

The Psychological Experiences of Male Survivors of Sexual Violence

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Abstract. Sexual violence against men remains underdiscussed and is often marginalized due to prevailing masculinity stigma. This study aims to explore the psychological experiences of male survivors of sexual violence in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara. The research employed a qualitative approach using the photovoice method for data collection, involving five male survivors of sexual violence. Thematic analysis identified four main themes. First, the forms of sexual violence experienced included conventional violence (physical, verbal, and non-verbal) as well as digital sexual violence. Second, survivors experienced revictimization through masculinity stigma and barriers to seeking help. Third, survivors' psychological responses emerged spontaneously across cognitive, affective, and conative domains. Fourth, survivors developed psychological capital in the form of self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience. This study highlights that the psychological experiences of male survivors are complex and shaped by gender norms and social contexts, thus requiring inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches.

Keywords: *sexual violence, psychological experience, photovoice*

Abstrak. Kekerasan seksual terhadap laki-laki masih jarang dibahas dan kerap terpinggirkan akibat stigma maskulinitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menggali pengalaman psikologis laki-laki penyintas kekerasan seksual di Kota Kupang, Nusa Tenggara Timur. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data *photovoice*, melibatkan lima laki-laki penyintas kekerasan seksual. Analisis tematik menghasilkan empat tema utama. Pertama, bentuk kekerasan seksual yang dialami meliputi kekerasan konvensional (fisik, verbal, dan non-verbal) serta kekerasan digital. Kedua, penyintas mengalami reviktimisasi melalui stigma maskulinitas dan hambatan dalam mencari bantuan. Ketiga, reaksi psikologis penyintas muncul secara spontan pada ranah kognitif, afektif, dan konatif. Keempat, penyintas mengembangkan modal psikologis berupa efikasi diri, optimisme, dan resiliensi. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa pengalaman psikologis penyintas laki-laki bersifat kompleks dan dipengaruhi oleh norma gender serta konteks sosial, sehingga memerlukan pendekatan yang inklusif dan sensitif gender.

Kata kunci: *kekerasan seksual, pengalaman psikologis, photovoice*

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (2024) defines sexual violence as any sexual act, attempt to perform a sexual act, or other act directed at an individual's sexuality using coercion, by anyone, regardless of their relationships with the victim, and in any situation. This definition emphasizes that sexual violence does not always take the form of physical contact and can occur in various relational contexts and spaces. Similarly, Schauer (1987) states that sexual violence is sexual behavior that is carried out without consent or in conditions where the individual is unable to give consent or refuse.

Globally, the issues of sexual violence are often perceived as a problem that primarily affects women. As a result, the experiences of male survivors of sexual violence tend to be marginalized in public discourse, policy, and support services. However, data shows that men are also a vulnerable group. Basile & Smith (2011) report that more than 27% of men have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. In Indonesia, the Quantitative Study on Gender Equality Barometer conducted by International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (2020) shows that 33.3% of 1,029 male respondents have experienced sexual violence, and another 33% have experienced sexual harassment. These findings confirm that sexual violence against men is a real and significant phenomenon.

However, this high national figure does not align with the availability of regional-level data, particularly in East Nusa Tenggara Province. To date, official data specifically documenting the number of male victims of sexual violence remains extremely limited. This lack of data does not indicate the absence of cases, but rather points to structural and social barriers in the process of reporting and documenting male victims. In fact, based on interviews with the Head of Police for Women and Children Protection, there were no reports of sexual violence against male victims

during the 2020-2024 period, which is strongly suspected to be related to the stigma of masculinity that hinders reporting.

This stigma is reflected in the experiences of survivors who feel ashamed, afraid, and consider sexual violence to be a disgrace that is inappropriate for men to experience. These findings are in line with the research by Donne et al. (2018), which states that male survivors face stronger stigma and have more limited access to support compared to female survivors. The impact of sexual violence is not only physical, but also psychological and social, such as PTSD, anxiety, feelings of worthlessness, social isolation, and impaired educational and work functioning (Macmillan & Hagan, 2004; Depraetere et al., 2020).

In this context, it is important to understand survivors' psychological experiences in greater depth. Psychological experiences include spontaneous individual responses in the form of thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations that arise in certain situations (Irwanto & Gunawan, 2018). These experiences are then interpreted by individuals, shaping how they understand themselves and the events they have experienced (Asikin et al., 2021). Therefore, this study aims to explore the psychological experiences of male survivors of sexual violence in Kupang City through a photovoice approach, so that voices that have been marginalized can be presented in a complete and meaningful way.

