

The Meaning of Social Support and Self-Acceptance in Building Psychological Well-Being: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Study of HIV Outreach Workers Who Are Survivors of Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Sexual violence experienced by HIV outreach workers can be traumatic and negatively impact the victim's psychological well-being. Lack of social support from the surrounding environment and workplace can leave victims feeling neglected, unprotected, and struggling to accept themselves. This low self-acceptance subsequently impacts the victim's psychological well-being after experiencing sexual violence. This study employed a qualitative method with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, aimed at deeply understanding the participants' subjective experiences of the phenomenon under study. The subjects in this study were four HIV outreach workers who had experienced sexual violence while carrying out their work. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews to explore the subjects' experiences, feelings, and meanings regarding the sexual violence. The results showed that the subjects experienced various psychological impacts, such as fear, stress, trauma, anxiety, overthinking, loss of work enthusiasm, and a tendency to withdraw from social circles. Furthermore, the lack of social support and low self-acceptance made the subjects' psychological recovery process more difficult and time-consuming. This study demonstrates that social support and self-acceptance play a crucial role in building the psychological well-being of HIV outreach workers who are survivors of sexual violence.

Keywords: Social Support, Self-Acceptance, Psychological Well-Being, Sexual Violence

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts directed against a person's sexuality through coercion, regardless of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim ([Krug et al., 2002](#)). Sexual violence has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Sexual violence is a phenomenon experienced not only by women and children, but also by men. Data from the National Commission on Violence Against Women indicate that cases of gender-based violence, including sexual violence and harassment, remain a serious concern in Indonesia, with incidents occurring in spaces that should provide protection, such as educational institutions,

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households, and workplaces ([Komnas Perempuan, 2024](#)). This is a social phenomenon that not only causes physical impacts but also leaves deep psychological and social wounds for those who experience it.

Sexual violence is generally perceived as a rare occurrence for men. Previous research has shown that women are frequently positioned as victims of sexual harassment or violence (Miranti & Sudiana, 2021, as cited in [Sumampau et al., 2024](#)). However, recent field observations and media reports have shown that sexual harassment is also frequently experienced by men. Men may also experience sexual violence, and such experiences can lead to feelings of worthlessness, particularly when victims do not receive adequate social support from their environment ([Fuadi et al., 2023](#)).

Outreach is essentially a community-based activity aimed at improving health and reducing HIV risk among individuals and groups who are difficult to reach through general health care services ([Lestari et al., 2022](#)). In the context of HIV/AIDS advocacy, HIV outreach workers often find themselves in vulnerable situations. This is due to low levels of knowledge, stigma, and limited access to HIV/AIDS-related health services. In this study, sexual violence was experienced by HIV outreach workers while carrying out their duties to assist clients identified as being exposed to HIV/AIDS, with the perpetrators coming from the clients themselves. This condition occurs because the victims feel they do not have the space and courage to seek help, so they are in a position unable to fight back or take self-protection measures. On the other hand, the perpetrators perceive themselves as having power over the victims because of the client's dependence on the role of HIV outreach workers in the assistance process. Unequal power relations are one of the factors that contribute to sexual violence ([Fuadi et al., 2023](#)). In situations marked by unequal power relations, structural vulnerability, and limited access to social protection, sexual violence can be understood as a manifestation of power exercised by perpetrators over survivors who are placed in powerless positions ([Sumintak & Idi, 2022](#)). Intimidation, neglect, or inappropriate responses toward victims of sexual violence may lead to secondary victimization, in which victims experience additional fear, shame, or emotional distress after the initial traumatic event ([Walklate, 2013](#)).

Social support is a crucial factor in the recovery process for individuals who experience sexual violence. However, in many contexts, victims find themselves in situations where there is minimal support from their environment. This lack of response not only reflects a weak institutional support system but also creates a unique psychological experience for victims. From an interpretive perspective, victims interpret this situation as a form of neglect and bias, ultimately reinforcing feelings of insecurity, disrespect, and loneliness in the face of traumatic experiences. In terms of social impact, those who experience sexual harassment can experience a reduced desire to interact with those around them and their environment (Miranti and Sudiana, 2021, cited in [Sumampau, S.G., et al., 2024](#)). The experience of sexual violence is interpreted as an event that is difficult for victims to accept and can have long-term psychological impacts. When the experience of violence is not socially validated, victims can experience ongoing emotional distress, withdraw from seeking help, and develop a tendency to blame themselves.

