
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

United Against Exploitation: Lived Experiences of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) Members

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| ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the work experiences of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) members in Central Visayas Region, Philippines. Specifically, the study seeks answers to the following questions: experiences of the informants in the performance of their functions, cope with the challenges encountered in the performance of their functions, and aspirations of the informants to improve the performance. The researcher adopted transcendental phenomenology which is based on principles identified by Husserl (1931) and was translated into a qualitative method by Moustakas (1994). The study was conducted in the Central Visayas Region of the Philippines which comprises two provinces – Bohol, Cebu, and the highly urbanized cities of Cebu City, Lapu-Lapu City, and Mandaue City. The study engaged a total of twelve (12) informants drawn from key agencies and organizations involved in anti-trafficking efforts. Specifically, two (2) representatives were selected from the Department of Justice (DOJ), two (2) from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), four (4) from the Philippine National Police (PNP), two (2) from the Mactan-Cebu International Airport Task Force Against Trafficking (MIATFAT), and two (2) from Bidlisiw Foundation, an non-government organization (NGO), closely collaborating with IACAT. Informants were chosen through purposive sampling, with the primary criterion being at least three (3) years of active participation in anti-trafficking operations or initiatives. Each of the twelve participants was interviewed individually to capture their unique perspectives and experiences. Results revealed that on the experiences of the informants in the performance of their functions, the themes generated were: For Positive Experience: Multifaceted Roles and Adaptive Capacity, Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed Practice, Justice and Purpose as Motivational Drivers, Collaborative Networks as Enablers and For Negative Experience: Operational Strain and Systemic Barriers, Emotional Toll and Wellness Gaps. For coping with the challenges encountered in the performance of their functions, the following themes emerged are: Personal Resilience and Self-Management, Collective Strength through Peer Support and Relational Trust, Strengthen Organizational Culture and Professional Sustainability, Navigating Structural and Resource Efforts. For aspirations of the informants to improve the performance, themes developed are: Strengthening the Human Infrastructure, Leadership, Coordination and Collaborative Ecosystem, Prevention, Innovation and Public Engagement. Recommendations urge IACAT and member agencies to adopt context-sensitive reforms that align operational realities with survivor empowerment.

| KEYWORDS

Exploitation, Lived experiences, Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT), Members, Phenomenology, Central Visayas Region, Philippines

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking is an ancient criminal activity as old as the tongue could speak; its roots is deeply embedded in the history of human civilization. The exploitation of people for labor, sexual exploitation, and other forms of servitude has been a continuous and widespread problem since the beginning of slavery in ancient Rome and Greece and the transatlantic slave trade that started

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in the 1400s. Human trafficking or Trafficking in person is defined by law which involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of individuals through force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation (*Republic Act 9208, 2003*).

Despite the passage of time and the evolution of societies, human trafficking continues to be a significant global problem, affecting millions of people worldwide. According to the 2024 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons published on December 11, 2024 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), child trafficking, trafficking for forced labor and forced criminality are rising as poverty, conflict and climate leave more people vulnerable to exploitation. The Report records a 25 percent increase in the number of trafficking victims detected globally in 2022 compared to 2019 pre-pandemic figures. Between 2019 and 2022, the global number of victims detected for trafficking for forced labor surged by 47 percent. The global number of detected child victims increased 31 percent in 2022 compared to 2019, with a 38 percent rise recorded for girls (*UNODC Global Human Trafficking Report, 2024*).

The inter-agency collaboration is widely adopted internationally as a framework for combating human trafficking. This adopted framework is anchored on the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Commonly referred to as the Palermo Protocol, this framework was adopted in 2000 and serves as the first legally binding international instrument to define human trafficking. It emphasizes a three-pronged approach: prevention, through awareness campaigns and addressing root causes; protection, by safeguarding victims' rights and providing support services; and prosecution, by criminalizing trafficking and ensuring justice for victims. The framework also promotes international cooperation among countries to address trafficking across borders, making it a cornerstone in global efforts to combat this heinous crime. Three (3) years after, the Philippines enacted the Republic Act No. 9208, otherwise known as, Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003, an act to institute policies to eliminate trafficking in persons especially women and children, establishing the necessary institutional mechanisms for the protection and support of trafficked persons, providing penalties for its violations, and for others.

In a global scale, the lived experiences of personnel working within anti-trafficking agencies reveal the complexities and challenges of combating human trafficking. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), frontline workers often face difficulties such as limited resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and the psychological toll of handling trafficking cases. A synthesis review of human trafficking studies from 2010 to 2022 highlights the need for enhanced training, better inter-agency collaboration, and improved data collection to support personnel in their roles. Additionally, the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022 underscores how crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated vulnerabilities and increased the burden on anti-trafficking personnel worldwide. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial for developing policies that strengthen support systems and improve the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts.