Method

The research method used in this study is a qualitative research method. According to Creswell & Guetterman (2015), a qualitative research method is used to explore and understand the meanings of individuals or groups involved in social or humanitarian issues. This research was conducted in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara. The procedure for selecting participants used purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (a) male survivors of sexual violence; (b) residing in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara; (c) survivors of sexual violence for at least 2 years;

(d) aged 18-30 years; (e) willing to sign *an informed consent form* as a research participant.

Table 1.

Informant Details

| Initial | Age | Gender | Time since the incident | Form of sexual violence |
|----------------|------------|---------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| SW | 25 years | M | 8 years | Physical and Verbal |
| JR | 24 years | M | 6 years | Physical and Verbal |
| ZT | 21 years | M | 5 years | Physical and Verbal |
| MG | 22 years | M | 2 years | Digital |
| AG | 23 years | M | 6 years | Verbal |

The data collection techniques used in this study were photovoice and interviews. According to Wang and Burris (cited in Beribe, 2021), photovoice is a data collection technique using photographs/images taken by participants themselves, either of themselves or of their community or phenomena, to raise awareness and discover strengths in a particular area of life. The application of the photovoice technique in this study began with explaining the objectives, procedures, and ethics of the study to the participants. Participants were asked to reflect on their psychological experiences as survivors of sexual violence, then document them through photographs taken using personal devices such as cell phones or digital cameras. The photos could depict objects, symbols, situations, locations, or specific representations considered capable of describing the psychological experiences they had undergone. After taking the photos, participants were asked to provide a brief description or caption for each photo to explain its meaning.

The photos will be collected, and based on these photos, the author will interview participants about the photos and how they interpret the psychological experience of sexual violence. The interview technique used in this study is a semi-structured interview. An interview is a communication process between two parties in which one party has a predetermined goal and involves asking and answering questions (Stewart & Cash, 2012). In this interview process, the author asks, "What does this photo mean to you?" This semi-structured interview includes basic questions and can evolve into additional questions based on the participant's

answers. Semi-structured interviews allow interviewers the freedom to explore more information from participants and make it easier to adapt to different participants. However, they impose a degree of structure, use recording devices, and make it easier to replicate interviews.

The analysis technique used in this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in data (Arnold cited in Alfauziyah & Daliman, 2020).

Result

The research data were obtained through in-depth interviews and a photovoice process with five male participants who were survivors of sexual violence in Kupang City. The collected data were then analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. In this process, the author found four main themes, namely forms of sexual violence, revictimization, psychological reactions, and psychological capital.

Forms of Sexual Violence

This theme describes the various forms of sexual violence experienced by participants, both in conventional and digital contexts. Experiences of sexual violence are not limited to physical acts such as touching or harassment in public spaces and schools, but also extend to verbal violence and technology-based harassment that often occurs through messages, comments, and anonymous accounts.

1. Conventional

Conventional sexual violence refers to experiences of sexual violence that occur directly in physical spaces, where the perpetrator and victim interact without intermediaries (Kango, 2009). Based on the interview results, the forms of conventional violence experienced by participants include physical sexual violence and verbal sexual violence. Participant ZT experienced harassment through touching that made him feel uncomfortable.

"The type of violence I experienced was physical harassment through touching that made me feel very uncomfortable" (Participant ZT)

2. Digital

Digital sexual violence is sexual violence that occurs through social media and digital devices used daily, where perpetrators take advantage of online spaces to commit harassment, threats, and intimidation (Utami et al., 2021). Participant SW described that the digital violence he experienced occurred on Facebook.

"The digital incident that I just told you about in the photo happened when I was in high school. It happened when a stranger on Facebook shared my personal and family photos along with threats" (Participant SW)

Revictimization

Revictimization refers to the experience when survivors not only experience sexual violence as the main event, but also face further forms of violence arising from the response of their social environment. In the context of male survivors, revictimization often occurs through stigma, lack of support, and structural barriers that prevent reporting.

