



Resilience of Sexual Incest Victims in Polewali Mandar

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the resilience and influencing factors of incest sexual abuse survivors in Polewali Mandar Regency. The study uses a qualitative, phenomenological design and focuses on survivors' lived experiences of coping with trauma. The research subjects consist of survivors of incest sexual abuse who were identified through purposive sampling in collaboration with the local Social Service and Women and Child Protection institutions. Researchers collected data using semi-structured interviews as the main instrument, supported by field notes, and analysed them using thematic analysis to capture the meaning of survivors' narratives. Results show that family members, particularly mothers, grandmothers, and uncles, along with professional support from psychologists and social workers, play a critical role in survivors' recovery. Meanwhile, inadequate support from schools and broader communities hinders resilience. Spiritual values, local culture, and religious beliefs significantly reinforce internal coping. The implications highlight the urgency of a multidimensional support system through family, professional, educational, and community involvement to holistically assist incest survivors in rebuilding their lives and regaining future independence. The findings show that resilience is built through the interaction of external factors (social support), internal factors (personal strength), and coping strategies. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on resilience dynamics among incest survivors in a cultural and religious context that has rarely been explored in previous studies.

Keywords: external support, personal strength, resilience, sexual abuse, social and interpersonal skills, survivor incest

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence in the context of education and family is one of the most serious social issues that demands deep attention. The World Health Organization (2012) defines sexual violence as any act directed toward sexuality without consent and may occur in various settings. This violence takes many forms, one of which is incest, sexual relations between close family members (Yanto & Gutomo, 2019). Incest cases

often involve children who are vulnerable due to their dependence and limited ability to protect themselves, making it one of the “three major sins” in the field of education (Dania, 2020).

The issue of incest becomes increasingly complex as it is influenced by various factors, such as the perpetrator’s psychological disorders (Kadir, 2024), family dysfunction (Umran, 2024), as well as social norms that normalise violence and weak law enforcement (Pagesti et al., 2024). The psychological impact of incest is profound and may result in trauma such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, which are often exacerbated by social stigma (Sopiah et al., 2025). Therefore, it is essential to examine how survivors can build resilience to recover from this trauma (Dunkel et al., 2021).

Resilience is an individual’s ability to adapt and overcome adversity in a positive way (Masten, 2018). This ability plays a central role in recovery (Vella & Pai, 2019). Previous studies indicate that resilience is shaped by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include the individual’s ability to regulate emotions and employ adaptive coping strategies (Mahardhani et al., 2020). External factors include social support from family, friends, or professionals, which serves as a key protective element (Ungar, 2012). Research by Kase et al. (2023) highlights the importance of social support and effective coping mechanisms in building resilience after traumatic experiences. In light of this emphasis on resilience, other research by Ismail et al. (2023) underscores the severe psychological impacts of incest, such as depression and loss of self-worth, thereby affirming the urgency of trauma recovery as a vital step toward achieving that resilience.

Although numerous studies on the resilience of sexual violence survivors have been conducted (Fayaz et al., 2025), there remains a gap in a deeper understanding of the characteristics of resilience and the specific factors influencing it among incest survivors, particularly within

the local context of Polewali Mandar Regency. According to data from the Department of Population Control and Family Planning, Women's Empowerment, and Child Protection of Polewali Mandar Regency, (2024), there were 14 cases of incest-related sexual violence between 2019 and 2023, with the majority of perpetrators being biological fathers. This data highlights the urgency of understanding how resilience can be developed within this specific environment. Thus, this study aims to explore the resilience of incest survivors in Polewali Mandar Regency.

This research is significant both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it is expected to contribute to the development of resilience theory in the context of incest, enrich the academic literature, and provide insights into the psychological impacts of incest in Indonesian society. Practically, the findings are expected to offer strategic, evidence-based recommendations for local governments, social institutions, and communities to design holistic intervention programs that strengthen resilience. These recommendations aim to guide stakeholders in developing programs that not only support survivors in their recovery but also empower them to rebuild productive lives while reducing the social stigma that hinders healing.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Approaching and Design

This study uses a qualitative, phenomenological design. The qualitative method was chosen to deeply explore and understand complex social phenomena, particularly the lived experiences of incest survivors. Asbari et al. (2020) and Nasir et al. (2023) explain that the phenomenological approach aims to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology focuses on two key descriptions:

textural description, which refers to subjects' direct experiences of a phenomenon, and Structural description, which refers to subjects' meaning-making and interpretation of those experiences (Hadi et al., 2021).

