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Advancing Victim-Centred Justice: Evaluating the Experiences of Vulnerable Victims in Navigating the Criminal Justice System in Kakamega County, Kenya

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of vulnerable victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in navigating the criminal justice system in Kakamega County, Kenya. Despite victim-centred justice reforms, concerns persist regarding secondary victimization, limited participation, and inadequate support for victims within justice processes. The study was guided by Procedural Justice Theory, which emphasizes fairness, transparency, voice, and respectful treatment as key determinants of trust and legitimacy in legal systems. A descriptive cross-sectional research design was adopted. The target population comprised 341 SGBV victims, from which a sample of 184 respondents was selected using Yamane's (1967) formula and simple random sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires, generating both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. Ethical approval was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI/P/22/21654), and ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and protection of vulnerable participants were strictly observed. Findings revealed that 82.6% of respondents experienced harm during interaction with the criminal justice system, 32.7% reported victim blaming, and 73.9% indicated difficulty coping with the psychological effects of victimization. Qualitative findings highlighted emotional distress, procedural delays, financial strain, weak protective mechanisms, and challenges within informal justice systems. While police interactions were generally perceived positively, broader systemic and procedural inefficiencies contributed to dissatisfaction and reduced trust in justice processes. The study concludes that negative victim experiences are largely driven by systemic and procedural shortcomings rather than individual practitioners. It recommends strengthened implementation of the Victim Protection Act (2014), improved case management systems, integration of psychosocial support services, standardization of informal justice mechanisms, and enhanced accountability frameworks to reduce secondary victimization and improve victim satisfaction.

Keys words: *Victim experiences, secondary victimization, vulnerable victims, victim-centred justice, Victim blaming and procedural justice*

1. Introduction

The treatment and experiences of vulnerable victims within criminal justice processes have



attracted increasing attention in contemporary criminal justice discourse. Victim-centred justice emphasizes the recognition of victims as rights holders whose participation, protection, and access to support services are essential components of effective justice delivery. According to Aertsen (2017), the evolution of victim-centred approaches reflects a shift from traditional offender-focused justice systems toward frameworks that acknowledge victims' rights, interests, and active involvement in criminal proceedings. This shift has been reinforced by international legal instruments such as the United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (1985), which established standards relating to victims' access to justice, fair treatment, restitution, and protection from further victimization. However, studies have shown that despite these legal guarantees, many victims continue to encounter exclusion, inadequate support, and secondary victimization during their interactions with criminal justice institutions (Vetere & Melup, 2018).

Within this study, vulnerable victims refer to individuals who face heightened risks of harm, exclusion, or barriers to accessing justice due to characteristics such as age, gender, disability, psychological condition, or experiences of gender-based violence. These groups often require additional safeguards and support to participate effectively in criminal proceedings. Kendall and Nouwen (2016) observe that while international justice institutions have introduced witness and victim protection mechanisms, vulnerable victims frequently experience difficulties arising from fear of retaliation, emotional distress, and limited understanding of legal processes.

In Africa, efforts to strengthen victim-centred justice have led to the establishment of victim support services, witness protection programmes, and legal reforms aimed at improving victims' participation in criminal proceedings. Osiro (2022) notes that several African countries have adopted policies intended to enhance victims' access to justice and protection. Nevertheless, the implementation of these measures has been constrained by inadequate resources, weak institutional capacity, and limited public awareness of victims' rights. Similarly, Hobbs (2014) found that cultural norms, stigma, and fear of social exclusion continue to discourage vulnerable victims from reporting crimes and participating in justice processes. As a result, the existence of legal frameworks does not always translate into meaningful access to justice for vulnerable groups.