For nine (9) consecutive years, the Philippines has maintained its Tier 1 Ranking in the United States' 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report. This means that the country has fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) minimum standards.

While the current literature delves into the effectiveness, best practices, and challenges of program implementation, it likely overlooks the perspectives of those directly involved the emotional, psychological, and professional journeys of individuals working within inter-agency collaborations like the IACAT. By exploring the lived experiences of IACAT personnel, my study could uncover unique insights into how they navigate the complexities of anti-trafficking work, cope with challenges, and contribute to the program's success on a personal level. This approach adds depth to the discussion by highlighting the human side of inter-agency collaboration, which is rarely addressed in program-centric studies.

With a background in law and 13 years of teaching experience in criminology, I possess the necessary expertise to conduct this study. My knowledge in legal frameworks provides a solid foundation for analyzing the intricacies of trafficking laws, while my extensive experience in criminology equips me with the skills to understand and address the challenges faced by law enforcement. Additionally, my teaching experience has honed my research and analytical abilities, enabling me to effectively gather, interpret, and present data. This unique combination of qualifications ensures that I can provide valuable insights and contribute significantly to the field of human trafficking research.

2. Literature Review

The study is anchored mainly on the Role theory by Robert K. Merton (1957) supported by Cognitive Dissonance theory by Leon Festinger (1957) and Transformative Learning theory by Jack Mezirow (1978).

The theoretical foundation of Merton's Role Theory is rooted in the functionalist perspective, which emphasizes the importance of social structures and institutions in maintaining social order and stability. According to this perspective, society is composed of interrelated parts, each with its own function that contributes to the overall functioning of the social system. Social roles are

seen as essential components of these structures, as they define the expected behaviors and responsibilities of individuals within various social contexts (Merton, 1957).

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) posits that individuals seek to maintain consistency among multiple cognitions (e.g., thoughts, behaviors, attitudes, values, or beliefs). Inconsistent cognitions produce unpleasant states that motivate individuals to change one or more cognitions to restore consistency with other cognitions (i.e., consonance). Cognitive dissonance was one of many theories based on the principle of cognitive consistency that grew from early theories such as balance theory (Heider, 1946).

Transformative Learning Theory, developed by Jack Mezirow in the late 20th century, is a comprehensive framework for understanding how adults learn and change their perspectives through critical reflection and new experiences. Mezirow's theory emphasizes the importance of challenging existing beliefs and assumptions to foster personal growth and transformation. This theory is intended to be a comprehensive, idealized, and universal model consisting of the generic structures, elements, and processes of adult learning. Cultures and situations determine which of these structures, elements, and processes will be acted upon and whose voice will be heard.

Human trafficking persists as a global menace, threatening the dignity, rights, and safety of countless individuals. In response to this pervasive issue, the Philippines established the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT), a collaborative body tasked with combating trafficking through a holistic approach involving prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership. While the policies and strategies of IACAT have been extensively studied, there is limited focus on the lived experiences of the personnel who are at the forefront of this mission. This section reviews literature and studies relevant to understanding the dynamics of inter-agency collaboration, challenges in anti-trafficking initiatives, and the psychological and professional experiences of personnel engaged in this critical work.

Interestingly, Bryant and Landman (2020) had examined and investigated as to whether or not the UN Trafficking Protocol works to combat human trafficking.

Research indicates that one of the most effective ways to combat human trafficking is collaborative governance. Taylor (2023) conducted a study regarding the barriers to anti-human trafficking collaboration in the United States. The study focuses on the domestic efforts to combat human trafficking based on socio-cultural-political factors that impact organizational efforts to work collaboratively in the United States.

Likewise, Jatau & Yahaya (2019) investigated the inter-agencies relations and their challenges in combating trafficking. Nigeria is a source, transit and destination for women and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. Her victims of trafficking are recruited from rural and to a lesser extent urban areas; women and girls for domestic servitude and sex trafficking and boys for force labor in street vending, domestic service, mining, stone carrying, agriculture and begging.

Van Dyke (2017) examined the nature of the evidence collected to monitor and evaluate the activities and outcomes of organizations involved in a number of human trafficking partnerships in England and Wales. It utilizes the '4 Ps' approach to tackling human trafficking: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership.

In Ghana, a multi-stakeholder collaboration concept which advocates for a four (4) phase systematic process, it demonstrates the fact that in dealing with a complex phenomenon such as Trafficking in Persons, a more fluid application of collaboration approaches is necessary. Collaborations are a continuum from loose relationships that enable the sharing of information, expertise and mutual assistance; to closer coordination of implementation strategies, where partners align their physical and human resources towards achieving agreed shared goals (Kandilige & Ampah, 2023).

