interview. Each significant statement was coded, and formulated meanings were created as they reflect comprehensive description of the informants' experiences.

The outcome of this research was construed to explain the lived experiences of injustice among crime victims.

I. Injustices Experiences of Informants

a. Phantom Assailant
b. Legal Paperwork Mishap
c. Officer Passivity
d. Unsettled Litigation

II. Coping Mechanism of Informants

a. Conformity/Lethargy

III. Informants' Aspirations

a. Legal Parity
b. Official Backing

IV. Government Interventions

Injustices: Experiences of Crime Victims

Underneath is revealed the presentation and explanation of emergent themes on the living experiences of injustice among informants.

I. Injustices: Experiences of Informants

Exploring the injustices experiences of the informants based on interviews was our honour to hear such account. The informants have not told anyone before about their experiences of injustice not until we conducted this study and becoming interested to disclose their stories of injustices that were hidden inside the closet. We have generated four (4) themes which focused on the experiences of injustice among informants in Zamboanga del Norte. The following themes are:

a. Phantom Assailant. This theme emphasizes that crime victims have not acquire justice as the perpetrator who committed the act has not been identified or caught by law enforcement authorities. This is the first and greatest injustice experienced and endured by the informants. Informants six (6) explained that the perpetrator who stabbed her son was not caught because his identity is not known. She stated that;

> *Wala gyud madakpi kay wala man mailhi ug kinsa ang galuba dayun gisalig na lang namo tos Ginoo* (P6: SS24). *(*It was not captured because we didn't know who the culprit was, so we just trusted it to God.*)*

Informants 7 corroborated the statement of Informant 6 regarding the perpetrators anonymity, he said that:

> *Lisud man gud ug masakyan ug pulitiko, asa man ka mangitag hustisya? Kay katong tawhana, naa gyud toy nagpaluyo sa iyaha (P3:SS9).* (It is hard when politics are involved, where can we find justice? That man was helped by someone in power.)

When the identity of the suspect/s is unidentified, the perpetrators unfortunately cannot be captured. That is informant 8 had said:

> *Unsaon man nga wala man pod me kabalo ug kinsay gapusil maong walay dakponon (P8: SS31).* (We don't know who shot him so no one is arrested.)

Informant 9 supplemented the account of Informant 8 in relation to unidentified offender. He said:

> *Wala gyod namo nailhi kinsa tong mga tawhana nga nagpusil naku hangtud karun kay ang storya nila sa akoa kay nganong ga uban uban ko sa kawatan ba daw (P9:SS34).* (We don't know who the man shot me until now because they told me why I accompany a thief.)

Informant 9 further claimed that the assailant was not caught due to his anonymous identity and said:

> *Wala mangod nahibaw-e ug kinsa kay ug muingon tag pulis wala man pod ta kita kay gabie man to (P10: SS38).* (It's not been identified and if we said it is a police officer, we don't see it because it's dark.)

One form of injustice revealed by the informants is the phenomenon of the phantom assailant, where victims are unable to identify their attacker, resulting in unresolved cases and unapprehended offenders. When perpetrators are not caught, victims feel that justice has not been served, and accountability is evaded. According to Glamrich (2021), most crimes reported do not result in the arrest, charging, or prosecution of suspects. Consequently, the failure of law enforcement to fulfill their duties has led to victims' growing reluctance to report incidents or cooperate with criminal justice authorities (Pruden, 2022).

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Lee (2019) emphasized that the main reason for unsuccessful prosecutions is the poor treatment of witnesses and victims within the criminal justice system. Many victims feel that the system fails to deliver justice, thereby compounding their pain and suffering (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Furthermore, Robinson et al. (2023) argued that a major, yet often overlooked, cause of justice failure is the increasing inaction by key actors in crime resolution, namely, community members and law enforcement. Stark (2023) similarly pointed out that police are not always able to track down and apprehend offenders, allowing crimes to go unpunished.

The Theory of Loopholes aptly explains this theme. This theory posits that some criminals are able to evade prosecution due to technicalities or loopholes in the law, often caused by unclear statutes, poorly written legislation, or negligence by law enforcement and prosecutors. Resource constraints, the influence and power of offenders, and the erosion of trust in the justice system further contribute to the failure to bring criminals to justice. Victims lacking the financial resources to pursue legal action are less likely to see offenders prosecuted. Additionally, offenders with strong social or political connections often manage to avoid punishment. When victims lose trust in the criminal justice system, they are less inclined to pursue justice, further weakening the system's efficacy.

