

Original Article

Exploration of Two Former Filipina Devotees: Narratives of Perceived Violence and Harm in a Localized Religious Context

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Abstract

This paper explored the multifarious experiences of women who had been members of an organization. The study employed a qualitative narrative approach through a semi-structured interview. This method allows the researcher to examine the relationship between religious practices and the normalization of violence. It highlights how exact adherence to injunctive norms and cultural activities often reinforces social inequality, leading to negative behaviors against women. The study included narratives from two key courageous informants who had left their church institutions, as I explored the impact of these experiences on their identities and their relationships with the world around them. The findings revealed a connection between practices and beliefs that leads to violence. This study emphasizes the importance of properly utilizing knowledge and collective policy changes that support women in church institutions. Lastly, the researcher hopes to contribute to a movement that empowers women and women survivors of violence in a religious setting.

Keywords: gender-based violence, injunctive norms, religious practices, structural violence, women empowerment

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts to describe and analyze gender-based violence among church institutions among its' former members in a retrospective approach, tackling various practices involved that reinforce violence against women. Religious groups

have exerted a profound influence on cultural practices and experiences, shaping them in numerous ways. Church-based groups are a prime example of such religious sects, known for their strict rules, customs, and emotional implications. This study aims to shed light on the actual experiences of former members to unravel the meaning behind their sacrifices and examine the consequences of the practices they have followed in their daily lives.

Violence against women and girls is evident worldwide, but historically has been condoned by various institutions and overlooked due to activities that are done within the community. In the past years, a number of countries have conducted statistical surveys in an attempt to provide data on violence against women. The United Nations Statistics Division compiled data where the percentage of women subjected to physical and sexual violence was prevalent (UNSD, 2025). According to the United Nations, on a global scale, there are an estimated 736 million women who have been subjected to physical and or sexual partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least in their life (UN Women Asia and the Pacific, 2024).

In the Philippines alone, as of 2022, there is a total of 19, 228 cases of women aged 15-49 who had experienced various forms of physical and sexual violence (PSA, 2024). Among various institutions, specifically, churches have been a ground for the propagation of violence against women, Ellaine Storkey, former LICC Executive Director, once described it as a 'global pandemic'. This is an unfortunate reality of our everyday lives, and even if you are personally unaffected, the chances are there will be women and girls around you who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence. In our workplaces, neighborhoods, regular haunts, and even our churches (Rankin, n.d). In Arab and Islamic countries, surveys in Egypt, Palestine, Israel, and Tunisia show that at least one out of every three women is beaten by her husband, as selective excerpts from the Koran are used to prove that men who beat their wives are following God's Commandments (Douki et al., 2003).

Furthermore, in South Africa, women and girls can no longer enjoy freedom. Activities of rape, killing, and other forms of female persecution are evident, and this kind of violence within the parameters of religious institutions, specifically Pentecostal churches, is encountered in various religious circles (Ndlovu et al., 2024). In addition to that, according to a study conducted in Brazil, specific cases of Christian institutions maintained a patriarchal vision that results in the marginalization and suppression of women in the social context. In this sense, we see Christianity as one of the main vehicles for promoting inequality between men and women (Oliveria et.al., 2022)

In Myanmar alone, since 2021, the country has experienced recurrent waves of religiously imbued violence. Violence has been both physical and symbolic, and has included the popularization of the belief that Muslim men are the primary threat to Buddhist women (McCarthy et.al., 2018). In the Philippine practices of confession, where the priest is able to have greater control over the lives of the converts the priest exacts his power through confession with complete descriptions of partners, positions, places, and emotions, the celibate priest is made aware of his own sexual urges and is

made susceptible to sexual violence against women, this catholic faith and ritual, the confessional has the most damaging effect on women. While they are passive recipients of abusive sermons, they are also active participants in their own denigration (Tapia-Raquel, 2005.).