Research Subject

The subjects of this study are three survivors of incest sexual violence residing in three different sub-districts of Polewali Mandar Regency, namely Bulo, Polewali, and Campalagian. Subjects were selected using purposive sampling based on specific, theoretical criteria to ensure the depth and relevance of the data collected. These criteria included: 1) individuals who are survivors of incest sexual violence; 2) domiciled in Polewali Mandar Regency; and 3) willing and able to provide in-depth information and participate actively in the study. Meanwhile, the object of this research is the description of the resilience factors developed by the survivors in dealing with and overcoming the traumatic experience of incest.

Research Instruments

The research data were collected using several main techniques. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed and comprehensive information regarding the subjects' experiences, emotions, and strategies in building resilience. The interview guide was carefully developed based on Grotberg's (2003) theoretical framework of resilience, which consists of three dimensions: I Have, I Am, and I Can. Additionally, observation was carried out to directly examine the survivors' conditions and nonverbal behaviours in their daily environments, serving as complementary data to the interviews. The study also collected supporting data through document analysis, including medical records, psychological reports, and police reports, to reinforce findings from interviews and observations.

Data Validity

To ensure data validity, triangulation techniques were applied. Source triangulation involved comparing data from various sources, including research subjects, family members, victim advocates, psychologists, and social workers. In addition, methodological triangulation was applied by combining several data collection techniques (interviews, observations, and documentation) to obtain more valid and comprehensive results.

Data Analysis

Data analysis used Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of three interrelated stages (Sarosa, 2021). The first stage, data reduction, involves selecting, categorising, and summarising relevant raw data. The second stage, data display, presents the reduced data in descriptive narratives, charts, or inter-category relationships to facilitate understanding. The final stage is conclusion drawing/verification, which involves formulating conclusions based on emerging patterns or themes from the analysed data. These conclusions are inductive and not intended to generalise the findings, but to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

RESEARCH RESULT

Survivors' Resilience Based on the "I Have" Dimension

The interview results showed that external support is crucial to building survivors' resilience. All three survivors received support from their closest family members. The survivors from Campalagian (Su) and Bulu (Rr) were supported by their mothers and extended families.

"Even though my father is in prison, my mother and family are always there for me. I feel so happy, because if they were not

there, I do not know how I would live." (Survivor Su, June 21, 2025).

All three survivors were also accompanied by psychologists and social workers. As Pakasi (Psychologist at WCCC, March 5, 2025) stated, they actively supported the recovery process. In contrast, the survivor from Polewali (Sa) received primary support from her grandmother and uncle, as her mother migrated and remarried. According to Nurhayati (Social Worker, Polewali Mandar, March 7, 2025): "In the Polewali case, the survivor received support from her grandmother and uncle because her mother had migrated and started a new family." This family support, particularly from her grandmother and uncle, helped the survivor feel valued and less lonely.

The family's role in the recovery process had varying impacts. For Rr, the family provided emotional support and strong encouragement to return to school.

"My mother always told me that I must continue school so I can become successful" (Survivor Rr, July 5, 2025).

On the other hand, while Su's family offered emotional support, they could not motivate her to resume her education. Social environments also played different roles. For Su and Sa, support from schools and neighbours was minimal, slowing recovery. Conversely, for Rr, support from teachers and peers greatly helped the survivor re-establish normal social interactions.

Based on interviews with the three survivors, the I Have dimension identified family support, professional support, and the social environment. Each of these findings is described as follows:

Family support

Family support was the main foundation for rebuilding the resilience of incest victims. Both Su and Rr received emotional support from their mothers and extended families. In an interview, Rr said:

“My mother always told me not to give up so I can have a better future” (April 24, 2025).

This aligns with observations showing Rr often interacted warmly with her mother, who consistently motivated and accompanied her in daily activities. Likewise, Su relied on her mother for strength, even though she withdrew more from the outside environment.

“If it were not for my mother, I probably would not be able to endure anymore. She is the only one who is always there.” (Survivor Su, June 21, 2025).

In contrast, Sa received more support from her maternal relatives, her aunt, uncle, and grandmother, who became substitute figures who gave her full attention when she felt lost.

“I live with my grandmother and aunt; they take care of me. When I cry, they hug me and say everything will be fine.” (Survivor Sa, May 20, 2025).

The observations also showed that Sa’s grandmother and aunt played a major role in creating a warm, emotionally supportive home environment. These findings highlight that active family involvement in providing attention, affection, and moral support is crucial in strengthening victims’ resilience amidst deep trauma.