Social support refers to comfort, attention, appreciation, or assistance received by individuals from others, including emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support ([Sarafino & Smith, 2011](#)). Social support plays an important role in helping individuals cope with stress and improving psychological well-being. Trauma recovery is highly dependent on the restoration of safety and supportive interpersonal relationships; therefore, social support is an

important component in the recovery process of trauma survivors ([Herman, 1992](#)). In line with Herman's trauma framework, trauma has significant impacts on individuals in both personal and social contexts, particularly through the disruption of safety, trust, and emotional stability ([Herman, 1992](#); [Satro Harmendo et al., 2025](#)). He identified three main aspects that are disturbed by trauma. The Safety of the World refers to the loss of an individual's sense of security due to violence, abuse, or disaster. This condition often causes excessive fear (hypervigilance), difficulty in trusting others, and ongoing anxiety about possible future threats.

Self-acceptance in post-sexual violence situations is often a complex process. The experiences of victims can shape how individuals assess and understand themselves, so self-acceptance is not always fully developed. Therefore, the experience of sexual violence and the accompanying social conditions are interrelated factors that influence the psychological dynamics of victims. Self-acceptance refers to an individual's ability to accept themselves realistically, including their strengths and limitations, which contributes to self-worth and personal adjustment ([Hurlock, 1973](#)). In this study, psychological well-being is positioned as the primary lens for understanding the experiences of victims of sexual violence. The psychological well-being framework consists of six dimensions, namely self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others ([Ryff, 1989](#); [Ryff & Keyes, 1995](#)). All three victims of sexual abuse demonstrated low psychological well-being as a result of their experiences of violence. These experiences leave deep psychological scars, causing victims to lose self-esteem and trust in their environment. This situation leaves victims feeling as if their human rights, especially the right to live in safety and dignity, have been violated.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sexual Violence

According to the World Health Organization, sexual violence includes any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts directed against a person's sexuality through coercion, regardless of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim ([Krug et al., 2002](#)). Sexual violence is any harmful or unwanted sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act through force or coercion, or any act directed at a person's sexuality without their consent, by any individual, regardless of their relationship to the victim.

According to [Herman \(1992\)](#), the experience of sexual violence can elicit complex trauma reactions, affecting the victim's ability to function psychologically and socially. From a social perspective, sexual violence is often associated with unequal power relations between the perpetrator and the victim. Finkelhor's model explains that sexual abuse may occur when factors such as motivation, opportunity, and weak protection place victims in vulnerable situations ([Finkelhor, 1984](#); [Ward & Hudson, 2001](#)).

2.2 Social Support

Social support is a form of acceptance, care, appreciation, and assistance from individuals or groups that creates the perception that a person is loved, valued, cared for, and helped ([Sarafino & Smith, 2011](#); [Dewi et al., 2023](#)). Individuals who perceive adequate social support tend to have better emotional regulation and stress-coping abilities (Adrian et al., 2011, as cited in [Wahdah & Akbar, 2025](#)).

Perceived social support is complex because individuals may interpret the types and sources of

support available in their lives differently (Bokhorst et al., 2010, as cited in [Ekanesia et al. 2024](#)). In the context of experiencing sexual violence, social support is essential because it provides a source of emotional strength, a sense of security, and assistance for individuals in coping with the psychological impact. Support from family, friends, and the community helps improve psychological well-being and the ability to adapt. Social support has many forms and is provided by various sources or different people in an individual's life ([Ekanesia, P. et al. 2024](#)).

