

## VICTIM SURVIVOR OF FORCED LABOR AMONG AETAS: A CASE STUDY IN TARLAC

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the experiences, coping mechanisms, and current life conditions of Aeta victim survivors of forced labor in Sitio Ye Young, Barangay Sta. Juliana, Capas, Tarlac. Forced labor remains a serious violation of human rights, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations such as indigenous communities. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight Aeta participants recommended by the community chieftain. The study employed thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes that reflect the participants' lived experiences. Findings revealed that the Aetas experienced multiple forms of labor exploitation, including withholding of salaries, irregularities in compensation and benefits, false promises, domestic work abuses, maltreatment, and threats. These exploitative practices were facilitated by poverty, low educational attainment, social discrimination, and limited awareness of labor rights. Despite enduring these challenges, the Aetas primarily relied on passive coping mechanisms such as time healing, displacement, and avoidance to manage psychological distress. These strategies, shaped by cultural norms and limited access to formal mental health support, allowed them to endure trauma but did not fully resolve its effects. In terms of current life conditions, most participants continued to live under circumstances similar to those prior to their victimization, relying on subsistence farming and informal work to sustain their families. Only a few reported modest improvements, primarily due to the assistance of educated children. Persistent poverty, low self-esteem, limited education, and social discrimination were identified as barriers to upward mobility and economic empowerment. The study highlights the structural and cultural factors that perpetuate forced labor in indigenous communities and underscores the critical need for interventions that include education, livelihood support, culturally sensitive mental health services, and policies that protect indigenous workers from exploitation. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between human rights violations, cultural context, and socioeconomic vulnerability in the Aeta community and offer evidence-based recommendations for promoting social justice, community development, and protection of marginalized groups.

**Keywords:** Forced Labor Victim Survivor Indigenous People Coping Mechanism Human Rights

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Forced labor continues to be a serious violation of human rights, deeply embedded in global economic, social, and political systems. In a recent report, the International Labour Organization (ILO) revealed that illegal profits from forced labor in the private economy now amount to USD 236 billion per year, representing a 37 percent increase since 2014. This rise reflects both an increase in the number of people being exploited and higher profits earned per victim, particularly in sectors such as sexual exploitation, agriculture, and domestic work (ILO, 2024). The magnitude and profitability of forced labor make it a particularly challenging issue for policymakers and civil society to address.

In the Asia Pacific region, forced labor remains widespread. Data from the ILO indicate that millions of people continue to be trapped in exploitative and coercive labor arrangements within sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, and manufacturing. These industries are characterized by minimal oversight, weak labor protections, and high vulnerability among low income and marginalized populations (ILO, 2018).

In the Philippines, recent studies show that the country ranks among those with a high prevalence of modern slavery. The 2023 Global Slavery Index estimated that approximately 859,000 Filipinos lived in various forms of modern slavery in 2021. This translates to a prevalence of about 7.8 people for every 1,000 in the population. Forced labor, forced marriage, human trafficking, debt bondage, and exploitation in domestic work are the most common manifestations of this issue (Walk Free, 2023). National labor statistics also reveal significant numbers of unpaid workers and high vulnerability among individuals in the informal economy (BusinessWorld, 2023).

Among the most vulnerable groups are Indigenous Peoples such as the Aetas. Their geographical isolation, limited access to education and infrastructure, and continued marginalization contribute to economic situations where they are undercompensated, subjected to coercive work agreements, or exploited through informal employment. Reports of poor working conditions, long working hours, nonpayment or minimal compensation, and absence of labor protection have emerged in several Aeta communities in recent years. These conditions reflect global patterns of forced labor that target marginalized ethnic and cultural groups.

Since this problem remains underexamined at the local level, particularly among indigenous populations, the present study focuses on the Aetas of Sitio Ye Young, Barangay Juliana, Capas, Tarlac. The purpose of this research is to document their experiences of what they perceive as forced labor, explore their coping mechanisms, and assess their socioeconomic conditions. The findings aim to provide a basis for developing interventions that will enhance their protection and welfare. Understanding their lived experiences is essential not only for safeguarding human rights but also for promoting social justice, community development, and policy reform.