In addition to that, sexual abuse allegations against Catholic priests in the Philippines are on the rise, some alleged victims say they have been pressured not to file charges and were paid money in exchange for their silence. In one of the cases, Imelda, a 15-year-old, said the priest in her village sexually assaulted her, stating that “After he kissed me in the forehead, he hugged me,” she recalled. “ It was really painful. Why did he do that to me? She says that when her family discovered she had reported the incident to the police, they beat her (Ang, 2017). Though these are some isolated cases, there are still practices that deviate from the mainstream doctrines, which create a decrementing factor for its members. In the localized context that blends indigenous practices with Christianity, leading to deviations that heighten fanaticism and vulnerability among members (Sevilla, 1979). For instance, youth radicalization in Mindanao stems from family ties and marginalized sectors, while faith healing cults exploit believers through unorthodox rituals (Casey & Pottebaum, 2018; Salazar, 1980). Such dynamics underscore the psychological and social risks, providing a pivotal lens for studying their impact in the community (Zlotnick et al., 2020). These events go unnoticed due to popular belief, social norms, and practices that are often not disclosed to the general public, so abuse occurs in various ways.

2. Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative research method with a narrative design. The Narrative method in research refers to a qualitative approach used to understand and explain complex phenomena by organizing and presenting findings in the form of a story or narrative. It involves collecting detailed accounts of individuals’ or groups’ experiences and perspectives through interviews, observations, or document analysis, and then analyzing and synthesizing these accounts to construct a narrative that reveals a deeper understanding of the research topic (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The narrative method would allow the researcher to understand participants' in-depth experiences retrospectively and unravel nuanced cultural factors that influenced their decision-making process regarding separation from the church-based group. The researcher employed purposive sampling, which focuses on characteristics of the population directly related to what is being studied. In-depth semi-structured interviews will be conducted with participants who have successfully transitioned away from the group, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

2.1 Population and Sampling

The study was carried out in Barangay Laurel, Baguio City, but the respondents were a former devotee in Manila, currently transferred to the City of Baguio, and

another respondent from Babasit, Pangasinan. The researcher had only two respondents. The rationale behind this is that respondents were both active participants within their institutions in the past and both of the respondents had disaffiliated already and the choice of residence is that this is within the comfort zone of the respondents and the age of the respondents.

2.2 Instruments

The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide that could be altered during the interview based on the respondent's answers.

2.3 Data Collection

The data-gathering procedure in this study was divided into phases to address the statement of the problem. The approval and agreement between the respondent and the researchers were considered. Prior to the official interview, the researcher built rapport with the respondents to ensure their comfort with the research. Afterward, we received approval to conduct a full-blown interview, and the researcher asked the respondents about their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

The interview was conducted in two sessions for the first respondent, who is considered one of the key informants. At the same time, a single session with the second respondent was also conducted. The first phase of the interview was short because the respondent's business was about to close. They also needed to leave, but substantial information was gathered, so before the interview ended, the researcher asked the respondents for another schedule which would be the second session of the interview, the researcher used a semi-structured interview guide, and also conducted the interview in a flexible manner that caters to the comfortability of the respondent, both sessions lasted for a total of almost 3 hours. For the second respondent, the interview lasted for an hour and a half (1 hour and 37 minutes). The interview was conducted once to gather confirmations of the data from the first respondent. During the data-gathering procedure, the respondents did not allow any recorded video, but the researchers were able to take a picture with the respondent at the end of both sessions. The researchers used a note to maintain data accuracy as the data-gathering process was ongoing. Lastly, the gathered data were stored and analyzed by the researchers to identify different themes using thematic analysis.

2.4 Treatment of Data

The researchers Clarke and Braun (2013) used a six-phase thematical analysis to analyze the data, which systematically explores the experiences of the women who were former members of the churches

2.5 Ethical Considerations

All key informants were informed of the study's purpose, including its voluntary nature, and of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty before the interview began. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to data collection.

Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study. All transcripts and reports had their personal identification removed, and the researchers were the only ones with safe access to the material. Documents and interview recordings were removed after processing and used only for scholarly reasons.