2.3 Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance is an individual's ability to accept themselves realistically, including their strengths and weaknesses, without excessive inferiority or self-rejection ([Hurlock, 1973](#)). Individuals with strong self-acceptance tend to have positive self-evaluations, feel satisfied with themselves, and adapt well to their environment. Hurlock explains that individuals with good self-acceptance generally exhibit the following characteristics: a realistic understanding of themselves, the ability to accept shortcomings without feeling excessively ashamed, a sense of self-confidence, and the ability to interact socially effectively. Self-acceptance is an individual's attitude of accepting themselves as a whole after experiencing various life experiences. This attitude reflects the ability to understand and reconcile with one's condition without excessively rejecting the past or one's shortcomings. According to Johnson David, the characteristics of people who accept themselves are as follows: Accepting themselves as they are, not rejecting themselves. If they have weaknesses and shortcomings, having the confidence to accept themselves. Therefore, a person does not need to be loved or appreciated by others. To feel valuable, a person does not need to feel completely perfect.

2.4 Psychological Well-Being

Psychological well-being refers to positive psychological functioning, reflected in self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth ([Ryff, 1989](#); [Ryff & Keyes, 1995](#)).

According to [Ryff \(1989\)](#), psychological well-being is a condition in which an individual is able to function positively in their life. Ryff proposed six dimensions of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and self-development. These six dimensions reflect an individual's ability to develop optimally and interpret their life positively.

Although psychological well-being differs from subjective well-being, both are related to how individuals evaluate and interpret their lives and emotional experiences ([Diener, 1984](#)).

Psychological well-being is an important aspect of an individual's life. Social support and self-acceptance are factors that help achieve this well-being, as they provide a sense of security and emotional support, respectively, while self-acceptance helps individuals understand and accept themselves positively.

3. Research Method

This study used a qualitative method. Qualitative research is conducted in natural settings, where the researcher serves as the key instrument, data are collected through triangulation, and the analysis emphasizes meaning rather than generalization ([Sugiyono, 2019](#)). In this study, the meaning of the events experienced by the subject as a survivor of sexual violence is explored through a qualitative approach; how the subject understands and interprets his life experiences,

especially regarding the social support received and the process of self-acceptance he undergoes. Both aspects are analyzed in terms of their contribution to the subject's psychological well-being.

3.1 Participants and Sampling

The number of subjects in this study was four. The subjects were individuals who were survivors of sexual violence. Subject selection was conducted using a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique based on specific considerations or criteria established by the researcher in accordance with the research objectives, thereby yielding data that are more relevant and in-depth ([Sugiyono, 2018](#)). Therefore, the subjects in this study were selected according to criteria aligned with the research focus. Participants were individuals who were currently or had worked as HIV outreach workers and had experience as survivors of sexual violence, were able to communicate their experiences and the process of making sense of their experiences, were adults at the top, willing to provide informed consent, and were not in a state of severe psychological crisis at the time of the study to ensure the safety and well-being of the participants.

Table 2. Participant Characteristics

No.	Initials	Gender	Age
1	AN	Male	25
2	NF	Male	22
3	RSY	Male	32
4	RK	Male	36

Source: Primary data processed by the researchers, 2026.

3.2 Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis technique in this study used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which aims to deeply understand participants' subjective experiences of the phenomena being studied. Qualitative data analysis is conducted interactively during and after data collection by organizing, categorizing, synthesizing, and interpreting data to derive meaning ([Sugiyono, 2022](#)). In IPA, the goal is to allow participants' experiences to be expressed in their own terms rather than being forced into predetermined categories ([Smith et al., 2009](#)). This involves organizing data, grouping it into categories, describing units, synthesizing it, and constructing patterns to derive meaning. Meanwhile, the goal of IPA is to conduct research in a way that allows experiences to be expressed in their own terms, rather than within a predetermined category system ([Smith et al., 2009](#)). In this study, data were obtained through in-depth interviews that were recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, meaning they were written down in full, word-for-word, without altering the participants' meaning. These verbatim transcripts served as the primary basis for the data analysis process. The stages of IPA analysis include: thoroughly reading and understanding interview transcripts, taking initial notes, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, forming superordinate themes, and conducting cross-case analysis.