Theoretical foundations are vital in analyzing this phenomenon. Conflict Theory explains how power disparities enable dominant social and economic actors to exploit those with limited power and resources. The Marxist perspective supports this view by asserting that labor is often treated as a commodity, and profit accumulation depends on maintaining low labor costs, which can lead to coercion, underpayment, and economic dependence. Social Disorganization Theory attributes exploitation to weak institutions, poor social networks, and lack of community cohesion. Victim Interaction and Repeat Victimization theories emphasize that vulnerable individuals and groups often experience repeated forms of abuse due to limited access to justice and empowerment. Constitutive Criminology suggests that victims of forced labor are stripped of their human agency, while offenders act out of excessive self-interest. The Economic Theory of Crime proposes that exploitative practices are more likely to occur when the perceived financial benefits outweigh the risks of punishment (Lanier & Henry, 2004; Van den Hoven & Maree, 2005; Witte & Witt, 2002).

Through these theoretical lenses, this study seeks to understand not only the presence of forced labor among the Aetas but also the structural, cultural, and economic conditions that allow it to persist. The research underscores the importance of strengthening legal protection, improving access to justice, enhancing educational and livelihood opportunities, and promoting awareness within indigenous communities to prevent further exploitation.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study utilized a qualitative case study design to explore and understand the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and present life situations of Aetas who have been victims of forced labor in Sitio Ye Young, Barangay Sta. Juliana, Tarlac. The qualitative approach was chosen because it focuses on exploring human experiences and meanings from the participants' perspectives. As emphasized by Rossman and Rallis (1998), qualitative inquiry acknowledges that there are multiple realities and diverse perspectives that shape how people interpret their world. Similarly, Merriam (1998) asserted that qualitative research contributes significantly to knowledge by focusing on discovery, insight, and understanding as perceived by those being studied. Through this approach, the researcher sought to capture the authentic voices of Aeta survivors and to uncover the realities behind their victimization and resilience against forced labor practices.

The study involved eight Aeta individuals of legal age residing in Sitio Ye Young. These participants were identified and recommended by the chieftain of the community based on their experiences of forced labor and their willingness to participate. The use of purposive sampling was appropriate for the study since it targeted participants who possessed direct and relevant experiences. Individuals who had suffered extreme trauma or who were medically fragile were excluded to prevent potential mental or emotional distress during recollection. The Aeta community was chosen as the focus because of their continuing experience of exclusion, marginalization, and limited access to social and economic opportunities. Sitio Ye Young, in particular, was selected because of its documented cases of forced labor as reported by SunStar

Pampanga from 2016 to 2018, which revealed that several Aetas had been recruited to work in factories and construction sites without proper compensation or benefits. The location also presents a strategic geographical context for traffickers, as it connects to multiple routes leading to San Jose, Camiling, Mabalacat, Angeles, and San Miguel, making it an ideal site for exploitation.

Data collection was conducted primarily through formal, semi-structured interviews complemented by direct observation. The interview guide was patterned from frameworks developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) for studying forced labor and human trafficking, and it was reviewed and refined by panel experts to ensure content validity. The interview instrument consisted of a brief introduction that explained the purpose and voluntary nature of the study, followed by open-ended questions that encouraged participants to share their experiences, coping mechanisms, and current life situations. The chieftain of the Sitio served as both translator and cultural mediator, ensuring that communication between the researcher and participants was accurate and culturally sensitive.

Each interview began with the presentation and explanation of an informed consent form. Participants were given the freedom to sign, provide a thumb mark, or verbally consent if they could not read or write. With their permission, responses were documented using written notes and, in some cases, audio or video recordings to ensure accuracy and completeness. Follow-up questions were posed when necessary to clarify details or elaborate on specific aspects of their narratives. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher secured ethical clearance and permission from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), which reviewed and approved the research protocol. The researcher also obtained permission from the 790th Air Base Group and the Barangay Captain of Sta. Juliana to ensure compliance with institutional and local regulations. Members of the Air Force provided security assistance throughout the data collection period to guarantee the safety of both the community and the researcher.