The continued freedom and activity of offenders heighten community panic and broadens offenders' opportunities to commit further crimes (MiinChai et al., 2022). Therefore, it is critical that law enforcement agencies effectively perform their roles to prevent the erosion of public trust (Pruden, 2022). Incarcerating offenders is essential, as punishment serves to deter criminal behavior (Cohen, 2017; Motz et al., 2019). Johnson (2019) also asserted that detaining certain individuals prevents them from committing new crimes. Conversely, Redgave (2021) warned that when the justice system fails to deter criminal conduct and address disorder, offenders are emboldened, thereby endangering individuals and communities.

b. Legal Paperwork Mishap. This theme pertains to unsuccessful filing of the criminal case because the informants are financially deficits. Majority of informants are coming from less fortunate family and they did not receive justice because of the inability to continue financing. Informant 3 declared that he cannot continue filing the case because of financial deficits. She said:

> *Ang tawo tanan gusto jud makadawat og hustisya, kung ako lang padesiyunon kung naa lay kwarta ngano gud dili tah gusto makamit ang hustisya? (P3: SS10).* (People do want to receive justice. If I were to decide if I have money, why don't I want attaining justice?)

Informant 3 strongly believed that they really want justice but has none sufficient money to achieve it. She furtherly said:

> *Sa ing-ana panghitabo wala tag-tungod na dili jud maningkamot unta nga makamit jud ang hustisya pero ang pangutana kwarta gayud. Wala man kay ikasukol sa kaso (P3: SS11). (In that event, no offended party not striving to attain justice but money is in question. You have no fight to the case.)*

Informant 4 supported the statement of informant 3 of having insufficient penny to continue the filing. She said:

> *Oo, wala namo nadawat ang hustisya sa nahitabo sa akong bana tungod kay wala me kwarta nga ikagasto (P4: SS13).* (Yes, we don't receive justice to what happened to my husband because we don't have money to finance.)

She furtherly declared that she was not able to continue the case as they were not helped monetarily. This was her statement:

> *Mao to kwarta kulang, wala jud me financial. Wala poy nitabang namo nga naa sa posisyon basin dagway agi sa among kapobrehon (P4: SS13).* (That's it! We don't have financial. Nobody in politics had helped us perhaps due to our poverty.)

The filing stage always required enough finances otherwise, always ends up losing the case. That is what informant five (5) agreed and said:

> *Wala nadawat ang hustisya kay wala man koy kwarta. Pobre man me, unya ag pamilya sa akong bana moy kwartahan wala pud sila galihok kay mahadlok pud maamong dayun wala pud daw sila kaila sa gapusil (P5: SS20).* (Justice is not served because I don't have penny. We are poor and my husband's family who were wealthy did not even work as they were afraid to be implicated and they also didn't know who shot him.)

Legal Paperwork Mishap is the second injustice experienced by the informants. This theme means that the informants failed to file criminal charges against the suspect even though there is enough evidence to support the charges. This occurs due to their financial constraint. Money motivates and regulates criminal process because government have a legitimate interest in minimizing the public cost of justice administration (Brown, 2019). Low income households are more likely to experience legal problems (Prettitore, 2022). Court fees and fines unjustly burden people with debt as they are re-entering society (Menendez & Eisen, 2019).

The study of Ditton & Mackenzie (2018) highlighted that there is filing failure of criminal cases due to financial barriers that victims may face when trying to participate in the criminal justice process such as victims from low-income background may not be able to afford the cost of legal representation or the expenses associated with attending court proceedings. Sutherland (2019) futher examines the challenges faced by low-income individuals when seeking legal assistance. According to her study, low-income individuals are diasppropriately affected by the high cost of legal representation and associated legal fees. On top of that, Shaw (2017) argued that victims may face cost associated with hiring an attorney and these cost can be prohibitive and may prevent them from pursuing legal action.

Equal Access to Justice Theory holds that all individuals should have equal acess to legal system and be able to seek redress for their grievances, regardless of their financial situation. However, financial deficiency can be a significant barrier to accessing justice. People with limited financial resources may struggle to pay for legal representation or court which can limit their ability to navigate the legal system effectively. This can create situation where justice is only accessible to those who can afford it, while others are left without adequate representation or legal recourse. In other words, accessing justice can be difficult for individuals who lack the financial resources to pursue a criminal case. Indeed, money motivates and regulates criminal process because government have a legitimate interest in minimizing the public cost of justice administration (Brown, 2019). This is why, it is important that victims have the proper access to resources to meet their immediate and long-term needs (Miller, 2022).