1. Masculinity Stigma

Masculinity stigma is a social construct in which society expects men to be strong, invulnerable, and incapable of being victims of sexual violence. Masculinity stigma emerges as one of the most powerful forms of revictimization experienced by male survivors (Weiss, 2010). ZT illustrates how masculinity stigma became an obstacle in reporting the sexual violence he experienced.



Photo 1. A photo can preserve evidence, but the victim bears the scars.

Source: Participant ZT

"I am a photographer, and I am also a victim. I experienced it, and I photographed what happened. But did I report it immediately after I took the photos? No. I mostly kept them as archives because I didn't dare to speak up. There were several considerations. For example, he thought about his status as a student, perhaps because of the stigma on campus, in the community, especially when the news spread in the media like that." (Participant ZT).

2. Reporting Barriers

Barriers to reporting emerge as a form of revictimization that adds to the psychological burden of survivors after experiencing sexual violence. These barriers stem not only from weaknesses in the reporting system but also from survivors' experiences and perceptions that reporting will pose greater emotional, social, and rational risks (Campbell et al., 2001).

The results of this study show that male survivors often face internal and external barriers, such as distrust of the system, fear of being blamed, gender-based social stigma, and unclear reporting mechanisms. MG described reporting barriers due to technical factors such as the unclear identity of the perpetrator, limitations in reporting mechanisms in cases of digital violence, and the perception that dealing with an "unclear" perpetrator would be exhausting, leading him to choose not to report.

"I might have reported it, but since the perpetrator often uses fake accounts, I don't know where to report it. And I thought that rather than dealing with this person who is unclear and whose job is only to make unclear comments, I said let it be, I won't deal with this person anymore." (Participant MG).

Psychological Reactions

Experiences of sexual violence give rise to various psychological reactions that are spontaneous, automatic, and unplanned. These reactions arise when the body and mind face threats, fear, or a sense of loss of control (Suhita et al., 2021). In this context, psychological reactions are grouped into three sub-themes: cognitive, affective, and conative. These three sub-themes describe how survivors react automatically at the level of thought, emotion, and behavior when faced with sexual violence.

1. Cognitive

Cognitive reactions refer to spontaneous thoughts that arise automatically when survivors experience sexual violence or when they recall the event (Mesia, 2024). SW described how his mind automatically associated school with sexual events because school was where he experienced sexual violence.



Photo 2. Was taken by SW, showing the environment where the sexual assault occurred.

Source: Participant SW

"...the image of school that depicts me in junior high school is related because I feel that this is like the environment where the sexual violence occurred. So I feel that this image can represent my thoughts. What I mean is, when I think about violence or every time I think about it, I often think about school, like the bad things I experienced when I was in school there." (Participant SW).

2. Affective

Affective reactions refer to immediate, spontaneous, and unplanned emotional responses that arise shortly after participants experience sexual violence (Ullman et al., 2026). Participant SW revealed that feelings of anger arose very strongly when another person controlled his body without his consent.

"...when it happened, I was really angry, I mean, the feeling when someone else controls our bodies like that makes me angry. I should be the one in control. But we were made powerless, and that made me feel angry and irritated, so my emotions were very strong." (Participant SW).

3. Conative

Conative reactions refer to survivors' reflexive, automatic, and unplanned behavioral responses when experiencing sexual violence (Sulastri & Nurhayaty, 2021). AG describes cognitive responses when experiencing verbal violence in the form of protective actions and

withdrawal from social spaces. Participant AG does this as an effort to calm himself and protect himself emotionally in private space.



Photo 3. My safe space.

Source: Participant AG

"In my own room, at that time I experienced verbal abuse from someone who sexually harassed me with their words. So I went to my room to reflect or to a safe space, usually I slept while covering myself with a blanket." (Participant AG).

Psychological Capital

Psychological capital refers to positive psychological development in individuals. It involves the development of individual potential characterized by self-efficacy, a positive outlook on life (optimism), future orientation (hope), and the ability to persevere, adapt, and bounce back (resilience) (Luthans et al., 2007). In this study, the participants' psychological capital manifested as self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience.

1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is an important aspect of psychological capital that describes an individual's belief in their ability to face challenges, make decisions, and manage life experiences. The findings of this study show that individuals who have experienced sexual violence gradually build a sense of empowerment through understanding, education, and community support. Participant JR described how his work experience helped him realize his abilities and strengths despite having experienced sexual violence. JR emphasized that his daily work activities strengthened his sense of empowerment and belief in his own capacity, demonstrating significant growth in his self-efficacy.