After data collection, the researcher analyzed the responses using thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher first familiarized himself with the data by reading and reviewing the transcribed interviews multiple times. Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful data segments, which were later grouped into potential themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and defined according to their relevance to the study's objectives. The final thematic framework reflected the participants' collective experiences and meanings while also preserving their individual voices. Thematic analysis was chosen because it offers flexibility and depth in interpreting qualitative data and allows the identification of patterns that explain the complex realities of forced labor among the Aeta community.

Throughout the entire process, strict ethical standards were observed. The researcher ensured that participation was voluntary and that all respondents were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and code names to participants, while all identifying information was stored securely and separately from the data. Interviews were conducted in private spaces, often within the respondents' homes, to ensure comfort and confidentiality. The presence of Air Force personnel served as a security precaution and did not interfere with the discussions, as they were not familiar with the local language. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, a licensed psychologist was engaged to conduct debriefing sessions with both the respondents and the researcher to address potential emotional distress arising from the recall of traumatic experiences. Upon completion of the study, copies of the findings were provided to the NCIP, the Air Force, and the Barangay Captain to ensure institutional transparency and to help inform future policy and community protection measures.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **1. Experiences of Victim Survivors of Forced Labor at Sitio Ye Young Barangay Sta. Juliana Capas, Tarlac**

Forced labor continues to affect vulnerable populations in the Philippines, particularly indigenous communities such as the Aetas of Sitio Ye Young, Barangay Sta. Juliana, Capas,

Tarlac. Despite experiencing exploitative labor conditions, many Aetas do not recognize these practices as forced labor or criminal acts, often remaining silent due to cultural values of humility, fear of retaliation, and limited trust in formal institutions (Commission on Human Rights, 2018). This underreporting contributes to the invisibility of forced labor in indigenous communities, leaving workers susceptible to exploitation, including unpaid domestic work and deceptive recruitment practices (ILO, 2017; Verité, 2016; U.S. Department of State, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016). Addressing these issues requires culturally sensitive interventions, community education, and strengthened law enforcement to protect and empower indigenous laborers.

To gain a deeper understanding, it is essential to explore the lived experiences of the Aeta community members. Their personal accounts reveal not only the nature and extent of forced labor but also the social, cultural, and psychological factors that influence their responses to exploitation. The following presents these experiences, highlighting the realities faced by the Aetas.

### **1.1. Withholding of Salary**

Withholding of salary refers to an employer's refusal or failure to pay an employee for work performed. This includes cases where wages are given below the agreed amount, delayed for several months, or completely denied. Employers may also deceive workers by promising payment at a later time that never comes.

From the participants' accounts, this situation is described as follows:

*KP 1: "Ang sahod ko sa isang buwan ay one thousand five hundred pesos (1,500 php) ngunit kung ano lang ang maisipan ng aking amo na ipasahod yun lang ang binibigay."* (My salary for one month is one thousand five hundred pesos but only what my employer would think to give that is the amount he will give.)

*KP 2: "Minsan lang pasahurin, kulang pa ang binibigay."* (The salary is given irregularly, and still below the agreed amount.)

*KP 3: "Iniipit o hindi po binibigay ang sweldo."* (Withholding or salary is not given.)

*KP 4: "Hindi nila ibinibigay ang sapat na sahod."* (They are not giving the salary that is agreed upon.)

*KP 5: "Minsan lang po pasahurin at kulang po ang binibigay."* (Salary is given only once and it is below the agreed amount.)

*KP 6: "Tuwing araw ng sweldo ay kalahati lamang ang binibigay."* (Every payday, only half of the salary is given.)

*KP 7: "Hindi po ako pinasahod ng anim na buwan."* (They did not give my salary for six months.)

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017), withholding of wages is among the most common forms of forced labor, affecting nearly one-fourth of victims worldwide. The findings reveal that due process was not followed in employment arrangements. Many Aetas were hired without written contracts, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and unable to demand fair compensation.

The absence of employment contracts creates opportunities for employers to exploit workers. Without written agreements, employees have little protection and limited access to justice. As ILO (2021) emphasizes, informal employment and lack of documentation remain major drivers of labor exploitation, particularly among indigenous and marginalized groups.