Canton (2015) asserted that inter-agency involves two or more agencies deciding to work together in partnership. It originates in the recognition by these agencies (or by policy makers at a higher level) that they have a common concern and/or that they are often working with the same people. It is possible that an agency may not even be aware that other agencies have the same concern so that they make their contribution without regard to the involvement of others. In the particular case of criminal justice, the offending-related needs of many offenders require a coordinated and complementary inter-disciplinary response. But how close a partnership ought this to be? A useful distinction can be made between multi-agency work which may be said to begin when several agencies become aware that they share concerns and clients and begin to think about how to work together and inter-agency work which implies at least some degree of blending, mixing or fusing. We shall say more later about these levels of cooperation and integration.

Thainiyom (2012) contended that although collaboration is growing rapidly, little is known about why collaboration is valued as a strategy to plan and implement anti-trafficking interventions. Other questions of interest include how collaboration is formed, what factors are significant in enabling an effective collaborative process, how collaborative outcomes are measured as

successful, and what the key ethical dilemmas of collaboration that should be considered in the anti-trafficking actors to understand the values of their collaboration and develop better strategies to effectively respond to the problem.

Wilson (2010), investigated on the relationships between non-government organizations (NGOs), religious groups, and government agencies in response to modern human trafficking, to assess the respective strengths and weaknesses of these relationships, and to seek ways in which partnerships and prospective members of partnerships may increase the effectiveness of their collaborative work. Additionally, separation of church and state within the United States creates problems for these church-state relationships, which are absent in countries like the United Kingdom where these two entities naturally cooperate.

When working with survivors of trafficking, it is critical to understand the deep interconnectedness between the survivor's ability to self-stabilize, build life skills, and develop positive coping mechanism, and the nature of his or her interactions with these various systems. It is equally critical to understand how strong and consistent collaboration among the members of these systems can lead to better outcomes for the survivors as well as everyone involved in the multiple aspects of a trafficking case. Moore (2006) investigated how attorneys can protect and yield better legal outcomes for their clients by collaborating with social service professionals specifically, and by reconsidering their own roles in serving trafficking survivors – not only as legal advocates, but as informal mental health advocates. His study further presented one model of comprehensive service delivery, that of the Coalition to Abolish Slavery (CAST), in which legal and social services complement and support each other within one agency to better serve clients.

Le et al. (2018) explored on the awareness-raising tactics as the first priority in the prevention strategies in Vietnam. The paper undergone a thorough discussion pertaining to the nature of human trafficking and legal framework on raising trafficking awareness. Under Vietnamese policies, awareness-raising involves knowledge-based training to acquaint people with the policies and legislation in place to counter human trafficking, recognize trafficking situations, inform the public about the risks and consequences of trafficking and share information about effective prevention measures between agencies. In Vietnam, public awareness-raising campaigns are implemented through two kinds of communication methods: mass media and community-based activities. The first method provides information through Vietnamese television, radio, newspapers, websites and phone networks. Community-based activities focus on awareness-raising campaigns at regional levels via networks of educators in human trafficking.

The Philippines is considered a transit, destination, and source country for sex-trafficking (UNODC, 2018). It further stated that the Philippines is reported to be in the top five (5) countries globally where sex-trafficking is prevalent and cyber-sex trafficking of children has become a primary mode of entry into the sex trade (Philippines Department of Justice, 2022; UNODC, 2021). With this, Moldovan (2023) explored on how professionals in the Philippines make sense of sex-trafficking in their country and how working with this population impacts their well-being.

Johnson-Daniels (2023) studied the challenges of law enforcement officers and the impact of law enforcement officers in combatting human trafficking. The result of his study indicated that law enforcement officers experience challenges combatting human trafficking due to the definition of human trafficking, and identification of human trafficking. These challenges can be overcome if law enforcement officers receive proper training and resources, update their traditional investigative methods, and collaborate with various law enforcement agencies.

In light of the anchor theory, supporting frameworks, legal provisions, conceptual perspectives, and prior studies explored in this examination, it becomes evident that anti-trafficking operations are multifaceted endeavors requiring coordinated and comprehensive approaches. These insights emphasize the interconnectedness of legal, social, and economic dimensions in combating human trafficking. As policymakers, enforcers, and advocates navigate the complexities of anti-trafficking efforts, they must draw upon diverse knowledge and interdisciplinary perspectives to craft strategies that uphold human rights, promote justice, and foster resilience for vulnerable populations, ensuring a safer and more equitable future for all.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The researcher utilized a qualitative research method that explored the lived experiences of the informants. The researcher adopted transcendental phenomenology which is based on principles identified by Husserl (1931) and was translated into a qualitative method by Moustakas (1994). The study was conducted in the Central Visayas Region of the Philippines which comprises two provinces: Bohol, Cebu, and the highly urbanized cities of Cebu City, Lapu-Lapu City, and Mandaue City. Under RA 9208 as amended by RA 11862, the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT) coordinates by harmonizing the efforts of government agencies, civil society, and international partners in policy-making, information sharing, victim protection, and law enforcement. Its mandate ensures a unified, survivor-centered, and globally aligned response to trafficking in persons, balancing prevention, prosecution, and rehabilitation.