Professional support

Beyond family support, psychologists and social workers were vital to the victims’ recovery. These professionals not only provided psychological counselling but also assisted victims with legal aspects and facilitated access to rehabilitation programs. For example, a social worker provided Sa with intensive support and connected her with a skills training program at Balai Nipotowe.

“If it were not for the counsellor who asked me to join the training, I might still isolate myself and not know what to do. Now I feel more hopeful.” (Survivor Sa, June 21, 2025).

Meanwhile, both Rr and Su benefited from counselling sessions that helped them manage guilt and trauma. A psychologist explained: *“We focus on rebuilding victims’ self-confidence so they can see themselves not as weak survivors but as individuals with strength.”* (Pakasi, March 5, 2025). This professional assistance clearly helped shape healthier mindsets and opened pathways for victims to pursue a more directed, sustainable resilience process.

Social environment

The social environment also significantly influenced victims’ resilience dynamics. Rr received strong support from teachers and peers, which helped her maintain motivation to learn.

“At school, I feel safer, and my friends often encourage me not to drop out.” (Survivor Rr, July 5, 2025).

The observations also showed that Rr appeared enthusiastic when talking about school subjects and interacting with peers, which accelerated her recovery. In contrast, Su faced heavy social stigma. Su admitted that her peers often avoided her and gossiped about her, which led her to quit school. This condition made Su withdraw and isolate herself from her surroundings.

“I feel ashamed when I meet people, especially when they whisper about me.” (Survivor Su, May 10, 2025).

Meanwhile, Su initially withdrew from her social environment because of her traumatic experience. However, after joining the training program at Balai Nipotowe, Su began to build new networks. This shows that positive social interactions play a vital role in restoring victims’ self-confidence.

“Here, I have new friends. We share stories, so I do not feel alone.” (Survivor Sa, June 21, 2025).

Survivors' Resilience Based on the "I Am" Dimension

Within the personal strength dimension, all three survivors displayed similar emotional responses—deep feelings of guilt and shame. They also experienced inner conflict because the perpetrators were their fathers. Survivor Rr admitted feeling ashamed and devastated by what happened. However, over time, Rr began to realise that the incident was not her fault. The survivor Sa showed more complex emotional reactions, including resentment, hatred, and even suicidal attempts. However, despite these struggles, Sa demonstrated considerable inner strength.

"I always think about my siblings... That is what makes me keep going, even though my situation is like this." (Survivor Sa, May 20, 2025).

Religious values and local Mandar cultural traditions became significant sources of inner strength.

"I always pray. I believe God gave me this trial because I am strong." (Survivor Su, June 21, 2025).

Rr demonstrated strong self-confidence and a belief that Rr could recover from trauma. In contrast, Sa still struggled with low self-confidence, influenced by her young age and her mother's lack of emotional support.

The findings identified in the I Am dimension were self-acceptance, motivation to survive and spirituality. Each of these findings is described as follows:

Self-acceptance

Self-acceptance was another crucial factor that strengthened victims' resilience, as R's experience shows.

"At first, I was very ashamed, but over time I realised this was not my fault." (Survivor Rr, April 24, 2025).

This realisation became a turning point, encouraging her to re-engage in daily activities, especially at school. Observations at her school showed that Rr actively interacted with teachers and peers and participated enthusiastically in learning activities. Thus, self-acceptance not only helped Rr reduce her emotional burden but also became an essential foundation for restoring her confidence and continuing her life more adaptively.

Motivation to survive

The motivation to survive became a key factor that pushed survivors out of despair. Sa had gone through severe depression and, at one point, attempted to end her life because she felt unable to bear the traumatic burden. However, the drive to stay alive emerged when Sa thought about her responsibility toward her younger siblings.

"If I give up, who will take care of my younger siblings? That is what makes me have to survive." (Survivor Sa, May 20, 2025).

Meanwhile, Su found her motivation to endure trauma by focusing on her child's future.

"I have to be strong for my son. I do not want him to grow up without a mother who is healthy, mentally and physically" (Survivor Su, May 22, 2025).

This motivation to survive became a turning point, strengthening both individuals' resolve to resist despair. Thus, their motivation to survive for the sake of their loved ones became a key factor in rebuilding resilience and shaping their future.

Spirituality

Beyond external factors, internal strength was a key determinant of victims' resilience. Spirituality and Mandar cultural values provided a framework that helped them endure. Su stated:

“I can only surrender and pray a lot because I believe God’s trials always have wisdom” (May 10, 2025).