These procedures ensured the full protection of the informants' rights, welfare, and privacy while maintaining ethical research standards.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis and interpretation of the information obtained from the informants were presented in this section. The results have been arranged into emerging themes, each of which has been interpreted and its ramifications discussed. The topic presentation adheres to the order specified in the study's problem statement to guarantee consistency and congruence with the research goals. This organization facilitated a clear integration of participants' narratives with relevant literature, strengthening the analytical depth of the findings.

Social norms, injunctive norms, and culture are significant aspects of the lives of the former church members, but within these different cultural practices, it has become evident that physical, emotional, and sexual abuse were seen. The Majority of the practices consist of "Pagluhod", "Pagsalba", and "Pagdarasal suot ang belo".

3.1 Pagluhod

Pagluhod is seen in the practice of doing it thrice (3), while wearing a specific garment in match with the Nazarene it', with its long glossy dress and yellow belt the devotees would kneel and praise the Nazarene according to r1 one of the things she remember was when her Mother and the used to make to tell us is to kneel down in the middle of the church from the front gate of the church, until the in front of the Nazarene. Though this practice conveys the sacred value of the group, it also, at the same time, causes physical abuse within the cultural practice; kneeling causes physical pain for former members. Still, they are bound to follow these practices; this injunctive norm, where one individual is forced to follow a set of rules, is bound to lead to physical bruises, and a strict requirement of structural violence is present.

3.2 Pagdarasal suot ang Belo

The practice of Pagdarasal suot ang belo is done from 6 AM till 12 PM, the activity is done nonstop and there are consequences imposed when one had a mistake this is seen through the accounts of the respondent as she stated while wearing the veil, I have to pray and believe in the Lord, and I continuously do this from 6 in the morning until 12 in the afternoon. I've been doing this for about half a day; furthermore, she stated that there is also hitting and slapping that would happen, propagated by superiors of the church and our parents when they repeatedly make the same mistake. This instigation may seem to be a sort of discipline but it instigate violence related to structures and norms allowed by our society, the practice could cause one extreme hunger and extreme fear for they don't have freedom which would be a push factor for a former devotees to experience traumatic experiences, as it results to them wanting to be away from the group based orders, furthermore there are instances where they are bounded by rules that they often follow that becomes detrimental to their nutrition and without proper nutrition in their body at a young age, it could be detrimental to one's physical health.

3.3 Pagsalba

Pagsalba is considered as one of the prestige given to the worshipper, wherein according to the experience of the respondent, the activity of Pagsalba is manifested through helping the family but in return the devotees daughter would serve on the so called Kabundukan ng Pagsalba, they had defined this as a sacred place of worship and the respondent even mentioned that they weren't able to see the member again, according to one of my respondents she faintly remembers this scenario bit some of her sisters there walked in a high task of "PAGSALBA" as they call it. She further shared with me that this is considered one of the privileges of our priest, and because of this, our families are given help. Still, we never see the members again afterward. A reward system was given to the family, but in exchange for the services of their daughters. She further added that, during conversations within their group, they were being taken to the Mountains of Salvation. They will dedicate their lives to serving the poor.

Even though it's a bit vague, the statement shows practices that could be dangerous to women. Within this practice of "PAGSALBA" the security and even the freedom of the woman member could be greatly limited, while also brainwashing the supposed to members of the group.

These various social norms are evidence of how traditional practices with a structural system often lead to violence. The society expects individuals to actively participate in activities within the norms of the religion itself, which, if not followed properly, leads to physical, emotional and sexual abuses. This could be seen that in the Philippine practices of confession, where the priest is able to have greater control over the lives of the converts the priest exacts his power through confession with complete

descriptions of partners, positions, places, and emotions, the celibate priest is made aware of his own sexual urges and is made susceptible to sexual violence against women, this catholic faith and ritual, the confessional has the most damaging effect on women. While they are passive recipients of abusive sermons, they are also active participants in their own denigration (Tapia-Raquel, 2005). Still, these events, as it commands, don't reflect the general belief of the Catholic religious sector; they only amplify the need to be more visible in terms of practices, as it would allow for more diverse acceptance.