3.2 Research Participants

The study engaged a total of twelve (12) informants drawn from key agencies and organizations involved in anti-trafficking efforts. Specifically, two (2) representatives were selected from the Department of Justice (DOJ), two (2) from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), four (4) from the Philippine National Police (PNP), two (2) from the Mactan-Cebu International Airport Task Force Against Trafficking (MIATFAT), and two (2) from Bidlisiw Foundation, an non-government organization (NGO), closely collaborating with IACAT. Informants were chosen through purposive sampling, with the primary criterion being at least three (3) years of active participation in anti-trafficking operations or initiatives. Each of the twelve participants was interviewed individually to capture their unique perspectives and experiences.

3.3 Research Instrument

We employed a semi-structured interview guide as the primary research instrument. The interview guide was designed with open-ended questions to facilitate in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of members from the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT). This interview guide consists of the following parts: part I composed of the preliminary questions, where the informants respond to some questions such as their personal circumstances, years in service as anti-trafficking personnel, and current designation as IACAT member; part II is about the experiences of the informants, most of the questions propounded are the overall functions and experiences (both positive and negative) as an IACAT personnel; part III are on the coping of the challenges encountered by the informants; part IV are on the aspirations of the informants, where the informants will give suggestions and recommendations of various programs that will aid and improve their competence in order to deliver quality service. The interview guide (IG) was validated and duly approved by the panel members. The interview was conducted and supplemented with field notes and a voice recorder for the documentation of the responses of the informants.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected personnel from member agencies of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT). This approach allowed informants to narrate their experiences in their own words, yielding rich, first-person accounts. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online and were audio-recorded with the consent of participants. An interview guide, informed by the research questions and phenomenological principles, was used flexibly to encourage reflective and comprehensive responses.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis within the framework of Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method, as adapted by Moustaka's (1994) in his transcendental phenomenology. This approach was selected for its rigor in systematically moving from participant's verbatim accounts toward a distilled description of the essence of their lived experiences.

The process began with epoche, in which the researcher engaged in bracketing to set aside personal assumptions about anti-trafficking work and interagency collaboration. Each interview transcript was read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of the narratives.

4. Results and Discussion

From the gathered data, through the recorded response of the twelve (12) informants, thirteen (13) substantial emergent themes were created. These themes formulated are as follows:

4.1 Experiences of the Informants in the Performance of their Functions

For Positive Experience

4.1.1 Multifaceted Roles and Adaptive Capacity

This theme highlights how IACAT members dynamically integrate investigative, advocacy, and psychosocial support functions, continually recalibrating their expertise, coordination mechanisms, and decision-making processes to meet the shifting demands of complex anti-trafficking interventions.

Our work in the WCPC is challenging and it includes investigation, serving warrant, coordination with DOJ-IACAT and help the victims. (Participant 3).

We are working in close partnership with IACAT to provide trainings. Bidlisiw focuses more on prevention and advocacy, while in protection and reintegration we also handle parent cases and have much less involvement in prosecution and law enforcement

since we are not lawyers. There are other NGOs that really go through prosecution. Bidlisiw will just refer cases to us and we assist in training our law enforcement and social workers to help them. (Participant 12).

Our work schedule is shifting subject to changes approved. There are some internal agreements among workers as to the days and hours of duty but we still need to render an 8-hour duty and 40 hours a week. Sometimes we do compressed hours of work, this is due to lack of personnel and based on flights to and fro whether local or international flights. One of the duties that we perform is to profile passengers mostly on visa countries (whose flight is expensive and difficult to penetrate) most of the tickets are promo tickets and the airline is affordable. Those are the things that we need to take on as part of the passenger profiling. (Participant 7).

4.1.2 Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed Practice

This theme captures the informants' practices and approaches in dealing with trafficking victims and traumatized survivors. Victims described moments of genuine "being seen" when personnels paused their agendas to listen deeply, which phenomenologically constituted a shift from object to co-author of their healing. Embedding this approach demands systemic adjustments: staff training in recognizing trauma symptoms, flexible policies that prioritize survivor feedback, and continuous evaluation mechanisms.