When it comes to legal matters, the cost involved in the legal processes such as filing a petition, securing the certified copies, filing a motion, etc. is indeed worth knowing and other components of criminal justice are also costly. As a result, crime victims do not come into contact with criminal justice system and choose not to go forward the case. It seems that they experience

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secondary victimization during criminal justice process. The burden of fees and fines falls largely on the poor victim (Menendez & Eisen, 2019). The financial burden disproportionately impacts from lower socioeconomic level (Gleicher & Delong, 2018).

State may not have legal responsibility to compensate and financially assist victims, but they have a moral obligation to protect and ensure to meet the needs of victim (Wemmers, 2021). Many people feel that the key to successful victim rights is the involvement of the state because victims' central desire is the person who caused the crime to take responsibility (Bradley, 2022).

c. Officer Passivity. This theme refers to the police failure of providing support and assistance to the informants while in the midst of seeking justice. The informants felt being left and neglected by the police to their own efforts of achieving justice. Informant 1 pointed out that:

> *Pagkuan na sa papel, gitagaan na me nila, ni-file na me sa bulwagan ng katarungan sa sindangan wala jud me ubani sa police. Mismo kaming tagtungod ang niadto (P1: SS1).* (When they gave us the paper, we filed it to the court of Sindangan but were not accompanied by police.We went alone.)

Informant 1 sadly claimed that they were being neglected by the officers even at first glance. He stated:

> *Sa akong kabahin, tungod kay pobre rame dili kayo me asikasuhon sa pulis sa unang reklamo* namo (P1: SS2). (On my part, we were neglected by the police at our first complaint because of our low economic status.)

He was not satisfied with the service of the officers. In fact he wanted more frome them as he feel abandoned. This is his terms:

> *Pero naa pud uban pulis samot na mga pobre, dili kayo nila entertainon. Kung mureklamo murag wala lang sa ilaha. Katong mga kwartahan, mao ragyud entertainon (P1: SS4).* (But there are some police when it comes to poor, they will give lesser entertainment.When complaining, its just nothing.Those rich is only being entertained.)

Informant 2 also believed that the police may have forgotten or choose to forget their case.

> *Gi follow up namo balik adto mi sa police, perme raman mig paabot unya wala raman gihapon. Mura mag gibalewala ra sa police, wala lihuka (P2: SS6).* (We made follow-ups, we always wait but nothing. It seemed neglected by the police, were not work unto.)

The statement of informant 2 has been supported by informant 10 arguing that officers apparently choose to neglect their concern saying that:

> *Para naku, siguro ang mga pulis atong tayma murag wala na siguro nila panumbalinga to. Dugay na biya kayo to (P10: SS37).* (Up until now, the police still search but instill not getting caught. For me, maybe they disregard it. It's been a long time.)

This theme, Officer Passivity is the informants' third injustice experiences and it refers to a situation where police officers fail to provide adequate support or assistance towards the informants. The informants claimed that the police just neglected them. Due to this failure, the informants felt abandoned and injustice exists. Jordan et al. (2019) highlighted that police non-assistance is a significant issue in a crime case and often leads to a lack of trust in law enforcement among victims. This idea was corroborated by the study of Bowers et al. (2018) identifying several common factors that contribute to police non-assistance, including lack of training and resources for officers, inadequate policies and protocols for handling victims of crime, and systematic biases and prejudices that can affect police attitude towards certain types of victims. Police could have the greatest contribution to the victim. It is because crime victim's contact with the police may strongly influence subsequent investigations and prosecution (Inzunza, 2022).

Furthermore, Levin & Grisham (2018) find out that there is a need for specialized training and support for police officers to effectively respond to the needs of crime victims. Also, enforcers must avoid racism, sexism and classism when treating victims (Perry & Porter, 2020). Aside from that, police officers should engage and sympathetically interact with survivors to better understand their experiences and needs because the complainants and victims have broader expectations of what services the police should be offering them not just by prioritizing the apprehension of offenders (Mowby & Smith, 2018; Munroe & Moffat, 2021).

Occupational Culture Theory best explained this theme suggesting that officers may be less likely to provide assistance to crime victims based on their unique beliefs, values and attitudes that they viewed themselves as law enforcers whose main focus is crime control and order maintenance and not necessarily on assisting victims. This means that police officers may be socialized to do their jobs as primarily focused on enforcing the law and apprehending criminal rather than providing support to crime victims. This is due to their occupational culture that prioritizing the needs of organization and its goal, rather than the needs of individual victims.