3.3 Data Validity

In qualitative research, data trustworthiness is important because interpretation is closely related to the researcher's perspective. Therefore, techniques such as triangulation, member

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checking, and audit trails are needed to strengthen credibility and ensure that the findings are not based solely on researcher bias (Syahran, 2020). Technical triangulation was conducted through interviews and observations. Interviews were used to explore participants' subjective experiences, while observations were conducted during the interviews to supplement the data by noting facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and emotional responses. Thus, the data collected encompassed both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Member checking was conducted by reconfirming the interview results and initial interpretations with the participants to ensure their meanings aligned with the intended experiences. An audit trail was established by storing all research data and documentation, both electronic and non-electronic, such as interview recordings, verbatim transcripts, field notes, and other supporting documents, to ensure the consistency, transparency, and objectivity of the research and reliable results.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Finding

4.1.1 The collapse of a sense of security in professional relationships

The experiences of sexual violence experienced by the four subjects were interpreted as a breakdown in trust in clients who were perceived to have betrayed their good intentions to help. Subjects who sincerely and caringly wanted to provide assistance instead faced experiences of sexual violence that left deep emotional scars.

-Violence as a Boundary Violation at Work

The sexual violence experienced by the four subjects violated professional boundaries in work relationships. All four subjects interpreted these experiences as causing discomfort, fear, and a threat to their well-being. These experiences were also interpreted as betrayals of professional relationships that should be built on a foundation of safety, mutual respect, and trust. From the subjects' perspectives, the work relationship, initially intended to help and support clients, became a dangerous situation. This led to feelings of disappointment and a loss of security while conducting fieldwork.

Subject RK revealed that the field work situation made it difficult for him to anticipate client actions:

"Sometimes we work to help them, but it ends up like that."

This statement indicates that the subjects interpreted sexual violence as a form of betrayal of professional relationships that should provide a sense of security.

- Client Power Relations

Subject AN

"Because it's like that in a boarding house, and the place where he lives is like that, it's quiet."

Power relations are unequal relationships in which one party holds a higher position than the other. All four subjects recognized unequal power relations in their relationships with clients. Their positions as HIV outreach workers placed them in a difficult situation to resist or reject sexual violence. This situation led to psychological stress and feelings of distress when faced with dangerous situations.

- Situational Powerlessness

Subject NF

"Sometimes I feel like I'm being treated like that for the sake of work, to the point of being abused by others, to the point of losing my self-esteem."

The four subjects interpreted this experience as a sense of powerlessness when facing sexual violence in the workplace. The lack of workplace protection and the high risk in field situations made the subjects feel insecure while carrying out their mentoring duties.

When carrying out their duties, the four subjects felt they had to face the incident alone. This feeling of being unable to protect themselves gave rise to trauma and lingering fear after the incident.

4.1.2 Social Neglect as a Second Wound

All four subjects revealed that they did not receive adequate emotional support and protection after the sexual violence incident.

- Institutional Invalidation

Institutional invalidation is a form of neglect, rejection, or inadequate response from an institution to a person's experiences, feelings, or reports, especially after experiencing a traumatic or violent event. Several subjects reported that after the incident, they expected a different response, but they received none.

Subject RK

"Where do we go to report it? The obvious answer is this, but you can anticipate it somehow."

From this statement, the subject interpreted the institution's response as a form of invalidation of their traumatic experience.

- Lack of Colleague Response

Subject NF

"Sometimes I tell my friends, and they say it's perfectly normal."

Subject Rsy

"There's no support from the foundation because the foundation only protects the client, not us as officers. That's why, even now, we've reported it to the West Java unit, but we as officers have no protection."

The lack of support from colleagues or friends makes the subjects feel that the experiences they share are not considered important. Furthermore, the responses from their environment tended to be mocking and lacked empathy, deepening the subjects' feelings of hurt.

-Emotional Isolation

Subject NF

"I'm indifferent now... I used to joke around a lot, but now I'm lazy, so I really want to be quiet..."

The emotional isolation experienced by the four subjects arose from a lack of social support, leaving them feeling alone in facing the impact of their sexual violence experiences. This condition was interpreted as emotional distress that was difficult to express to others. As a result, the subjects had difficulty forming relationships with those around them because they

felt unable to express their feelings and experiences. In the subjects' understanding, the lack of a safe space to talk led them to suppress their emotions, withdraw from social circles, and experience difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships.