Usually, it is the social worker from the DSWD who do the interaction of the victims but there are instances where social workers are not available, so I will do the initiative to conduct the interview. Most of the time, it is a challenge to handle kids because they are somehow distracted and throw tantrums at us despite of the initial undertaking given to them (e.g. food, accommodation, etc.) We do not proceed asking questions right away, we will try to build rapport first and ask questions totally unrelated to the case. It is different when it comes to teenagers, they are difficult to deal with, what we did is that we will just let them do whatever they want and we understand as well that they experienced traumatic stress upon rescue. We do small talk first in the van and when are being brought to the centers then they are in the hands of the social workers. (Participant 1).

The instincts – like sibling instinct and maternal instinct – just come out, you know. It is the NBI or Police were supposed to do the first interaction but there are instances that they will immediately submit the victim to the DSWD despite of all they are still patient and understanding. So, we have to make sure that we understand them and attend to their needs. There was a time when the mother was very hysterical but she was not the suspect herself, she refused to submit the child to the center but later we were able to convince her. I convinced her child will not be imprisoned but there was a possibility that child was abused. With patience, the mother and the child were able to understand the situation. That is how the way we approach. (Participant 5).

We are not harsh in dealing with victims because most of them suffer terribly and does not talk. We experience lack of funding that is why we sometimes refer them to the DSWD. We make sure that we can build rapport to them. We have to deal them with utmost care until they feel better. (Participant 7).

4.1.3 Justice and Purpose as Motivational Drivers

This theme operates as intertwined forces that fuel sustained commitment to anti-trafficking work where each act of protection, rescue, or rehabilitation is both a pursuit of accountability for harm done and a reaffirmation of the deeper calling to restore dignity, safety, and hope in survivors' lives.

A successful operation is memorable for me such as the ability to pull-out victims (kids) from their respective houses and to be able to file or entrap perpetrators. (Participant 1).

My successful experience is to be able to perform my job in a proper way though mistakes are normal but to be able to be recognized of a job well done from my boss is enough. It seems like paper works are trivial matters but these are actually important as the lives of the people involved lies in it. (Participant 2).

When you do all the work, like, I had a case before where I conducted an undercover operation, I conducted surveillance, and then I was assigned as the arresting officer that was successful. Yes, I did the job with the three roles. It was a successful operation where I fulfilled all three roles and at the same time I delivered justice for the child who, in my experience, was a six-year-old child who was exposed. (Participant 10).

4.1.4 Collaborative Networks as Enablers

This theme embodies strategic engagement in multi-level councils and informal communication channels transforms collaborative networks into active enablers of anti-trafficking action. Through maintaining consistent presence in formal bodies, such as IACAT, LCATs, and BCPs, and sustaining rapid exchanges through group chats and direct coordination, actors like Bidlisiw

foundation strengthen policy alignment, accelerate case response, and embed advocacy priorities within interconnected governance systems.

This is already an established council. We make sure that partner agencies are coordinating and doing their mandated job according to the law. We should strengthen this part. We see to it that there are focal persons on each partner agencies so that we can create relationships for easier contact. I do courtesy visits in their office but not to the extent that I am taking advantage of them. Example, DepEd is a member of the IACAT council but not actively participating in the past. What I did, I tried to get in touch with their focal person. If there is a case, we make sure that we are doing case conferences to convene and discuss the things that we should do on the case. That is one of our best practices. (Participant 5).

Actually, what we have here, ma'am, is that we receive referrals from other partner agencies such as DSWD, DSWDO, or even from IACAT itself, or there are times when walk-ins come here to report alleged trafficking cases, so that is the source of our information. Most referrals and proactive investigations. In proactive investigations, we conduct cyber patrolling, so we can gather information there, and that is where the investigation will start. We also have an advocacy program where our personnel will conduct information dissemination, lectures in schools, including barangays. There will also be distribution of IEC materials, in fact, the month of July is known as World Trafficking Days. So in collaboration with IACAT, we have tasks involving media, radio visits, and there will also be activities like caravans, so we will participate in those as well. But for us, even on normal days, we conduct barangay visits, distribute IEC materials, and hold lectures. (Participant 8).

We do courtesy visits, especially if we have not partnered or it's our first time entering barangays. We really introduce who Bidlisiv is and what we do. Our goal, especially concerning LGUs, is to secure a seat in their BCPC (Barangay Children Protection Committee) council so that we can influence the council members to prioritize our advocacy, especially in trafficking in persons. (Participant 11).

For Negative Experience

4.1.5 Operational Strain and Systemic Barriers

This theme describes how chronic under-resourcing, procedural bottlenecks, and fragmented inter-agency coordination create sustained operational strain, impeding timely and effective responses to trafficking cases. Heavy caseloads, unclear role delineations, and gaps in institutional mandates not only slow service delivery but also erode personnel well-being and morale. These systemic barriers, when left unaddressed, perpetuate cycles of inefficiency that undermine both survivor outcomes and the long-term resilience of frontline actors.