"...after I started working, I felt, oh, it turns out I am empowered even though I have experienced sexual violence. It's like, oh, it turns out that all this time I thought that I was useless, that my life was over, that I was no longer useful. But it turns out I can still work. Seeing this room every day makes me feel that I can still work and be empowered..." (Interview, JR: P2-011).

2. Optimism

Optimism emerged as an important dimension of psychological capital, reflecting how individuals view life positively despite having experienced sexual violence. The findings of this study show that social support and the meaning participants attribute to experiences contribute to their ability to respond to situations with greater calm, gratitude, and a focus on what they can control. Participant JR emphasized that the support of friends and affirmative experiences helped him view life more positively. JR explained that words and symbols of encouragement made him feel that life was more colorful (see photo 5).



Photo 4. A word of affirmation from my friend to me.

Source: Participant JR

"Firstly, because of my circle of friends, even though I am a survivor, my friends are very supportive. They always give me experiences, joy, love, attention, affection, and support. That's why here I have the words ' ' affirmations that are not just words but also attractive, beautiful pictures. So I feel that life is getting better. Even though the experience gave me a different color, I feel that life is colorful. That's how I feel." (Participant JR).

3. Resilience

Resilience emerges as an individual's ability to survive, adapt, and recover from experiences of sexual violence. The findings of this study show that participants are able to control their emotions and manage negative thoughts despite experiencing stress. The long recovery process, support from the social environment, and the experience of sharing stories

help survivors to make peace with themselves and motivate other survivors to be able to get through this experience of sexual violence. Participant SW explained that although negative thoughts still arise, his emotions are now in a state where he is still aware enough to regulate them. SW emphasized that the ability to regulate emotional responses indicates greater resilience than in high school, when negative thoughts tended to be repetitive and difficult to manage.

"But if my emotions are not under control, I feel that it is still at a level that I can control, except when I was in high school because my thoughts kept repeating, I mean, the negative thoughts, but I feel that I can still control my emotions" (Interview, SW: P1-023).

Discussion

This study aims to explore the psychological experiences of male survivors of sexual violence in Kupang City using the photovoice approach. The results show that the psychological experiences of survivors are not singular, but complex and interrelated dynamics. These experiences include the forms of sexual violence experienced, experiences of revictimization, psychological responses, and psychological capital. All of these findings form a series of psychological experiences of male survivors of sexual violence in Kupang City that cannot be understood partially.

Research findings show that male survivors experience various forms of sexual violence, both conventional and digital. Referring to the classification of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia (2024), sexual violence includes physical, verbal, non-verbal, and digital violence. Conventional sexual violence in this study occurs directly in physical spaces, especially in school environments and in peer relationships. Participants' experiences show that physical sexual violence in the form of unwanted touching often occurs in relationships marked by power imbalances, especially among adolescent boys. The school environment, which should ideally be a safe space for

individual development, has the potential to become a location for sexual violence, as confirmed in previous studies (Fitri et al., 2025).

Beyond the physical, survivors frequently face verbal violence in the form of ridicule, insults, and comments that degrade their identity and bodies. This highlights that sexual violence does not always manifest as overt physical acts; it often occurs through language and social interactions that are normalized or overlooked by society. Non-verbal violence also plays a role, manifesting as threatening stares or gestures that leave survivors feeling unsafe, even when such behaviors are not recognized as violence by those around them.

In the digital age, the scope of violence extends into cyberspace. This study confirms that survivors experience digital sexual violence through social media and digital devices, including threats, online harassment, and the non-consensual distribution of personal photos. Utami et al. (2021) explain that the anonymity and 24/7 accessibility of digital spaces allow perpetrators to feel safe from legal consequences, while for survivors, it prolongs a sense of insecurity. Technology enables violence to be carried out repeatedly, which, according to Zagloul et al. (2022), strengthens the perpetrator's position and exacerbates the psychological impact on the victim. Sexual violence is thus a multidimensional phenomenon operating across physical and digital spaces with interconnected control mechanisms.