3.4 Cultural Activities

With the practices of Pagluhod, Pagsuot ng Belo, and Pagsalba, different abuses were manifested, resulting in physical pain, trauma and fear. This led the respondent to be more eager to leave the group at that time.

3.5 Pagluhod and Pagsuot ng Belo sa Pagdarasal results to Physical Pain and Fear

Through the experience of kneeling for three times while praying the respondent stated to us that she felt pain on her knees but she was afraid that if she would not finish it, she would either be beaten up by the mother, according to one of the respondent her knee was so much in pain that time, but she had to continue kneeling and praying to the Nazarene because her Mother would hit me or beat me if I couldn't accomplish it.

Furthermore, physical form of abuse is also seen in the Practice of Pagdarasal suot ang Belo, where according to the respondent while doing their prayers, they weren't able to have any rest and not even given the chance to drink water as they continue with their prayers, which is one of the fear is that they would be hit by the priest that causes the respondent to feel trembling on her knees as she had stated there was no utmost rest and there was no water, but we had to keep praying because if we stopped, the parish priest would slap us. That was one of the things I was afraid of. My knees would almost shake when the priest approached us. A noticeable effect of violence lingers within the lives of these former church devotees as they navigate through their lives, while the interview was actually going through her husband suddenly stood beside her, as she reminisces the past experience, her traumatic experiences seemed to come back. This imbued violence as justified by culture and norms is seen as normalized already in the society where practices of violence against women and children are prevalent. This could also be seen in Myanmar in various religious forms, where the country has experienced recurrent waves of religiously imbued violence.

Violence has been both physical and symbolic, and has included the popularization of the belief that Muslim men are the primary threat to Buddhist women (McCarthy et al., 2017). In cases like Mindanao's extremist networks or Davao's sectarian conflicts, leaders rationalize violence as divinely sanctioned, trapping

vulnerable members in a self-reinforcing pattern of acceptance that showcases societal tolerance for these localized abuses (Casey & Pottebaum, 2018).

3.6 Other Cultural Practices Resulting to Sexual Abuse

Injunctive Norms and Cultural Violence as a reinforcing factor is another reason that lies which resulted to the reinforcement of violence against women as it portrayed the fear of getting abused by the Kura Paroko, members felt a certain sense of sexual desires from the activities like the in sensitive touching of the arm, and a practice where the Priest would call them at the back of the altar or in the office of the Kura Paroko then with the malicious eyes they would look around the group member who is considered as a minor. As her story goes, some of my older sisters told me that it was as if the priest touched his arm differently. There would be instances when we would be called one by one behind the altar or in the priest's office, and they would talk to us while continuing to walk around us. Results also show that extreme fear of authority and sexual abuses done by the church leaders influenced the reinforcement of gender-based violence. According to Ang (2017), sexual abuse allegations against Catholic priests in the Philippines are on the rise, some alleged victims say they have been pressured not to file charges and were paid money in exchange for their silence. In one of the cases, Imelda, a 15-year-old, said the priest in her village sexually assaulted her, stating that "After he kissed me in the forehead, he hugged me," she recalled. "It was really painful. Why did he do that to me? She says that when her family discovered she had reported the incident to the police, they beat her.

This goes duly unnoticed as structural violence and injunctive norms are highlighted within the Philippine context, experiences of gender-based violence continue to exist because the system allows it and is often consolidated by adults.

These similar experiences, even in different timelines, show how a system allows the justification of its leader's abusive actions, a never-ending story of injustices that, if stories are not spoken, we would never even question. Though not all systems become abusive, it shows how power often leads to injustice, but injustices can always be questioned.