According to Inzunza (2022), the victim's first contact with the police may strongly influence subsequent investigations and prosecutions as well as the crime impact on the victim. However, Franklin et al. (2019) revealed that police personnel often have misperceived manifestations on the victims. Supplemented by Paterson et al. (2018) disclosing that while police forces across the globe often share a common understanding of police functions, there is less agreement when referring to how to engage with citizens and balancing the broader panoply of priorities.

The way the police respond to reported crime is a delicate balancing act (Mawby & Smith, 2018). Victims who were deeply touched by the crime and/or offender thought it was also important that the police took a clear-stance against the crime because victims want both the processing and outcome of their case (Koster et al., 2020). As a result, it contributes to the underreporting of crime to the police (Xie & Baumer, 2019).

d. Unsettled Litigation. This theme denotes that the justice of the informants is not served because the case is delayed. There have been no improvement that happened, and the informants are just waiting for updates. In fact, Informant 1 concluded that they have filed the case and always made follow-ups about their case but inquire nothing. He said:

> *Gisulayan namo ug balik-balik sa police station kay basin naa nay development. Unya kuan inig abut namo didto muingon raman sila nga wala pa. Mag-update radaw sila, pahibaw-on radaw me nil (P1: SS3).* (We tried to inquire in police station if there is any development. But everytime we ask, they just said nothing. They will just update and inform us.)

Informant 2 made some follow-ups with regards to their pending case but still failed. In fact, she had said:

> *Atong Dec. 24, amo man jud to na fillan og kaso, dayun pagka human january ni file mi didto sa sindangan, sige*

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to nako gi follow up. Sa time nga na process na namo tanang papel, nag paabot na me sa resulta, hantud naabot nalang pila ka bulan wala raman gihapon (P2: SS5).

(In December 24, we have filed the case. Then after, we filed on January in Sindangan, I always follow-up. The time the paper has been processed, we wait the results until how many months but nothing.)

Informant 6 is also willling to wait for changes with regards to the case, but until now, there has been none. She said that:

Gahulat ra me ug update hangtud karun. Pero wala man gyud gihapun nausob sa among kaso. Taman ra sa blotter (P6: SS26). (We wait for update until now. But nothing changes with our case. It remains only to blotter.)

Informant 8 in connection to the statement of informant 6, she is also willing to wait that someday there could be modifications with their pending case.

Maghulat nalang jod me.Bahalag tigulang na kaayo me basta mapriso lang unta ang nakasala (P8: SS33). (We will wait. Though were old as long as the perpetrator will be imprisoned.)

Informant 10 with all he can, he is wishing that his father's assailant could be put in jail. He stated:

Naghulat gihapun meg update kay matud pa sa akong manghud kay siya may nagpabaga didtog duol sa pulis, gipangita nagyud nila (P10:SS39).

(We are still waiting for updates because according to my sister as she is the one went to the police, they are looking for it.)

Unsettled litigation is the ultimate injustice experienced by the informants, referring to situations in which legal cases filed by them remain unresolved, often due to delays or complications in the legal process. This means that their cases face undue delays, becoming a source of frustration and stress for those seeking justice for the harm they have suffered. According to Anwar et al. (2018), factors that contribute to delays in case processing include insufficient staff and resources, case overload, and delays in evidence processing. Other factors influencing delays include the complexity of the case, the severity of the charges, and the type of court where the case is heard (Walsh et al., 2019).

Because of these pending cases, victims often feel wronged or cheated when the state fails to punish offenders or make such conduct punishable (Alm, 2018). This delay in justice has a significant impact on victims and their families, both financially and mentally. Moreover, the community loses trust in the justice system when it is broken and in crisis (Law Society, 2021). Thus, there is a need for better approaches to managing pending cases (Dauvergne & Labman, 2019). Likewise, improving support and resources for victims and their advocates may help mitigate the negative effects of case delays in the criminal justice system (Nellis & King, 2019).

The Bureaucratic Justice Theory best explains this injustice, asserting that the criminal justice system is characterized by bureaucratic structures designed to promote efficiency, standardization, and fairness. However, these structures and processes can also cause delays and inefficiencies that slow down case processing. For instance, cases may need to go through multiple levels of review and approval before decisions are made, and procedures must often be followed precisely to ensure fairness and accuracy. Additionally, bureaucratic processes can create a backlog of cases, particularly when there are too few resources or staff available, or when there are delays in transferring cases between different stages of the criminal justice system. The system's ability to meet these challenges has failed to keep pace (Hudson, 2017).