The challenge is when deadlines for my compliances are simultaneously due. It is also a challenge to request public prosecutors to get involved in the case because most of them are busy with other tasks. We cannot force these public prosecutors to be get involved. Sometimes they will call prosecutors in order to provide legal opinions under such circumstances. (Participant 2).

Number 1 is our security. Although we are immune in the face of law that we can't be sued but as to physical, we cannot dodge bullets and we don't wear bullet vests unlike the police. Our enemies are syndicates and security was really my concern. I was very careful about my contacts and social media. They might infiltrate into my contacts because my name was written in affidavits. So far, I received no threats but if there exist, I make sure that I am ready for it. When it comes to OSAEC, we did not encounter any suspicious happenings, most of the time, we find issues here in the centers because parents are suing us. Second, the demand of our job centers in the rescue operations that requires our undivided attention. You really have to leave all the things you currently working on and sometimes we have to extend our working hours just to finish our work. Lastly, our concern is the budget, we do not have enough supplies for our victims. (Participant 5).

If I will to take it seriously, I get affected, I just don't mind the flaws of my work and I happen to accept it. I am frugal of my finances besides, I am already 63 years old and we even have a co-worker who is 72 years old. Ours is a job order contract and every 6 months we renewed the contract. (Participant 7).

4.1.6 Emotional Toll and Wellness Gaps

This theme revealed that sustained exposure to high-stakes, trauma-laden casework exacts a significant emotional toll, often without the buffer of adequate institutional wellness mechanisms. The absence of structured psychosocial support, compounded by workload intensity and the blurring of personal professional boundaries, erodes resilience over time. These wellness gaps leave practitioners reliant on individual coping strategies rather than systemic care, risking burnout, diminished efficacy, and the long-term sustainability of the anti-trafficking workforce.

Because of the nature of my job having to deal with trafficked victims, I have this paranoia in me that my relatives (e.g. nephews and nieces) might be engaging in this kind of activities that would lead to trafficking because kids nowadays possess cellphones. (Participant 1).

No one who take charge in the wellness of the personnel that supposedly should be done. There must be a proper debriefing after every rescue operations so that we will not absorb emotionally traumatized experiences. For example, our operation conducted at Negros, this place is highly infiltrated by NPAs. Then the dialect is so challenging to as we could not understand each other. Also, the distance of some remote area is a factor since the signal is unavailable in those places. (Participant 2).

First is prayers. Everytime we conducted operation especially during nighttime, I asked guidance from the Lord. For example, the case I handled in Cordova where the mother is the suspect and the victims were minors aged 6,7,14 and 16. The proper procedure in dealing with this kind of case is that we separate mothers from children and as we started the process of search, the children started to cry. Our companions such as fiscals, social workers and even police will start to cry as well. It is horrible to think that these innocent children have lost its dignity. Some of them (children) are self-perpetrating the crime. Until now I can still remember this case somehow it is hard to erase it in your mind. (Participant 3).

4.2 Coping with the Challenges Encountered in the Performance of their Functions

4.2.1 Personal Resilience and Self-Management

Personal resilience, within this thematic frame, is not treated as an inherent or fixed trait, but as a dynamic capacity actively constructed through self-management. This theme sustained that by an intentional orchestration of boundary-setting, reflective self-monitoring, and strategic resource stewardship practices that enable individuals to remain grounded while navigating high-pressure, often unpredictable contexts. Here, self-management functions as both the scaffolding and the amplifier of resilience: through restorative routines, regulated pacing, and proactive support-seeking, it transforms lived challenges into structured opportunities for adaptation and growth. This coupling of reflective insight with decisive, boundary-anchored action safeguards physical, emotional, and ethical integrity, ensuring that resilience is not simply about endurance, but about the sustainable preservation of well-being and purpose in the midst of systemic strain.

I sometimes get carried away especially when things get dramatic since these kinds of happenings involved family members. But I am sure I will get used to it in time. (Participant 2).

I just need to be frugal since I received only minimal salary. (Participant 4).

Personally, first I really pray. If I feel like I can't take it anymore, I call my family since they are far away – video call – I just talk to them and then take a break from the screen, something like that. It's like alone time, that's just how my routine goes. (Participant 9).

4.2.2 Collective Strength through Peer Support and Relational Trust

This theme expressed that in high-demand professional contexts, collective strength through peer support and relational trust operates as a reinforcing social infrastructure that sustains both individual resilience and group efficacy. Rooted in mutual accountability, empathic listening, and reciprocal care, these relational dynamics generate a psychologically safe environment in which colleagues can exchange candid insights, co-develop solutions, and share the emotional weight of their work.

I could not deny that sometimes I get affected by the experiences of the victims because somehow, I can relate to them. Due to poverty and being a bread winner, they wish to avail of the opportunity from outside of the country. Online transactions has promised attractive offer for those people who wish to work abroad. (Participant 4).