4.1.3 Self-acceptance after violence

Self-acceptance is how the subject accepts themselves after experiencing sexual violence.

- Self-Blame

Subject NF

"Sometimes I feel like I wouldn't be able to do it..."

Subject Rsy

"My psychological state, actually, on the outside, I'm happy and cheerful, laughing with my friends, but on the inside, I'm devastated."

Self-blame is the tendency to excessively blame oneself after experiencing a traumatic event. After experiencing sexual violence, the subject tends to internalize the experience, blaming herself for the incident, believing that the risks of her job caused the incident. This interpretation gives rise to feelings of guilt and makes the subject feel responsible for the experience.

-Loss of Self-Worth

A lack of self-esteem causes the subject to view herself as less valuable.

Subject RK revealed:

"Initially, after the incident, I didn't accept myself, especially because I lacked social support, which led me to isolate myself."

This statement is interpreted as a decrease in self-esteem influenced by a lack of social support after experiencing sexual violence. This condition makes it difficult for the subject to accept himself and tends to withdraw from social circles.

- Negotiating the Meaning of Experience

The subject interpreted sexual violence as a fearful experience. This process indicates an internal struggle in understanding the traumatic experience.

Subject RSY

"Is this destiny, or is it meant to be this way for the rest of my life?"

4.1.4 Psychological Well-Being Reconstruction Efforts

The process by which a person rebuilds their understanding, feelings, self-identity, or life after experiencing a traumatic event.

- Identity Redefinition

Subject AN

"I'm more vigilant after an incident like that."

The process of reshaping one's identity, where the subject builds a new understanding of themselves as individuals who have experienced trauma but are trying to navigate everyday life. This experience changed the way the subjects viewed themselves. All four subjects

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attempted to rebuild their understanding of themselves as individuals who had experienced trauma but were still trying to navigate everyday life. This experience influenced their self-identity and how the subjects understood themselves in social relationships and at work.

-Professional Adaptation

Subject AN

"I always inform my friends, for example, where I'm going, it's always Sherlock, and then, if I don't call, it's Sharelock."

The experience of sexual violence prompted the subjects to develop various self-protection strategies in carrying out their work. Subjects became more vigilant and began implementing safety measures to adapt to the risks inherent in their work as HIV outreach workers.

Subjects experienced trauma that led to a decrease in enthusiasm for their work, but they persisted due to economic demands and a sense of responsibility to their families. This condition demonstrates an individual's ability to adapt quickly to an experience despite the psychological stress it causes.

-The Meaning of Life Continuity

After experiencing a traumatic experience, the subject initially lacked enthusiasm for life. However, over time, the subject gradually began to accept it and try to move on despite the lingering trauma. This experience demonstrates a deep inner struggle, but also demonstrates the subject's efforts to persevere and find a reason to continue living.

Subject AN

"I felt like I wanted to commit suicide, but after thinking about it again and again, what would be the benefit of killing myself?"

This statement demonstrates the psychological state of someone experiencing inner conflict that makes it difficult to regulate and manage their feelings, yet the subject still tries to survive and continue living.

4.2 Discussions

The four subjects had varying experiences of sexual violence while working as HIV outreach workers. These experiences included verbal harassment, non-consensual groping, forced sexual activity, and intimidation, which caused fear and psychological trauma. The experiences of sexual violence were not only interpreted as painful events, but also as experiences that changed the way the subjects handled themselves.

Subject RK

"Where do we go to complain? The most obvious answer is this, but you can anticipate it somehow."

The four subjects' experiences were interpreted as leaving them feeling unsafe, lacking protection, and neglected by their surroundings. The subjects not only suffered psychological wounds from the sexual violence itself but also emotional distress due to the lack of social support they expected after the incident. These incidents occurred in high-risk fieldwork situations, particularly when victims were directly reaching clients in environments with minimal supervision and security protection.