The criminal justice system also proves ineffective at addressing the harm done to victims (Bradley, 2022). Victims often feel wronged or cheated when the state fails to punish offenders or fails to recognize the conduct as punishable (Alm, 2018). Victims are often burdened with enforcement and prosecutorial responsibilities in a process that does not address their needs or compensate their losses. This delayed justice has a profound financial and mental impact on victims and their families. Furthermore, the broader community's trust in the justice system deteriorates when it is broken and in crisis (Law Society, 2021).

Victims' feelings and needs are frequently ignored, and they are often given no clearly defined role in case processing (Shapland et al., 2019). Most states also lack effective mechanisms for implementing legislation that guarantees the rights of victims (Boateng & Abess, 2017). A range of approaches and greater flexibility in justice system responses are required; improvements in these areas would help ensure that victims feel more respected, heard, and comfortable (Rue et al., 2023).

II. Coping Mechanism of Informants This part showed the coping mechanism utilized by crime victims to deal, cope, and combat the injustices they encountered in their living existence. The only emergent theme appears explained the reason why crime victims continued to live their lives despite their injustices experiences.

a. Conformity/Lethargy. This theme explained that the informants combat injustice by simply forgetting and accepting what happened. Perhaps they did this to find peace and healing as they will no longer expect something from our criminal justice system and as if, they have forgiven the perpetrator. Indeed, Informant 4 honestly replied that he would teach herself to accept the fact that her husband could not have justice. She mentioned:

Sa pagkakarun, ako nalang tudluan ang akong kaugalingon nga dawaton nalang ang panghitabo nga dili mahatagan ug hustisya ang akong bana (P4: SS15). (For now, I will teach myself to accept the circumstance that my husband could not have justice.)

According to informant 4, she is not willing to forgive but she chose to because she has nothing to do about it.

Sa tinuod lang, dili pajud naku kaya nga dawaton ang panghitabo bisan 2 years nato pero saon man wala man sad koy mabuhat ana. Nahumana mana (P4: SS16). (Truthfully, I can't accept the incident though it's been two years but I have nothing to do about it. It's done.)

Additionally, informant 5 admitted that she won't accept the event but still ends up accepting it for having no other options. She said:

Ako wala ko kadawat sa panghitabo pero saon man wala man ko, pobre man ko (P5:SS21). (Me, I can't accept but I have no choice. I am poor.)

Informant 7 claimed also in the same way among the other informants that she chose to forget and forgive. She said:

Gidawat ang kamatuoran nga gipusil siya nga wala gani me kahibalo ug unsay sala. Gidawat nalang jod namo (P7:SS29). (We accept the fact that he was shot not knowing his faults. We just accept it.)

Informant 9 otherwise in order to cope up with injustice has choose to forget the incident as they did not know who was the perpetrator behind it. He mentioned:

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Wala na gikalimtan nalang jod nako to kay wala man pod me kaila ug kinsang tawhana pod, lisud man pod ug magpasagad tag wala ta kahibalo (P9: SS36). (Nothing, I was just forgetting it because we also don't know the perpetrator. It is difficult if we just accused carelessly.)

Conformity or lethargy is the coping mechanism used by the informants in dealing with injustice. This theme means acceptance and forgiveness. Some of the victims have chosen to accept while others chose to forgive perhaps as means for healing and mental well-being restoration. Forgiveness and reconciliation aim to bring closure to the past, promote healing and well-being for both the victim and the offendr and prevent future harm (Underwood et al., 2018).

According to Brenner et al. (2019), forgiveness is a complex process that involves multi psychological and social factors, and that understanding these factors can shed light on how forgiveness can contribute to better mental health outcomes for victim's interpersonal harm. Additionally, empathy and forgiveness can help prevent violent behaviour and can help victims move forward and heal from the trauma (Suarez et al., 2018).

Forgetting and accepting allow victims to move on. It can be the basis of both individual healing and community reconciliation (Osanloo, 2020). Acceptance involves accepting person's flaws and imperfections while forgiveness involves letting go of negative emotions towards another person (Smith et al., 2018). Kearns et al. (2019) had found that victims who reported higher levels of forgiveness also reposted that the offender had accepted responsibility for their actions.

Empowerment theory suggests that forgiveness and acceptance can be a way of the victim to regain a sense of control and power over their lives in the aftermath of a crime. According to this theory, individuaals who experienced victimization may feel a sense of powerlessness and loss of control over their lives. Acceptance and forgiveness can be a way for victims to take back some of that power by choosing to let go negative emotions and thoughts about the offender, and focusing instead on their own healing and well-being. Moreover, this theory also suggest that acceptance and forgiveness can promote positive changes in victims lives, such as increased resilience, improved mental and physical health aand greater social support. By choosing to forgive, victims may be able to break free from anger, resentment, and negativity that can keep them trapped in a victim mentality.