The rational choice theory of crime further explains that some employers may withhold wages when they perceive that the benefits of doing so outweigh the risks of being caught or penalized. In this case, the economic gain from not paying workers exceeds the perceived cost of possible legal consequences.

### **1.2. Irregularities in Compensation and Benefits**

Compensation and benefits refer to the entitlements that employees should receive, such as retirement plans, health and life insurance, disability benefits, vacation pay, overtime, holiday pay, sick leave, premium pay, and the thirteenth month pay. However, the Aetas who experienced forced labor reported irregularities in receiving these compensations and benefits.

They stated that employers often promised such benefits to persuade them to work, but when they needed medical or financial assistance, employers failed to fulfill their obligations.

Four participants shared their experiences:

*KP 3: "Hindi niya man lang ako pinapagamot o binigyan man lang ng pera upang pambili ng gamot o pampagamot noong ako'y minsang magkasakit ng walang dahilan sa itikan."* (He did not even send me for treatment or give me money to buy medicine when I got sick without reason at his duck farm.)

*KP 4: "Ang bayad sa overtime ay malaking tulong sana para pang tustos sa pang araw-araw ngunit hindi nila ito binigay."* (The payment for overtime could have helped in sustaining our daily needs, but they did not give it.)

*KP 5 and 6: "Hindi kami binigyan ng I.D. para sa medical assistant at insurance."* (They did not give us identification cards for medical assistance and insurance.)

The findings suggest that the denial of compensation and benefits represents a deliberate act of exploitation, primarily motivated by profit. In cases of labor exploitation, the employer's gain directly corresponds to the worker's loss, making it a zero-sum relationship. Employers benefit financially by withholding rightful entitlements such as overtime pay, health benefits, and insurance, while workers suffer economic and physical harm.

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017; 2021) has reported that profit-driven exploitation remains a core motive in forced labor practices, particularly among vulnerable populations. The lack of awareness about occupational safety and health standards further exposes Aeta workers to risks of injury and illness. Employers' neglect of medical assistance is often rooted in their desire to avoid financial loss, even at the cost of workers' well-being.

From a criminological perspective, constitutive criminology views these employers as active agents who pursue excessive economic gain at the expense of human dignity. The victims, in turn, become powerless, enduring pain, deprivation, and loss of basic rights. This aligns with the view that exploitation is a form of structural violence embedded in profit-oriented labor systems.

### **1.3. False Promises**

False promises refer to commitments made without any real intention of fulfilling them, often with the intent to deceive or take advantage of others. Among the Aeta community, such deception is common because many members are trusting and less familiar with labor laws and formal employment practices. The Aetas are known for their Palabra de Honor or "Word of Honor," meaning that when they make a promise, they strive to keep it. Unfortunately, this cultural value is often exploited by lowland employers who use false promises to control and manipulate Aeta workers.

Four Aetas shared their experiences of receiving false promises from their employers:

*KP 3: "Pinangakuan ako ni Kong Dong na kada buwan ay tataasan niya ang sahod ko ng limang daan (500 php)."* (Kong Dong promised me that every month my salary would increase by five hundred pesos.)

*KP 5 and 6: "Nangako sa amin kasama ng aming kapwa trabahador na may allowance kami ngunit wala kaming natatanggap."* (He promised us and our co-workers that we would receive an allowance, but we never received any.)

*KP 8: "Pinangakuan kami na titirahan daw ang aming lupa at babayaran buwan buwan pero hanggang ngayon ay wala."* (They promised us that they would live on our land and pay rent monthly, but until now, nothing has happened.)

These accounts reveal that the Aetas were deceived through promises that are, in fact, basic labor rights guaranteed by law, such as fair pay, allowances, and proper compensation. Employers took advantage of the Aetas' lack of knowledge about their rights, knowing that they were unlikely to recognize or challenge the deceit. This pattern of exploitation reflects a deeper social problem where ignorance of the law and unequal power relations allow employers to violate labor rights with impunity.

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017; 2021) has identified deception as a key indicator of forced labor, noting that many victims are lured by false promises of wages,

benefits, or better living conditions. These deceptive recruitment and employment practices continue to be prevalent in informal and marginalized labor sectors.