In Kenya, victim-centred justice has been strengthened through constitutional and legislative reforms. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) recognizes and protects the rights of victims, while the Victim Protection Act (2014) establishes mechanisms to facilitate victim participation, access to information, and protection from intimidation. Ngáng'ar (2020) argues that these reforms have significantly improved the legal recognition of victims within the criminal justice system. However, evidence suggests that challenges persist in the practical implementation of these provisions. Victims continue to face barriers such as limited awareness of their rights, inadequate support services, delays in judicial processes, and insufficient protection measures. These challenges raise concerns regarding the extent to which existing victim support mechanisms effectively address the needs of vulnerable victims and enhance their participation in criminal proceedings.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite significant legal and policy reforms aimed at strengthening victim participation and protection, evidence indicates that many victims continue to encounter challenges when engaging with criminal justice processes. Studies have shown that victims frequently report inadequate information about case progress, limited participation in court proceedings, delays in the administration of justice, and insufficient protection from intimidation and retaliation (Healy, 2019). These challenges often contribute to secondary victimization, whereby victims experience additional psychological, emotional, or social harm as a result of their interaction with justice institutions.

In Kenya, the enactment of the Victim Protection Act (2014) sought to enhance victims' rights to information, participation, protection, and support within the criminal justice system. However, implementation of these provisions has remained inconsistent. Ngáng'ar (2020) observed that many victims are not adequately informed about court proceedings, while opportunities for meaningful participation are often limited. Consequently, victims may feel excluded from decision-making processes affecting their cases, reducing their confidence in the justice system.

The situation is particularly concerning for vulnerable victims, including children, persons with disabilities, survivors of gender-based violence, and individuals with special psychosocial needs. These groups face additional barriers such as communication difficulties, fear of retaliation, social stigma, dependency on offenders, and limited awareness of their rights. Existing studies have largely examined victim experiences within the general population, with limited focus on whether victim-centred justice reforms adequately address the unique needs and challenges faced by vulnerable victims (Tešović, 2025). As a result, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the effectiveness of existing victim support and protection mechanisms in improving the experiences of vulnerable victims within the criminal justice system.

This knowledge gap is particularly evident at the county level, where little is known about how vulnerable victims experience criminal justice processes in Kakamega County. Evaluating these experiences is necessary to determine whether existing victim-centred justice reforms are achieving their intended objectives.

1.2 Research Objectives

To evaluate the experiences of vulnerable victims in navigating the criminal justice system in Kakamega County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Procedural Justice Theory

Procedural justice theory, first articulated by Thibaut and Walker (1975), posits that individuals' perceptions of fairness in legal processes directly shape their trust, satisfaction,



and willingness to engage with the justice system. Central principles include impartiality, transparency, the opportunity to be heard, and consistency of procedures (Tyler, 2016). In the context of vulnerable victims of sexual and gender-based violence, research shows that satisfaction is influenced not only by case outcomes but also by how respectfully and sensitively victims are treated by police, prosecutors, and court officials (Koster & Kunst, 2020). Victims who receive timely updates, empathetic engagement, and fair treatment are more likely to perceive justice positively, whereas dismissive attitudes, delays, or victim-blaming behavior exacerbate trauma and reduce trust in the system (Ganguli, 2024). In this study, procedural justice theory provides a framework to examine how fairness, respect, and transparency in judicial processes influence the experiences, satisfaction, and coping of vulnerable victims navigating the criminal justice system in Kakamega County.

2.2 Empirical Review

Crime victims have historically felt marginalized within the criminal justice system, often perceiving themselves as ignored, unheard, and inadequately supported (Ofori-Dua, Onzaberigu, & Nimako, 2019). Victims' experiences within the justice process significantly influence their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, as well as their willingness to report crimes and participate in future proceedings (Elliott, Thomas, & Ogloff, 2014). While victim-centred reforms aim to improve these interactions, existing evidence suggests that victims' experiences remain mixed, with many reporting adverse encounters that undermine satisfaction with the criminal justice system.

2.2.1 Secondary Victimization in Criminal Justice Processes

Secondary victimization refers to the additional psychological, emotional, social, or economic harm victims experience as a result of their interaction with criminal justice institutions following the initial victimization (Csaba, 2022). Although criminal justice systems are intended to provide protection, support, and redress for victims, research increasingly demonstrates that institutional responses may inadvertently exacerbate victims' suffering. Secondary victimization occurs when victims encounter insensitive treatment, procedural barriers, inadequate communication, delays in case processing, or practices that undermine their dignity and sense of security. Consequently, rather than facilitating recovery, criminal justice processes may become a source of further trauma and distress (Cummins, 2023).