However, the suffering does not end with the incident itself. Survivors often find themselves trapped in a cycle of revictimization fueled by masculinity stigma and "gendered disbelief." This stigma causes male survivors to doubt their own experiences, feel ashamed, and fear being dismissed if they come forward (Weiss, 2010). Deep-rooted social assumptions suggest that men must be strong, capable of fighting back, and impossible to victimize. Such thinking creates a gender-based disbelief that blames or doubts the victim (Javaid in Conner, 2020).

Cultural pressures in Indonesia, particularly in Kupang, which demand that men suppress emotions like crying or asking for help, further silence these survivors. Consistent with findings by Easton et al. (2014), male survivors experience

ambivalence in expressing trauma due to the fear of being mocked. The fear of negative reactions from family, teachers, and peers remains a major barrier to seeking help. A study by Manafe & Benu (2024) emphasizes that negative family responses significantly affect a victim's well-being. In Kupang, hierarchical social structures reinforce the authority of adult figures, leaving young survivors feeling powerless to challenge harmful reactions. This revictimization functions as a social mechanism that prolongs psychological suffering and hinders recovery (Campbell et al., 2001).

Internally, survivors grapple with intense psychological responses across three aspects: cognitive, affective, and conative (Walgito, 2004). Cognitively, the violence triggers spontaneous thoughts, confusion, and a tendency toward self-blame (Pangesti & Saputri, 2023). Traumatic memories attached to specific locations often trigger painful flashbacks (Arel, 2018). Emotionally (affectively), survivors experience layered feelings of anger, fear, shame, and betrayal. Widodo (2025) notes that these emotions, including emotional numbness, fluctuate and create intense internal conflict. Consequently, survivors exhibit protective behaviors, such as social withdrawal or avoidance, to alleviate emotional pressure (Fleurkens et al., 2014).

Despite these oppressive dynamics, this study's remarkable finding is the survivors' ability to develop "psychological capital" as an internal source of strength. Survivors begin to build self-efficacy, the belief that they are still capable of making decisions and managing their lives. They also cultivate optimism, not by denying the trauma, but by interpreting the experience adaptively (Kusristanti et al., 2020).

Resilience serves as the final key to this journey. The ability to endure and recover develops through a long process of emotional regulation and social support. For men, support from trusted individuals or peer groups is crucial for challenging restrictive masculinity norms and regaining a sense of agency (Hakim & Widjanarko, 2025). Ultimately, the experience of sexual violence in men is more than just a tragedy that leaves scars; it is a profound psychological process where survivors fight to recover, challenge stigma, and forge a new, stronger meaning for their lives ahead.

Conclusion

This study aims to describe and understand the psychological experiences of male survivors of sexual violence in Kupang City through the photovoice approach. The findings indicate that survivors' psychological experiences are complex and dynamic, encompassing cognitive, affective, and conative components, which are reflected in how survivors interpret their experiences of sexual violence, manage emerging emotions, and develop adaptive responses in daily life. These experiences are structured into four interrelated themes: forms of sexual violence experienced, experiences of revictimization, psychological responses following the incident, and the development of psychological capital.

Physical, verbal, and digital sexual violence serve as initial triggers for complex psychological dynamics, which are often reinforced by revictimization within social environments and digital spaces. Despite these vulnerabilities, male survivors demonstrate the capacity to survive, adapt, and grow by developing psychological capital, including self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience. The photovoice approach proves to be a relevant and meaningful method for uncovering survivors' psychological experiences while providing a safe space for men to narrate experiences of sexual violence that are frequently silenced, thereby offering a foundation for the development of psychosocial interventions, advocacy efforts, and gender-sensitive policies within the local context of Kupang City.

Suggestion

Male survivors of sexual violence need to realize that what they have experienced is not their personal fault, dare to identify themselves as victims, and develop adaptive coping mechanisms and literacy about sexual violence, including digital safety, with the support of a safe environment and professionals. Parents and families are expected to create a supportive space that is free from stigma and does not blame the victim, as well as to increase understanding about sexuality, gender, and children's mental health. Meanwhile, the government and educational institutions need to strengthen inclusive and gender-sensitive policies and services

for the prevention and handling of sexual violence, ensure a safe reporting system for male survivors, and increase the capacity of educators and officials to provide an empathetic and unbiased response.

For future research, studies are encouraged to increase participant numbers and to explore diverse cultural backgrounds to enrich the understanding of male survivors' experiences. Further research may also examine the dynamics of revictimization in digital environments and investigate how masculinity stigma influences long-term recovery processes.

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