From a criminological standpoint, the Social Disorganization Theory helps explain why such practices persist. In communities where social institutions like family, education, and governance are weak, exploitation and abuse are more likely to occur. The disorganization of social control mechanisms allows exploiters to operate without accountability, while marginalized groups like the Aetas remain unprotected and silent.

#### **1.4. Domestic Work**

Domestic work is one of the oldest forms of labor in human history, rooted in systems of servitude and slavery that continue to influence labor relations today. It remains undervalued and largely unregulated in many countries because labor laws often exclude domestic workers from formal protection.

According to the chieftain of the Aeta community in Sitio Ye Young, domestic work is the most common form of employment among Aetas because it does not require formal education or complex skills. Aetas are known to be hardworking and capable in household tasks such as cooking, laundry, childcare, and general housekeeping. However, these jobs often expose them to poor and unhealthy working conditions.

Three Aeta participants shared their experiences:

*KP 1: "Ako ay nagtrabaho bilang isang kasambahay sa banda ng Tambo, Capas." (I worked as a domestic worker in Tambo, Capas.)*

*KP 2: "Namasukan ako bilang isang kasambahay." (I worked as a domestic helper.)*

*KP 7: "Naranasan kong magtrabaho bilang kasambahay na pinagtrabaho ng siyam na oras mula alas siete hanggang alas kwatro." (I experienced working as a domestic helper for nine hours, from seven o'clock to four o'clock.)*

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017) reported that among the 24.9 million people trapped in forced labor worldwide, about 16 million are exploited in private sectors such as domestic work. This finding aligns with the experiences of Aetas, who are vulnerable to exploitation because of limited education and lack of awareness of their labor rights.

According to the chieftain, the main reason Aetas remain susceptible to forced labor is not the absence of educational opportunities but the effects of bullying and discrimination that discourage them from completing their studies. As explained by Chiqui Yamson, the Aeta tribe secretary in Sitio Ye Young, bullying in schools causes many young Aetas to lose confidence and withdraw from education, limiting their future employment options.

Research supports this observation. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (StopBullying.gov, 2017) found that children who experience bullying often suffer from anxiety, depression, loneliness, and poor academic performance, making them more likely to drop out of school. Similarly, Bullying No Way (2019) reported that the psychological effects of bullying can persist into adulthood, leading to social anxiety, loss of self-esteem, and feelings of helplessness.

Another factor that contributes to the vulnerability of Aetas is stereotyping. Even those who have completed formal education face discrimination during job applications. One respondent, a high school graduate, shared that despite submitting resumes to various establishments, he never received any responses. When applying in person, he observed that employers favored individuals with lighter skin and straight hair, treating Aetas as inferior. This racial bias forces many Aetas to accept any job offered, even when conditions are uncertain or exploitative.

James (2018) explained that stereotyping limits the opportunities of cultural minorities by reinforcing prejudice and unequal treatment. These biases perpetuate social exclusion and make marginalized groups more prone to labor exploitation.

The Aetas' involvement in domestic work reflects a combination of structural and social vulnerabilities such as limited education, discrimination, and lack of labor protection. These factors collectively expose them to exploitation and forced labor.

#### **1.5. Maltreatment**

Maltreatment refers to physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and exploitation that cause harm to a person's dignity or well-being in a relationship of responsibility or trust.

Some Aetas reported being trained by a military official who claimed they would serve as his reservist security force. After their deployment to Clark Green City as security guards, they endured maltreatment and labor exploitation from their employer.

At least two Aeta respondents described their experiences:

*KP 5 & 6: "Nakaranas kami ng sobrang kaparusahan kapag hindi nakakabalik sa itinakdang oras, kami ay pinagmamarcha na nakasuot ng kapote habang tirik ang araw."* (We experienced severe punishment when we failed to return on time; we were made to march wearing raincoats under the sun.)

*KP 5 & 6: "Naranasan din namin na ipaddle kapag mayroong pagkakamali."* (We were also hit with a paddle when we made mistakes.)

Recent studies show that maltreatment often arises when an authority figure holds power over vulnerable individuals and uses that power to enforce compliance. Victimology: A Text (Daigle, 2017) emphasises that relationships of trust can lead to higher risk of abuse when controls are weak or oversight is absent.