A recurring theme within the literature is that formal criminal justice procedures can expose victims to repeated psychological harm. Victims are often required to recount traumatic experiences multiple times to police officers, prosecutors, medical personnel, and judicial officers throughout the investigation and trial process. Herman (2017) argues that these repeated disclosures may trigger traumatic memories and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly among victims of violent and sexual offences. Similarly, the National Institute of Justice (2019) notes that repeated questioning and detailed examination of traumatic experiences frequently contribute to re-traumatization. These findings suggest that procedures designed to establish facts and secure convictions may unintentionally intensify victims' emotional suffering.

The literature also highlights the role of criminal justice personnel in shaping victims'



experiences. Interactions with police officers, prosecutors, and court officials can significantly influence victims' perceptions of fairness, respect, and support. Studies indicate that victims who perceive justice actors as dismissive, insensitive, or judgmental are more likely to report feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and dissatisfaction with the justice process. The finding that 42% of victims report experiencing blame from criminal justice personnel further illustrates how institutional attitudes can contribute to secondary victimization. Such experiences may discourage victims from fully participating in proceedings and reduce confidence in criminal justice institutions.

Beyond individual interactions, scholars emphasize that secondary victimization is also influenced by broader structural and social factors. Campbell and Feeney (2017) argue that negative institutional encounters are associated with adverse mental and physical health outcomes, suggesting that the effects of secondary victimization extend beyond the courtroom. Suarez and Gadalla (2010) further contend that victims who lack legal knowledge, financial resources, or access to support networks face greater difficulties navigating complex criminal justice procedures. These challenges are particularly pronounced among vulnerable victims, including children, persons with disabilities, survivors of gender-based violence, and individuals from marginalized communities, who may require additional support to participate effectively in justice processes.

Feminist scholars provide a critical perspective by arguing that secondary victimization is often rooted in institutional practices that reflect broader social inequalities and power relations. Yosef (2019) contends that criminal justice institutions may reinforce stereotypes regarding the characteristics of a "credible" victim, resulting in differential treatment of victims based on gender, social status, or the nature of the offence. Such practices may privilege certain victim narratives while marginalizing others, thereby reproducing existing vulnerabilities rather than addressing them. This perspective suggests that secondary victimization is not merely the result of individual misconduct but may be embedded within institutional cultures and practices.

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that secondary victimization remains a significant challenge within criminal justice processes, with victims frequently reporting re-traumatization, emotional distress, and negative institutional interactions. While studies generally agree that criminal justice procedures can inadvertently exacerbate victims' trauma, most empirical evidence is derived from Western jurisdictions and focuses predominantly on survivors of sexual violence. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to the experiences of other vulnerable groups, including children, persons with disabilities, and elderly victims. This creates a contextual and empirical gap regarding the nature and extent of secondary victimization experienced by vulnerable victims within Kenyan criminal justice institutions, particularly at the county level.

2.2.2 Victim Blaming in Criminal Justice Processes

Victim blaming remains a significant challenge within criminal justice systems and is widely recognized as a form of secondary victimization. It occurs when victims are held partially or wholly responsible for the crimes committed against them through attitudes, behaviours, or practices that question their credibility, decisions, conduct, or character. Such responses

undermine victims' dignity, discourage participation in justice processes, and may intensify the psychological harm resulting from the original victimization (Hester et al., 2025). Victim blaming is particularly prevalent in cases involving sexual violence and gender-based offences, where societal stereotypes often shape perceptions of what constitutes a "genuine" victim.