When we speak of forgiveness, we mean generally forgiveness by victims towards their offenders (Shapland, 2016). Victims who adopt forgiving or pre-social motivation towards the offender may experience improvements in psychological wellbeing. (Jenkins, 2018).This was supported by Suzuki et al., (2020) arguing that the role of acceptance and forgiveness in restorative justice remains peripheral because interpersonal forgiveness has been a gift. It did not focus on interpersonal forgiveness but forgiveness for offenders. Forgiving is part of a set of other through social behaviour that promotes harmony within the relationship (Kazoun, 2018). Forgiveness seeking is an important aspect of relational repair from an international perspective (Diaz et al., 2021).

Victims want peace of mind. Forgiveness offers them that (Osanloo, 2020). Forgiving is part of a set of other through social behaviour that promotes harmony within the relationship (Kazoun, 2018). It is is an important aspect of relational repair from an international perspective (Diaz et al., 2021). Forgetting and accepting allow victims to move on. It can be the basis of both individual healing and community reconciliation (Osanloo, 2020).

III. Informants' Aspirations

This particular portion of the study discussed the living wishes and wills of crime victims (informants) towards our current justice system. Here, they narrated what are their preferences that can make our justice system better and easily accessible. The two (2) generated themes below elucidate how much crime victims longed for justice.

a. Official Backing. This theme is the foremost wish of the informants. They always wanted police to help and assist them throughout their journey in seeking justice because they felt neglected even from reporting stage. Informant 1 agreed that the police must do their job to attain justice. He said:

Sa akong kabahin, hinaut unta ang mga pulis ang ila untang himoon, ila untang gi-eskwelahan nga balaod aron matagaan gud ug hustisya ang mga tawo nga gidaug-daug samut natong pobreng pareha namo (P1: SS4). (On my part, I hope the police would do their schooled law so that oppressed people would be given justice especially like us.)

Likewise, Informant 5 asserted that the proponent of criminal justice system should strive to meet the needs of victims. She stated:

Paningkamutan gyud sa nagdumala sa atong panghustisya nga sikopon ang tawo nga nakasala kay dili maayo ipaluntad sila aning kalibutana (P5:SS22). (The ones in authority would strive to capture the perpetartor because it's not good to nurture them in this world.)

Informant 6 supplemented the statement of informant 5 that the police must be responsible at all times to achieve justice. She said:

Tumanon unta nila ang hustisya ug unta, bisag dugay nato, lihukon unta sa naa sa posisyon ilabi na ang mga pulis kay makalolooy meng pamilya nga gahulat nga mapriso tong tawhana kay nakasala siya (P6: SS27). (They must fullfil justice though it happened for a long time. (Those in positions especially the police, should take action because we, the family who waited for the perpetrator's imprisonment are pity.)

Informant 7 also suggested that police officers must be effective and efficient in doing their individual functions because they are the first and foremost source of justice. She said:

Ug mahimo ang mga pulis ang mulihok. kay sa ila tinubdan ang tanan (P7: SS30). (If possible, the police should mobilize because everthing starts from them.)

This statement is elaborated by informant 10 wherein he emphasized that police must be active and alert to easily capture unlawful person. He claimed:

Dapat alerto ang mga pulis aron katong mga kuan, katong mga tawo nga nagbuhat ug krimen, dali sila madakpan kay tungod alert ang atong kapulisan (P10: SS40). (Police must be alert to easily capture suspects of crimes.)

Official Backing or Police assistance is one among the aspirations of the informants. They are not wishing for financial support, but rather only wishing for the help and assistance from our uniformed personnel. The informants believed that if there is active participation of police officers in their journey of finding justice, there is a greater opportunity that they can easily obtain justice without so much delay. Findings of Coker & Greenberg (2018) revealed that victims who received more extensive police assistance were more likely to be satisfied with the criminal justice system.

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Dehart et al (2021) discuss the concept of Police Victim Service Units (PVSUs) which are specialized police units dedicated to assisting and supporting crime victims. It helps improve victim's satisfaction with the criminal justice system and increase the likelihood of successful case outcomes. Maguire et al. (2019) also concluded that police interventions are more effective than others in reducing re-offending and improving victims' safety and satisfaction. Thus, police assistance is an important factor in promoting victim satisfaction and that efforts should be made to improve police assistance to victims of crime (Kim & Jang, 2018).

On the other hand, perceived negative treatment by police officers has consequences for victim's willingness to cooperate with police (Koster, 2020). For some victims of crime, lack of effective support from police officers mean they do not have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the criminal justice process (Ellard & Campbell, 2020).