This statement reflects how prayer and faith in God served as a coping mechanism, providing comfort and meaning in her suffering—the religious and cultural values of Mandar, especially the teachings of AGH. Muhammad Thahir, also known as Imam Lapeo, became Su’s spiritual foundation and source of inner strength. The observations also showed that Su often participated in religious activities in her community, such as attending small study circles with her family, which strengthened her sense of religiosity. This spirituality not only offered emotional consolation but also nurtured her belief that she could endure life’s trials, helping her maintain hope amid deep trauma.

Overview of Survivors’ Resilience Based on the “I Can” Dimension

This dimension highlights the variations in coping abilities among the survivors. Survivor Rr demonstrated the most adaptive strategies by staying active in peer interactions and continuing school activities.

“I was able to rise from trauma quickly, with the support of family, teachers, and friends.” (Survivor Rr, April 24, 2025).

Meanwhile, survivors Su and Sa showed more limited recovery skills, though they still made adaptive efforts. Su chose to study at home and help her mother to ease her worries. Sa, on the other hand, benefited from interventions at Balai Nipotowe, where Sa was taught sewing skills.

“At the centre, I was taught how to sew. I became happy because I could create something. That way, I do not think too much about the problems I face.” (Survivor Sa, June 21, 2025).

Based on interviews with informants, it was found that the recovery process of incest victims varied in method and pace, depending on the strategies they chose in daily life. For instance, Rr remained active at school and maintained interactions with peers, so her recovery

process was relatively faster. The supportive school environment became a significant factor that encouraged her to rise again.

“I do not want to keep remembering that incident. At school, I feel calmer because I have friends who cheer me up.” (Survivor Rr, July 5, 2025).

In contrast, Su withdrew from her social environment and eventually dropped out of school. Su withdrawal and isolation were used to avoid further pain, embarrassment, and re-traumatisation from external scrutiny. This withdrawal slowed her recovery due to a lack of positive stimulation.

“I feel very ashamed. People talk about me, so I would rather stay home.” (Survivor Su, June 21, 2025).

Meanwhile, Sa gradually recovered through skill-training programs at Balai Nipotowe. Though Sa had previously suffered from severe depression and attempted suicide, Sa began to rebuild hope through productive activities.

“When I join training, I can slowly forget, and I feel like I still have a future.” (Survivor Sa, June 21, 2025).

In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted direct observations during visits. These observations revealed differences among the victims. Rr showed enthusiasm during visits, actively interacting with the social worker and occasionally joking. Sa appeared cheerful, talkative, and often laughed but showed signs of anxiety when discussing her father (the perpetrator), who was about to be released soon. At times, Sa appeared pressured when discussing her relationship with her husband because her mother intimidated her. In contrast, Su appeared withdrawn, keeping her head down, speaking softly, and staying mostly quiet. These differences among the three victims show that recovery strategies, whether through education, withdrawal, or skill training, play a crucial role in shaping each individual’s resilience

dynamics. These findings indicate that victims' resilience is dynamic and varies among individuals.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the resilience of incest survivors in Polewali Mandar Regency is strongly influenced by the interaction of external support (I Have), personal strength (I Am), and recovery skills (I Can). Resilience is not an outcome, but rather a dynamic process shaped by the context and resources available to survivors. Family and environmental support, in line with Grotberg's (2003) I Have concept, form the primary foundation for recovery. This finding aligns with Ramadhani and Nurwati (2022), who emphasised the positive correlation between family involvement and enhanced psychological resilience among survivors. However, this study also identifies a novel aspect: the complexity that arises when the perpetrator is an immediate family member, which can cause fragmented support systems and slow down the healing process (Siregar et al., 2023).

Based on field findings, several specific factors significantly influenced the resilience of incest survivors in Polewali Mandar Regency, which can be categorised into internal and external factors. First, internal factors: Despite severe emotional turmoil, the three survivors demonstrated inner strength to endure. Mandar's religious and cultural values, particularly those rooted in Imam Lapeo's teachings, became significant sources of spiritual strength. Internalising these values provided a cognitive framework and coping mechanisms that reinforced their resilience (Alhidayat, 2025). For example, although she once attempted suicide, the survivor managed to survive because she thought about her younger siblings. This demonstrates the ability to find new meaning in suffering as motivation to live, consistent with

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy theory. According to Frankl (2024), individuals can find meaning even in the most difficult conditions, which then becomes a driving force for survival.