The work by Vakhitova et al. (2018) demonstrates how offenders use both physical and psychological measures to maintain control over victims who depend on them, and that close interaction or dependency increases the chance of abuse.

Betrayal Trauma Theory also explains how maltreatment by someone seen as protector or in authority can be particularly damaging because the sense of betrayal deepens the trauma.

These sources help explain the Aetas' experiences: the military official's promise of legitimacy, the close relationship during training and deployment, and the severe punishments reflect an abuse of power and betrayal by someone trusted. Where oversight is absent and legal protections are weak, maltreatment can continue without recourse.

### **1.6. Threat**

A threat refers to any communication intended to cause fear, harm, or loss to another person. Among the Aetas in Capas, Tarlac, this form of exploitation is common because they are often perceived by others as belonging to the lowest social class. Exploiters take advantage of this perception, believing that the Aetas will not retaliate even if their rights are violated. This sense of superiority and intimidation is maintained through constant threats and abuse of authority.

Three Aetas shared their experiences of being threatened by their employers:

*KP 1: "Minsan ay nakiusap po ang aking anak na umuwi dito sa aming baryo pero hindi po siya pinayagan sa halip ay pinagbabantaan pa po siya na kapag pinagpilitan niya paring umuwi ay may mangyayaring masama sa kanya."* (One time, my daughter asked to go home to our Sitio, but she was threatened that if she insisted, something bad would happen to her.)

*KP 2: "Kapag ako ay hihingi ng day off ay hindi na daw ako makakabalik sa aking trabaho."* (When I ask for a day off, they say I will no longer be allowed to return to work.)

*KP 4: "Ang sabi po ng amo niya kahit sino pang mataas na tao ang dalhin sa kanila o kahit ang presidente man ay hindi sila matatakot."* (Her employer said that even if the highest government official or even the president intervenes, they would not be afraid.)

The accounts reveal that employers intentionally use threats to instill fear and control the Aetas, discouraging them from asserting their rights or reporting abuses to authorities. Fear becomes a psychological weapon that traps victims in silence and compliance.

During a follow-up interview, the respondents expressed how deeply fear affected their lives:

*KP 1: "Pagkatapos ng karanasan kong iyon ay hindi na muli akong sumubok pang magtrabaho at nag-asawa na lamang dahil sa takot."* (After that experience, I never tried to work again and chose to get married instead because of fear.)

*KP 2: "Simula noon ay natakot ang aking anak na makipagtrabaho sa labas o mamasukan bilang kasambahay."* (Since then, my daughter has been afraid to work outside or become a domestic helper.)

The respondents' fear of retaliation and lack of trust in the justice system prevent them from filing complaints. They believe their wealthy employers are untouchable and that seeking justice would endanger their families.

This situation aligns with findings from Reem and Tamimi (2017), who emphasized that threats and coercion are common tools in forced labor to maintain control over victims. Similarly, Bales and Soodalter (2019) explained that the psychological manipulation of fear is a hallmark of modern slavery, as it effectively prevents victims from seeking help or escaping.

### **1.7. Good Treatment**

Despite the numerous accounts of negative treatment, two Aeta respondents shared that they were treated well by their employers throughout their employment. They reported receiving free food and experiencing kindness in their workplace.

*KR 3: "Libre naman ang aking pagkain sa pinagratrabahuan"* (My food at the workplace is free) (Personal)

*KR 7: "Naging maganda naman ang pakikitungo ng amo ko sa akin"* (My employer treated me well)

It appears that the Aetas' sense of contentment is simple; receiving basic needs such as food and respectful treatment already makes them feel valued, even if their rights are compromised. However, further validation revealed that these employers still underpaid their workers. The wage of fifty pesos for eight to nine hours of labor violates labor laws. Similar findings from other studies show that some exploiters treat workers kindly to prevent them from disclosing the true nature of their exploitative conditions (Del Rosario & Ofreneo, 2018; Villanueva, 2021).