Number 1 is having a good support system and my boss is very supportive. There are few here I consider as friends that after ever rescue operations we normally vent out our experiences, we talked about it over dinner. Number 2 is sleep. Operations are usually done early morning, so, I make sure that have enough sleep. I turned off my phone every time I travel. There are times that I asked for a one-week day off from my supervisor. I also find time to read; I love reading novels. Reading helps me forget momentarily the stressful job. As to self-care, there was none offered by the council and even. (Participant 5).

Food. We have circle of friends. In the late afternoon I usually asked them to eat with me. I make sure to allocate one week to go home to spend time with my family. Here in the city, I have also friends. (Participant 6).

4.2.3 Strengthen Organizational Culture and Professional Sustainability

This theme articulated that organizational culture plays a decisive role in shaping professional sustainability by establishing the values, norms, and support systems that enable individuals to thrive in demanding work environments. When an organization fosters a climate of mutual respect, transparent communication, continuous learning, and shared accountability, it not only strengthens employee well-being and retention but also sustains high levels of performance over time. A supportive culture grounded in trust, inclusivity, and recognition becomes the foundation upon which professionals can adapt, innovate, and remain committed to their roles despite systemic challenges.

Expect challenges like working beyond working hours, even 24/7, you took oath for it and that is your job although you have the right to rest but the demand of the work is the priority, I say, it is not of the faint of heart. The good thing about IACAT is that despite of the demand in work, there is a support system. Once you get into this kind of job you have to broaden your horizon and open to possibilities of working 24/7. (Participant 5).

We do a lot of trainings but right now, we have to look for sponsors for the trainings. Before, we our office is still new, every year we have 3-4 trainings but right now, it has been a rare thing after the pandemic. Sometimes there are online seminars from Australian embassy or foundation. Those trainings are not initiated by IACAT, we were just invited. Here in our office, we have trainings but initiated by the airport itself but again it is no longer done because of the budget. In terms of psychological, we are just doing our own initiative to feel better within ourselves. Sometimes we make fun out of it when we encounter cases and we do profiling with passengers because that's our job. (Participant 7).

You really need to set aside your emotions because if you let your emotions take over, it will affect your judgment in your decision making. As much as possible, just remain objective. The victims are also ordinary people who have unknowingly violated the law, especially when the perpetrator is a close relative. Don't you think about how it could happen to you? There are situations where children are simply allowed to watch something on screen, and there is a story involving a foreigner, and they are unaware that they have been exploited. (Participant 8).

4.2.4 Navigating Structural and Resource Efforts

This theme expressed that IACAT members actively devise adaptive responses to systemic limitations such as inadequate staffing, budgetary shortfalls, and procedural bottlenecks by reconfiguring workflows, prioritizing critical tasks, and leveraging informal support networks. In doing so, they reframe institutional constraints as negotiable boundaries, employing improvisation, resource pooling, and cross-agency alliances to sustain operational effectiveness within a resource-scarce environment.

I think it is more on the budget and I think emphasis on the welfare. We, in the IACAT we have budget intended but what happen we need to justify for allocation of a specific purpose just like during rescue operations and food allocation for the staff. Emphasizing not only on the staff development but also on the rest and recreation (R&R) of the staff. I am hoping that IACAT can promote that kind of policy especially for the frontliners such as the police, prosecutor and DSWD. (Participant 5).

That is really what we have been asking from the national for a long time, those benefits because we have been asking from others that have the same standards; those agencies that are not involved in human trafficking are different from the government agency within the airport, they have JO, what is the difference between JO and contractual, it's basically the same. They have leave, we really don't have leave. Before, we were allowed before only based on the agreement with IACAT but that was removed. And if we are absent, we really can't, but if we do get absent, it's hard to be absent because during that time I am alone, we don't have anyone to replace. Unless maybe if someone is really seriously ill, but how can we manage that? We really don't take absent unless we agree that your duty is my duty and my duty is your duty. (Participant 7).

Try to think outside the box since he doesn't have enough information; look at the other side, maybe there are other ideas to consider, as it can't just be limited to that. (Participant 9).

4.3 Aspirations of the Informants to Improve the Performance

4.3.1 Strengthening the Human Infrastructure

In this theme, the informants aspire to fortify the human backbone of IACAT by investing in the continuous development, well-being, and cohesion of its personnel. They envision a workforce empowered through targeted capacity-building, mentoring systems, and robust psychosocial support ensuring that staff are not only technically proficient but also resilient, collaborative, and adaptive in the face of structural and resource constraints.

My aspiration is for the salary to increase and make it as a plantilla position. It is also important to equipped ourselves with trainings/seminars to let us perform effectively as part of IACAT. (Participant 1).