These experiences not only impacted their emotional and psychological well-being but also influenced how they viewed themselves, their social environment, and their work. Sexual harassment may occur through physical or non-physical acts, including sexually suggestive words, gestures, touching, or other behaviors that cause discomfort, humiliation, anxiety, and threats to the victim's safety (Winarsunu, 2008, as cited in [Kirana & Listyani, 2023](#)). However, the term violence or harassment itself is taken from the English word sexual harassment, which means teasing or disturbing, which results in discomfort (annoyance and anxiety) for the victim who is teased. Sexual acts can be carried out through physical or non-physical touch, which is basically a form of behavior that suggests or results in unilateral sexual acts that are not expected by the victim, for example, flirting, whistling, sexually suggestive words, deliberately showing pornographic material, poking or touching body parts, hinting or giving sexual gestures that cause discomfort to the victim, offended, feeling humiliated, even leading to health problems and also the safety of the victim.

4.2.1 Social Support

For the subjects, the lack of response from their environment was interpreted as a form of neglect of their psychological well-being. They felt unimportant, especially in the workplace, even though they believed they were working to help people with HIV.

The subjects expected to receive emotional protection and support, but instead felt they were held responsible for the incident. This experience left them feeling confused, insecure, and increasingly reluctant to share their experiences of sexual violence.

AN, NF, and RSY also experienced this situation, believing their workplace focused solely on protecting clients rather than on the psychological well-being of field workers who were victims of sexual violence. This situation left the subjects feeling deprived of emotional protection and support after experiencing the traumatic event.

Perceived social support refers to an individual's belief regarding the availability of support from others, including family, friends, partners, colleagues, and the broader social environment (Chu et al., 2010; Heerde & Hemphill, 2018; Rueger et al., 2016, as cited in [Ekanesia et al., 2024](#)). This support can come from various sources, including loved ones such as parents, partners, children, friends, and community social contacts.

Social support takes many forms and is provided by various sources or different people in an individual's life ([Ekanesia, P., et al., 2024](#)). A lack of social support from the surrounding environment, including colleagues at work, makes victims feel increasingly neglected and forced to face the impact of their experiences alone. This condition makes victims feel neglected, uncared for, and forced to face the stress and psychological impacts alone. Social support is the presence of others who help individuals feel loved, cared for, valued, and part of a social group (Taylor, 2009, as cited in [Hardjo & Novita, 2015](#)).

To continue working and meeting their living needs, subjects persist in their jobs despite facing psychological pressure and discomfort. The social environment can serve as an important source of support that influences individual adjustment after stressful or traumatic experiences. Social support has positive implications for mental health ([Ekanesia, P., et al. 2024](#)). If social support is inadequate, victims may feel disrespected, lack a safe place to talk, and experience difficulties in emotional and psychological recovery after experiencing sexual violence.

4.2.2 Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance involves recognizing one's experiences and accepting oneself, including painful emotions and difficult life events, without excessive self-rejection ([Germer, 2009](#)). Self-acceptance impacts an individual's well-being, including HIV outreach workers. They not only work to help others but also face various risks in their work, including the risk of sexual violence and psychological distress while carrying out their duties in the field.

The four subjects experienced sexual violence in varying forms while working as HIV outreach workers. The experience of sexual violence changed the way they viewed themselves. They began to question their own worth, felt worthless, and struggled to accept their condition after the incident. They tended to feel inferior, blamed themselves for their experiences, and struggled to accept their condition and rebuild trust in themselves and their surroundings.

Self-acceptance is important because low self-acceptance can affect individual development and interpersonal relationships ([Febriana & Rahmasari, 2021](#)).

The lack of self-acceptance experienced by victims of sexual violence prevents them from fully accepting themselves. Victims still feel unworthy of respect, love, or good treatment from others, making the psychological recovery process longer and more challenging. The experience of sexual violence also creates fear, anxiety, and hypervigilance of their surroundings, leading victims to withdraw, struggle to feel safe, and become more cautious in forming relationships and interacting with others. Self-acceptance plays a crucial role in determining psychological well-being.