## **2. Coping Mechanisms Employed by the Victim Survivors relative to their experiences**

The second specific problem focuses on the coping mechanisms employed by the victim survivors of forced labor in Sitio Ye Young, Barangay Sta. Juliana, Capas, Tarlac. Based on the interviews, the Aetas commonly used time healing, displacement, and avoidance to cope with their traumatic experiences. These strategies reflect their attempts to recover emotionally despite limited awareness of psychological coping methods.

### **2.1. Time Healing**

Time healing emerged as the most common coping method among the Aetas. Three participants shared that they chose to let time ease their pain and accepted what happened.

*KP 1: "Sa paglipas ng panahon ay tinanggap ko na lang ang nangyari."* (Over the time I accepted what had happened)

*KP 2: "Malilimutan ko din ang masasakit na nangyari sa akin sa paglipas ng panahon."* (I will just forget the pain that happened over time)

*KP 8: "Hinayaan na lamang po namin ang pangyayaring iyon dahil lilipas din ang araw."* (We just let that happen because as time passes by we will just forget it)

According to the American Psychological Association (2019), most individuals recover from traumatic events through the passage of time, as people naturally adapt and regain stability at their own pace.

### **2.2. Displacement**

Displacement involves redirecting emotions or energy toward safer or unrelated activities. The Aetas admitted that engaging in other tasks helped them forget their painful experiences.

*KP 4: "Itinuon ang oras sa ibang bagay."* (Time is spent on something else)

*KP 7: "Ibinigay ko na lang ang atensyon ko sa mga anak ko."* (I gave my attention to my children)

*KP 8: "Pinagtuunan ko na lang ng pansin ang isa pa naming lupang sakahan."* (I decided to focus my attention on another farm land)

Displacement can provide temporary relief but does not resolve underlying distress (Nguyen & Vo, 2017).

### **2.3. Avoidance**

Avoidance involves evading thoughts or situations that trigger distress. Four Aetas practiced this strategy to forget the abuse they experienced.

*KP 3: "Pinilit kong kalimutan ang naging karanasan ko sa itikan."* (I forced myself to forget my experience at Duck Poultry)

*KP 4: "Pilit na makalimutan ang masasakit na nangyari sa akin."* (I forced myself to forget the painful things happened to me)

KP 5 & 6: “*Pilit kong kinalimutan ang nangyari sa akin.*” (I forced to forget what happened to me)

Avoidance may reduce initial distress but can also lead to psychological strain if prolonged (Scott, 2018; García & Santos, 2020). One respondent described experiencing disturbing visions, possibly linked to trauma.

KP 3: ““*Kasabay ng pag limot kong iyon ay may kakaibang nangyari sa akin mag pa sa hanggang ngayon na tuwing gabi ay sinasaniban ako at nagpapakita sa akin ang babaeng sinasabi ng manggagamot na naging dahilan ng pagkakasakit ko sa aking trabaho.*” (Along with me, forgetting about the incident something strange happened to me until this day that every night I was possessed and a woman showed to me that is said by the shaman who caused my illness to work)

Cultural influences also shape coping styles. As Wethington and Kessler (1991) and later studies confirmed, cultural background affects how individuals manage emotional challenges (Li & Zhao, 2019). For the Aetas, limited awareness of mental health concepts led them to rely on familiar but less effective coping strategies. Hence, promoting culturally sensitive mental health education among indigenous communities is essential.

### 3. Current Life of the Victim Survivors

Specific problem three (3) deals with the query in the current life of victim survivors at Sitio Ye Young, Barangay Sta. Juliana, Capas, Tarlac. Victims’ responses about their current life after they have been victimized show that almost all Aetas’ conditions of life have not improved; they always return to their previous status after victimization.