The Victim-Centered Approach is one of the most widely accepted theories for police assistance towards victim. This approach priorities the well-being of the victim, rather than focusing solely on the criminal justice process. Under this approach, police officers are encouraged to view victims as partners in the justice system rather than simply as witnesses or sources of information. Officers should work to build trust with victims, listen to their concerns and involved them in decision making to the greatest extent possible. Police officers also must provide pratical support to victims, such as helping them to navigate the justice system, connecting them with resources and services and ensuring that they are kept informed and involved in the process. By doing this, police officers ensures that victims feel supported, empowered and heard throughout the justice process.

According to Vicente et al. (2020), police officers are recruited to enforce laws to preserve societal stability and moral good. Thus, police officers are expected to perform law enforcement function mainly to perpetuate societal values and citizens' freedom. They supposedly deserve rights and services within criminal justice system that begin from reporting a crime to a police. As a result, perceived negative treatment by police officers has consequences for victim's willingness to cooperate with police (Koster, 2020). For some victims of crime, lack of effective support from police officers mean they do not have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the criminal justice process (Ellard & Campbell, 2020)

In the study of Inzunza (2022), Police could have the greatest contribution to the victim. By approaching victims appropriately, officers gain their trust and cooperation. They may then be more willing to provide detailed information about the crime to officers and later to investigators and prosecutors. In other words, police officers have social responsibility towards law abiding individuals and also victims of crime (Ogan, 2021).

b. Legal Parity. This theme pertains to fair treatment of justice both to wealthy and less fortunate family. The informants desired that our justice system to is equal regardless of victim's status. Informant 2 argued that justice must be equal to all persons. She responded:

> *Sa mga naglihok didto, ipantay unta nila ang tanang katawhan, hatagan unta jud nila kay krimen gud na. Bisan asa ang krimen, mahimo lang hatagan jud unta nilag hustisya ang tanang panghitabo dili ra sa akong anak apil sa tawong nag kinahanglan og hustisya (P2: SS7).* (For those who work there, they should treat all persons fairly because it is crme. Crime is anywhere and if possible, they give justice to what happened not just to my son but to all who needed justice.)

Informant 2 also emphasized that justice should be accessible especially poor. Her statement below:

> *Manghinaot ko sa ila na ila pud unta buhaton unsay angay sa mga katawhan sa pagtabang labi na sa mga kabus(P2: SS8).* (I hope they will do what is right and just for helping people specifically poor ones.)

Informant 4 claimed that justice should be fair regardless of the social status of a person, whether rich or poor. She specified:

> *Fair lang unta ang pamalaud nga dili magbase ug kwartahan kag dili. Nga magtinabangay, nga magbase sa unsa jud ang tinuod mao na akong gusto mapaabot (P4: SS17).* (Laws will be fair not on the basis if you are rich or not. That helping each other that will base to what is true is what I waited.)

She further clarifies based on her observation that our justice is favourable to wealthy people. That is why she wants equity in the justice system.

> *Bisan pobre ra siya, mausob lang gyud unta nga fair ba mahatagan pobre man ka o dato ana lang jud. Ang hustisya man gud karon pabor sa mga kwartaan. Ang mga way kwarta looy kaayo (P4: SS18).* (Even though she's poor, there could be change that fairness is brought regadless of being rich or poor. Justice today favors only economically stable persons and poor people were left behind.)

Informant 6 on his side also believed that justice must be rendered. Thus, the government must strive to meet the needs of victim. She responded:

> *Tumanon unta nila ang hustisya ug unta, bisag dugay nato, lihukon unta sa naa sa posisyon ilabi na ang mga pulis kay makalolooy meng pamilya nga gahulat nga mapriso tong tawhana kay nakasala siya (P6: SS27).* (They should fulfil justice although it's been too long. One's in position must mobilize especially police because we are pity if not.)

Legal parity remains a paramount concern for the informants within the criminal justice system. A common observation among them is the inequitable nature of justice, wherein it disproportionately favors the wealthy, often leaving the poor marginalized. Consequently, the informants express a strong desire for a justice system that is both equal and accessible, ensuring that fairness prevails regardless of an individual's economic status, sex, or race. The greater the fairness embedded in the justice process, the higher the likelihood that justice can be attained by all individuals.