4.2.3 Psychological Well-Being

Psychological well-being is a crucial aspect of every individual's life, as it is closely related to emotional conditions, self-acceptance, and the way people live their daily lives. All four participants demonstrated various emotional reactions, including fear, anxiety, stress, overthinking, sleep difficulties, loss of work motivation, and a desire to withdraw from social interactions. Each participant experienced different consequences following the incident.

These experiences indicate that sexual violence caused trauma that affected the participants' daily activities and professional responsibilities. They also lost their sense of safety while carrying out their work as HIV outreach workers.

The experiences also influenced the participants' emotional states and the ways they managed their daily lives. As emotional distress increases, individuals may become less able to engage in daily activities and may repeatedly focus on the source of their problems, indicating difficulties in emotional regulation and coping ([Akbar, 2022](#)). Consequently, the process of psychological recovery became more difficult and required a considerable amount of time. Sexual harassment may affect physical, psychological, and social aspects of life, including stress, trauma, depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Miranti & Sudiana, 2021, as cited in [Sumampau et al., 2024](#)). Emotional states are shaped by the interaction between physiological arousal and cognitive interpretation of situations that trigger emotional responses ([Nuradina et al., 2023](#)).

Within the psychological well-being framework, well-being includes several dimensions, namely self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth ([Ryff, 1989](#); [Gumilar & Akbar, 2026](#)). The conditions experienced by the participants suggest disruptions in the dimensions of self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. Their experiences

of sexual violence made it difficult for them to feel safe, trust their surroundings, and maintain a sense of comfort in their everyday lives.

Overall, the findings indicate that experiences of sexual violence, limited social support, and low levels of self-acceptance are interconnected factors influencing the psychological well-being of the participants. From the participants' perspectives, sexual violence was not merely a traumatic event; rather, it became a life-changing experience that altered the way they understood themselves, others, and the lives they were living.

5 Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study involving four HIV outreach workers who survived sexual violence, it can be concluded that experiences of sexual violence were interpreted as violations of professional boundaries within workplace relationships, undermining their sense of safety and significantly affecting their psychological lives. These experiences gave rise to feelings of helplessness, fear, and a loss of trust in relationships that had originally been built on the foundations of support and care.

These experiences also influenced how the participants perceived themselves. The participants demonstrated struggles in the process of self-acceptance, characterized by self-blame, feelings of worthlessness, and efforts to understand the meaning of the traumatic experiences they had endured. Throughout this process, the participants attempted to negotiate and reconstruct the meanings of these experiences to continue moving forward with their lives.

The lack of social support and difficulties in self-acceptance subsequently affected their psychological well-being. The participants experienced various forms of emotional distress, including stress, anxiety, fear, overthinking, sleep disturbances, loss of work motivation, and persistent trauma following the incidents. Some participants also exhibited behavioral changes, such as becoming more withdrawn, suppressing their emotions, distancing themselves from social environments, and experiencing a decline in work motivation. Nevertheless, the participants continued to demonstrate efforts to rebuild their lives by redefining their identities, adapting to work-related demands, and rediscovering a sense of meaning and continuity in life after experiencing sexual violence.

This study demonstrates that experiences of sexual violence, limited social support, and the challenging process of self-acceptance are interconnected factors that influence the participants' psychological well-being. These traumatic experiences not only generated profound emotional consequences but also affected how the participants perceived themselves, formed relationships with others, and navigated their daily lives. The findings highlight that the development of psychological well-being following experiences of sexual violence cannot be separated from adequate social support and protective measures. Therefore, institution-based protection for HIV outreach workers is essential, including the provision of safe reporting mechanisms, victim-centered responses, and continuous psychosocial support following incidents of sexual violence.

Based on these findings, organizations and institutions that employ field workers should develop comprehensive, victim-centered worker-protection Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Such procedures should not only focus on incident management but also ensure access to psychological services, peer support, social support from colleagues and supervisors, healthcare services, legal assistance when necessary, and ongoing support systems. The implementation of clear and comprehensive SOPs is expected to provide a greater sense of

safety and protection for field workers who may be at risk of experiencing sexual violence while carrying out their professional duties.

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