#### 3.1. The Same Life Situation

Out of eight (8) participants, six (6) Aetas claimed that their lives after the crime remain exactly the same as when they left their families. When asked why their situation has not changed, they replied:

KP 1: “*Hanggang ngayon ay mahirap pa din kami wla pa ding nagbabago*” (Until now, our life has not changed; we are still poor)

KP 3: “*Wala namang nagbago sa pamumuhay ko*” (Nothing has changed in my life)

KP 4: “*Mahirap pero kinakaya*” (It is hard, but we are still enduring)

KP 5: “*Ganun pa din ang aming pamumuhay*” (Our lives are still the same)

KP 6: “*Ako ay nag-uuling sa aming baryo upang mayroong maipakain sa aming pamilya*” (I am selling charcoal in our village to feed my family)

KP 7: “*Katulad pa rin ng dati, umaasa na lang ako sa asawa*” (It is still the same; I depend on my wife)

Aetas who dream of improving their living conditions often try to find employment elsewhere. However, they face the reality that it is more practical to continue their previous way of life. Planting root crops such as yam and sweet potatoes, as well as vegetables like eggplant, squash, and taro, ensures that their family has food for the day while also providing some income if crops are sold. This is the main reason why the current life of most Aetas neither improves nor worsens but remains the same. It is empirically evident that vulnerability to forced labor is closely linked to poverty. According to ILO (2015), over 75 percent of the global workforce is engaged in temporary, informal, or unpaid work, meaning only a quarter of workers have the security of permanent contracts. Four in ten workers are either unemployed or working but living in poverty, while as of 2014, over 200 million people were entirely unemployed.

#### 3.2. Improved Life Situation

It is morally uplifting that at least two (2) Aetas reported improvements in their lives. They stated:

KR 2: “*Sa ngayon po ang aking anak ay mas mabuti na ang kalagayan, nag tratabaho ngayon siya sa bukid at nakakasama namin araw-araw*” (For now, my daughter is in a better situation. She is working in the field, and we are with her every day)

KR 8: “*Sa ngayon masasabi kong tumaas naman kahit papano ang aming pamumuhay dahil sa tulong ng aking mga anak, tinutulungan din nila akong mag trabaho at tumulong din sila sa pinansyal dahil sila ay nakatapos at may kanya kanyang trabaho*” (For now, I can say that our

lives have improved because of the help of my children. They also help me with work and provide financial support because they have completed their studies and have their own jobs)

The researcher observed that the sense of happiness and fulfillment among Aetas is not profound. Being complete as a family and sustaining daily living is enough for them to consider their life successful. Education, however, can create a more significant change in their lives. According to chieftain and secretary, the education of Aetas is well supported by NGOs and government organizations, but support for their daily living needs is often neglected. While Aetas do not face financial barriers to education, they lack support for everyday survival.

Aetas strive hard to finish their education, but circumstances often make it impossible. Education is essential because it is the key to success. The younger generation of Aetas recognizes its importance, which is why some manage to complete up to the fourth year of high school. The researcher emphasizes the need for every Aeta to pursue education up to the tertiary level. The chieftain added that low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence also contribute to the low percentage of Aetas in professional positions. Many perceive farm work and domestic work as the only suitable jobs, while office work is considered for those with lighter skin and straight hair.

The findings of this study are timely, coming shortly after national elections. As this study illustrates, labor violations continue to persist. The researcher hopes to hold politicians accountable for fulfilling their promises, particularly in improving the living conditions of every Aeta in Sitio Ye Young.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

1. The experiences of Aeta victim survivors reveal pervasive labor exploitation, including withholding of salaries, irregularities in compensation and benefits, false promises, domestic work abuses, maltreatment, and threats. These practices are facilitated by poverty, lack of formal education, social discrimination, and limited awareness of labor rights. The findings highlight that exploitation is both structural and cultural, with employers leveraging the Aetas' trust, humility, and social invisibility to perpetuate forced labor.

2. The Aetas primarily employ passive coping mechanisms such as time healing, displacement, and avoidance to manage the psychological effects of forced labor. These strategies reflect cultural norms and limited access to formal psychological support, allowing them to endure trauma but not fully resolve it. The reliance on familiar coping mechanisms underscores the need for culturally sensitive mental health education and interventions tailored to indigenous communities to enhance resilience and recovery.

3. Most Aetas continue to live under conditions similar to those prior to their victimization, relying on subsistence farming and informal work to sustain their families. Only a few reported modest improvements, largely due to the support of educated children. Persistent poverty, low self-esteem, limited education, and social discrimination prevent significant upward mobility. The study emphasizes the importance of education, livelihood support, and policy interventions to improve the living conditions of Aetas and protect them from future labor exploitation.

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