According to Borg (2019), marginalized and disadvantaged individuals frequently bear the disproportionate burden of injustice within the system. Class-based inequalities persist, with working-class and poor individuals being more likely to face arrest, charges, and incarceration compared to wealthier individuals (Kilby & Johnston, 2020). Furthermore, individuals with disabilities and undocumented immigrants often encounter discriminatory practices within the criminal justice system (Starr & Agan, 2019). This economic bias shapes the current system, wherein the rich continue to prosper while the poor are left to suffer. As Bryan Stevenson aptly put it, "We have a system of justice that treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent" (Mathews & Curiel, 2019).

Poor individuals often face distinct legal challenges compared to their wealthier counterparts. They tend to receive significantly worse outcomes in the justice system (Gramatikov et al., 2021).

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Their experiences are often marked by less favorable legal treatment, with the outcome of their cases frequently being influenced by their financial status. As highlighted by The New York Times (2018), "There can be no equal justice where the kind of trial a person gets depends on the amount of money they have."

The principle of Procedural Justice Theory, as applied to the criminal justice system, emphasizes the need for equal treatment of all individuals, regardless of their financial resources or social standing. This theory posits that the fairness of justice is not solely determined by outcomes but also by the processes through which justice is delivered. A just legal system should operate in a manner that is transparent, fair, and respectful, ensuring that everyone, irrespective of their financial status, is treated equally under the law. This includes guaranteeing the right to legal representation, access to a fair and impartial trial, and the availability of necessary resources to secure an equitable outcome.

Legally, federal judges are required to swear an oath to administer justice equally to both the rich and the poor (Re, 2017). However, in practice, the wealthy often enjoy protections, while the poor are disproportionately punished (Webster, 2023). This disparity underscores the challenges faced by the less privileged. As Bryan Stevenson reiterated, "We have a system of justice that treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent" (Mathews & Curiel, 2019).

Further evidence suggests that poor individuals face legal challenges distinct from those of non-poor individuals. These challenges frequently result in worse legal outcomes (Gramatikov et al., 2021). The disparity in treatment is most pronounced in courts, where wealth often dictates the quality of legal representation and the fairness of the trial. The New York Times (2018) emphasized this inequality, stating that "There can be no equal justice where the kind of trial a person gets depends on the amount of money they have." Liberati (2019) also supports the argument that there is a significant inequity in the treatment of individuals based on socio-economic status.

Wealth confers the ability to make choices and access opportunities that are unavailable to the economically disadvantaged. Offenders from lower economic backgrounds often face harsher sentences, and their financial limitations hinder their ability to hire competent legal defense (Bagaric, 2016; Maher, 2017). Those without resources are unable to secure skilled lawyers to present an adequate defense, making it more likely for them to receive severe punishments. In fact, the poor are more likely to be sentenced to death compared to the rich (Geneva, 2017). Given these realities, the primary role of the criminal justice system is to reduce harm and promote fairness, particularly for the poor (Findley, 2017).

5.0. CONCLUSION

The majority of the informants in this study were females, and all reported having experienced injustice within the criminal justice system. One key reason for their lack of justice was the phenomenon of the "phantom assailant," which highlights the frustration that arises when the criminal justice system fails to meet the normative expectations of the victims. This is consistent with Experience of Injustice: A Theory of Recognition, which argues that injustice occurs when a subject or group's expectations are unmet. The informants also pointed out that the government's failure to fulfill its duties went beyond merely apprehending offenders; the system did not provide adequate support for the victims.

Another form of injustice encountered by the informants was the issue of legal paperwork mishaps. Many victims were unable to continue with the filing of their cases to the final stages due to financial instability and a lack of support. Official passivity also emerged as a significant form of injustice, where victims felt neglected by the police during the processing of their cases. This often led to a loss of faith in the justice system, causing them to abandon their pursuit of justice. Lastly, the informants highlighted the issue of unresolved litigation, where their cases were delayed for extended periods without any progress. This further reinforced their belief that the Philippine justice system is weak and inefficient.

Despite these injustices, the informants employed certain coping mechanisms to continue living despite the setbacks. One such method was conformity, or a sense of lethargy, in which some informants, rather than waiting for justice to be served, chose to accept the reality of their situation. They forgave the offenders in the interest of their mental health and personal healing.

In terms of their aspirations, the informants expressed two primary desires: Official Backing and Legal Parity. Official backing was the foremost aspiration, as many informants felt dissatisfied with the police's lack of support. They believed that law enforcement paid little attention to their needs, particularly for the poor. Additionally, the informants viewed the justice system as inherently unfair, with the poor being treated harshly and the wealthy receiving preferential treatment. This inequality left them disillusioned with the system. Ultimately, Legal Parity emerged as the greatest aspiration among the informants, reflecting their desire for a justice system that is fair, accessible, and equitable to all.

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