We should know how to handle women and children even though we are not social workers. There are times that social workers are not available, it is us who actually handle these children. (Participant 2).

We are trying our best to prevent and enforce trafficking cases. As I have mentioned we can only do so much as the mode of trafficking has transformed from traditional to advance technology. I suggested before to cut down internet but that is impossible as internet already is a necessity in our modern society. To me, it is difficult to control trafficking. We can arrest only if there is being reported to our office. (Participant 3).

4.3.2 Leadership, Coordination and Collaborative Ecosystem

This theme is about cultivating strong leadership, seamless coordination, and a truly collaborative ecosystem is central to the vision of IACAT members. They aspire to a unified anti-trafficking network where decision-makers, implementers, and community partners in concert sharing information, aligning strategies, and reinforcing each other's efforts to ensure swift, coherent, and survivor-centered responses.

After we have performed the rescue operations, the IACAT members involved will have a debriefing, in this case we talked about our challenges and issues encountered during operations so that in the future we will know what to do. It is actually a good thing to improve. The debriefing will also lead to the feeling of unnecessary awkwardness towards each member. (Participant 3).

Actually, we see that partnership should not be done only with the LGU but also to private sectors such business sectors, tourism establishments and schools. (Participant 5).

The coordination among partners needs to improve, but the improvement isn't significant because they are quite different. If they are strict and really focus on prevention, they can achieve that, but among our partners, ma'am, they really vary. Before IACAT, the smuggling activities were already happening; it was just that their movements seemed to be prevented because of IACAT. That's why they have a barrier; they definitely have their own methods. (Participant 7).

4.3.3 Prevention, Innovation and Public Engagement

Under this theme, IACAT members transition from reactive response toward a proactive guardianship model anchored in prevention, propelled by innovation, and sustained through public engagement. They construct protective architectures by weaving community networks into early-warning systems, harness adaptive praxis via iterative, technology-infused solutions, and foster shared stewardship by demystifying anti-trafficking efforts through inclusive, transparent outreach. Together, these strategies coalesce into a dynamic framework that not only anticipates and thwarts trafficking risks but also mobilizes collective action for enduring impact.

You cannot really say it is lesser because there are so many modus operandi regardless of your partner (the informant means the council members). We will really strive to prevent it as best we can. We have given a lot of awareness, ma'am, indeed we have given a lot, but there are also many new modus operandi. The traffickers are really aware, but as far as the Philippines is concerned, we are tier 1 in the international arena, ma'am. Many trafficking cases have been prevented. If you compare it to other countries, their trafficking is more rampant; we have more cases compared to other countries. (Participant 7).

Awareness in the community is really important, especially in those remote areas because they are very vulnerable. Most of what we know comes from those types of provinces. It is actually easy to access the internet there now. Maybe online communication is just through chat, even without load you can still chat, so from the remote areas they really have no idea about what is happening. So, when they chat with them, they are given money and it is easy for them to communicate without asking where the money is coming from and why they are being given money, unless they are informed that it is not easy for someone to give them money without an exchange for that money. (Participant 10).

The landscape of trafficking has truly evolved; it is a mixture of both online and traditional methods. We have a hackathon, which is an activity where we invite tech developers to create an application that can help with our advocacy, especially concerning OSAEC. That is the goal as we try to innovate with technology. (Participant 11).

5. Conclusion

From the gathered data, through the recorded response of the twelve (12) informants, thirteen (13) substantial emergent themes were created. The findings highlight both the resilience of IACAT members and the systemic gaps that shape their daily realities,

pointing to the need for reforms that strengthen individual capacity and institutional frameworks. For practice, the implications emphasize comprehensive capacity-building and welfare programs for personnel, supported by sustainable budgets, alongside specialized roles within agencies such as full-time prosecutors in the DOJ, dedicated aftercare staff in the DSWD, and specialized anti-trafficking units in the PNP and NBI. Integrity measures and ethics-focused training are recommended for the Bureau of Immigration, while NGOs should be formally integrated into coordination mechanisms with sustainable funding streams. Other agencies such as APD, AVSEGROUP, DOTr, DILG, and LGUs are urged to enhance coordination, secure staffing and funding, embed anti-trafficking education and indicators into local governance, and mobilize community networks for vigilance and prevention. Survivors are positioned not only as beneficiaries but as partners in advocacy, with empowerment through skills training, livelihood support, and survivor-led initiatives. Researchers are called to ensure ethical dissemination, survivor confidentiality, and accessible translation of findings, while future studies should explore cross-country comparisons of council coordination, multi-agency responses to digital trafficking threats, and community-driven perspectives on prevention and advocacy. Together, these implications underscore the importance of survivor-centered, evidence-based, and context-sensitive strategies that connect governance, operational response, and grassroots action to build a more coordinated, resilient, and ethically grounded anti-trafficking movement.

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