3.7 Social Factors that Affected Their Departure

Social Factors include camaraderie, respect for authority, and limiting oneself to continue studying, leading to dropping out of school. The social life of an individual becomes limited to only the group, and they hold high regard for its members and respect for authority, as they are afraid of not following their parents. As one of the respondents stated, she enjoys being in the group, but she feels terrified when the leaders are there because they make us do so many things we don't understand. Furthermore, this portrays the uncertainties of the activities they are doing, which limit an individual's freedom as a member of the group. The pressure was also seen as condoned by the parents, as even though they wanted to continue their education, they

weren't able to do so because the parents were part of the group. She stated she remembered that when she was in her 3rd year of high school, and it was the fourth quarter of my studies, my mother suddenly told me to stop without knowing why, though she was allowed to finish school, and that same day, they went to church, that's where it all started.

3.8 Consequences of the Practices After They Left the Group

Different variables are observed regarding the consequences of the practices; in this discussion, the researcher subdivided them into 3 (three) subcategories: Personal, Social, and Psychological Consequences.

Walking through the personal experiences of the former members, it was seen that they tended to see themselves in self-resentment; she stated that "Halos isuka ko na ang pagkatao ko noon". A narrative of loathing oneself due to various factors that are tolerated and even influenced by societal structures and acceptable forms of violence. This shows the hope that, at some point, they couldn't be part of the group. If there were a time when they could go back in the past, they could create another identity for themselves.

In the Social aspect, it is evident that there was a conflict of interest among the family members as her mother was a fanatic of the group while the respondent wanted to get out, while her mother stayed she tried to pursue the life that she wanted, even though the heavy burden was upon her, she was still able to cope up with life, for the sake of her siblings, She stated that on the on first part, it was difficult, because my mother was a fanatic and I kept convincing her to leave, but I was afraid when she got mad, but I didn't want to go back that time, so I took a risk at a young age, Looking for a life to make a living trying to sell "goma" for a living. Even though she had experienced hard sets of emotions, she still learned to interact with other people, she didn't only think about myself, she was also thinking about her siblings because she was the eldest at the time. Both of their stories portrayed strength: that, during their time, women were not given notice of, even though she had shut down her life in the group, tried to work her way up, and continued socializing with other people. The respondent demonstrated resilience even though she had shut down her life in the group, worked her way up, and continued socializing with others.

Lastly, the Psychological Consequences resulted in the development of hatred towards the Church Authorities, and it left various traumas in her life, resulting in her not having the courage to enter the Church anymore. As they both tell their stories, similar occurrences of unhealed scars are shown. According to both respondents, they both used to feel mad and resentful before; they came to the point that they wanted to take revenge either through a physical or emotional one on the priest. As one of the respondents stated, she was left with a lot of trauma, and she was afraid to go back to the church because of the trauma that the church had left on her. The psychological traumas they had felt left a scar on their daily living, as evident in the respondents' accounts. This shows that past activities can erode a person's faith in a religious group.

The former Members felt a sense of relief when they were able to disaffiliate from the group. As they continued with their daily endeavors, their faith in God remained, but their faith within the Church was not evident, as they did not participate in church activities. The battle for life continued, and with hard work, the respondent achieved greater autonomy and stability in her life. As portrayed by their stories right now owning their own businesses and enjoying their life with their family, she told me that she had become resilient in life, even though she was hospitalized several times and almost died because of overworking myself but still fought, even so, my faith in Papa Jesus is there, and I know that the Lord has many more plans for me. The results show that after every adversity the respondent faced, she was able to see better outcomes in her life, as she continues to value freedom and focus on the progress of her own life.

This shows that after every adversity the respondent faced, she achieved better results in life, as she continues to value freedom and focus on the progress of her own life.

5. Conclusion

This study examined two specific narratives from women who were once part of the church institutions, which revealed localized experiences of religious abuse. These narratives portray how religious practices and teaching in this particular setting contributed to silencing their stories of violence.

The two accounts suggest a need to examine further specific doctrines, sermons, or even church policies within these institutions that have normalized such experiences. Given the limited sample of two participants, future research could incorporate data from key informants with firsthand accounts of institutionalized teachings. Researchers might also organize focus group discussions with individuals sharing similar localized scenarios to explore their experiences in greater depth.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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