Second, external factors: Supportive family involvement has been shown to positively correlate with increased psychological resilience (Snyder, 2021). According to Walsh (Abubakar et al., 2023), adaptive, supportive family systems lay the foundation for resilience, helping individuals process trauma and reconstruct their life narratives. However, this study also found significant challenges, particularly family division, since the perpetrator was often a close family member. These conditions often hinder recovery because some relatives sided with the perpetrator. Psychologists and social workers from institutions such as the Women Child Crisis Centre (WCCC) of West Sulawesi and the Department of Social Affairs provided important professional support. These professionals helped survivors process trauma and reconstruct meaning from their experiences (Putu & Putu, 2023). However, the effectiveness of this support also depended greatly on the level of cooperation from the survivors' families. Resilience-building often cannot be achieved individually; it must involve the entire support ecosystem (Ungar, 2012).

The resilience of incest survivors is a complex process influenced by the interaction between strong external support and powerful internal strengths (Pond et al., 2023). These findings confirm that optimal recovery requires interventions focused not only on the family but also on strengthening communities and helping survivors develop adaptive skills. The survivors' skills and recovery strategies in overcoming trauma varied greatly. A survivor from Bulu demonstrated adaptive coping strategies by staying active in school and engaging with peers, which accelerated her recovery. By contrast, other survivors' coping strategies were more limited. However, professional interventions

such as skill-training programs, as experienced at Balai Nipotowe, became an important step in building long-term resilience. These trainings helped survivors focus on productive activities and rebuild their confidence (Brown et al., 2022).

The findings on the resilience of incest sexual abuse survivors in Polewali Mandar have important implications for the field of guidance and counselling, particularly in providing services tailored to the psychological needs of survivors. First, the finding that spirituality is a key source of strength suggests that counsellors can integrate religious and local cultural values into the counselling process. Prayer, religious practices, and the teachings of local religious leaders (such as AGH. Muhammad Thahir/Imam Lapeo) can provide moral and spiritual support that reinforces survivors' recovery. Second, the aspect of self-acceptance demonstrated by survivors highlights the importance of counsellors helping clients reduce guilt and internalised stigma. Counselling interventions can focus on techniques such as self-acceptance and cognitive restructuring, helping survivors recognise that the incident was not their fault and rebuild confidence and trust in their social environment (Williamson, 2024). Third, survival motivation rooted in responsibilities to family or loved ones suggests that counsellors should explore survivors' intrinsic motivations. Counsellors can help clients rediscover life goals, hope, and reasons to endure, channelling their psychological energy into positive activities such as education, skill training, or social engagement (Quing, 2024).

Furthermore, the study shows that external support from family, teachers, and professionals (psychologists, social workers) plays a major role in resilience. Therefore, counsellors should develop counselling models that involve social support systems (support system-based counselling). This approach positions families and social environments as active partners in survivor assistance, ensuring recovery is not only

individual but also collective (Warrington et al., 2023). Thus, this research suggests the need for holistic guidance and counselling services rooted in cultural-religious values and incorporating social support. Such an approach is believed to strengthen the resilience of incest survivors and help them rebuild healthier psychological and social lives (Sasaki & Overall, 2023).

This study is limited by its small sample—only three subjects from a specific area. This small sample size does not allow the findings to be generalised. Furthermore, time and access constraints made it difficult to observe the long-term recovery process. For future researchers, it is recommended to include a larger number of subjects from diverse regions to achieve a broader understanding of the resilience of incest survivors. Future studies may also assess the long-term effectiveness of different intervention types (such as narrative therapy or skills-training programs) and examine the role of broader community-based support, not just immediate family. Such approaches are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding and generate more effective intervention strategies (Theofani & Herdiana, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the resilience of incest sexual abuse survivors in Polewali Mandar Regency is a dynamic process strongly influenced by the interaction of external support, personal strength, and recovery strategies. Despite profound trauma, survivors can demonstrate endurance. However, recovery is not uniform and depends largely on the availability of internal and external resources. These findings highlight the need for a locally contextualised approach to counselling services rather than a generalised one. Counselling services should integrate local cultural

and spiritual values, such as AGH's teachings and Muhammad Thahir, as sources of strength and coping strategies for survivors. In addition, counselling should be designed to address the complexity of family fragmentation when the perpetrator comes from the immediate family, where counsellors need to work not only with survivors but also with supportive family members. Counselling programs should also offer diverse, skills-based interventions beyond talk therapy alone to help survivors regain a sense of control and renewed meaning in life. Finally, the findings emphasise the importance of public education so counselling services can collaborate with communities to reduce the social stigma that often hinders recovery, enabling schools and society to become significant long-term protective factors.

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