The literature suggests that victim blaming is not merely the result of individual prejudice but is often embedded within broader social and institutional belief systems. Kelleher (2024) observes that criminal justice actors may rationalize criminal behaviour by scrutinizing victims' actions before, during, or after an offence. For example, victims may be questioned about their clothing, relationships, movements, or decisions leading up to the incident, implicitly suggesting that they could have prevented the crime. Such practices shift attention away from offender accountability and place undue responsibility on victims. Similarly, Kazmi and Rauf (2024) argue that victim blaming is closely linked to the "just world" hypothesis, which assumes that people generally get what they deserve. Within this framework, individuals may attribute responsibility to victims as a way of preserving their belief that the world is fair and predictable. Consequently, victims who suffer harm may be perceived as having contributed to their own victimization, thereby reinforcing negative attitudes and discriminatory treatment.

These findings indicate that victim blaming is sustained by both institutional and societal factors. Criminal justice actors do not operate in isolation but are influenced by prevailing cultural beliefs and social norms. As a result, stereotypes regarding gender, sexuality, age, disability, and social status may influence how victims are perceived and treated within justice processes. Victims who do not conform to socially constructed expectations of vulnerability may therefore encounter greater skepticism and reduced institutional support.

Empirical studies further demonstrate the practical consequences of victim-blaming attitudes within criminal justice institutions. Sleath and Bull (2017) found that victims often reported low levels of satisfaction with police responses, particularly where officers appeared dismissive, judgmental, or lacking in empathy. Such experiences can negatively influence victims' perceptions of procedural fairness and reduce their willingness to cooperate with investigations. Likewise, Davis (2023) reports that male rape victims frequently encounter discriminatory attitudes due to prevailing gender stereotypes that portray men as less vulnerable to sexual victimization. These findings suggest that victim blaming is not limited to women but can affect diverse victim groups whose experiences challenge traditional assumptions about victimhood.

Research also indicates that victim blaming may have long-term implications for reporting behaviour and access to justice. The findings of Bloomfield-Utting (2023) appear to indicate that victims of rape continue to experience unsympathetic treatment during criminal justice proceedings, leading some to express reluctance to recommend crime reporting to others. This is particularly concerning because victims' perceptions of how they are treated can influence future reporting decisions, engagement with legal processes, and trust in justice institutions. When victims anticipate blame, disbelief, or humiliation, they may choose not to report offences, withdraw complaints, or avoid participating in court proceedings altogether.



Consequently, victim blaming not only affects individual victims but may also undermine broader criminal justice objectives by reducing reporting rates and limiting access to justice.

Feminist scholars further argue that victim blaming reflects deeper structural inequalities embedded within criminal justice institutions. According to Matthews (2025), legal and social systems have historically reinforced gendered assumptions regarding victimhood, often portraying women as responsible for managing risks of victimization while minimizing offender accountability. These assumptions contribute to differential treatment of victims based on their gender, lifestyle, social identity, or perceived respectability. As a result, some victims receive greater sympathy and support than others, creating unequal experiences within the justice system.

Moreover, existing studies largely focus on general victim populations, with limited empirical attention to vulnerable victims. This study therefore, addresses this gap by evaluating the experiences of vulnerable victims within the criminal justice system in Kakamega County, Kenya.

3. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design to systematically examine the experiences of vulnerable victims of sexual and gender-based violence as they navigated the criminal justice system. The study was conducted at Kakamega Law Courts in Kakamega County, a setting chosen due to its jurisdiction over both high and lower courts, a dedicated children's court, and a high number of reported SGBV cases, making it ideal for exploring victims' interactions with formal and informal justice mechanisms. The target population comprised 341 victims of sexual and gender-based violence the sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula, resulting in a sample of 184 victims. A simple random sampling technique was then used to select the study participants, ensuring that each victim in the target population had an equal and independent chance of being included in the study.

Data collection employed semi-structured questionnaires. A pilot study was conducted at Bungoma Law Courts to test the reliability and validity of the instruments, yielding Cronbach's Alpha values ranging of 0.821, indicating high internal consistency. Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns, categories, and key verbatim responses, while descriptive statistics summarized quantitative findings. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, assent for minors, confidentiality, and respect for participants, ensuring the protection and autonomy of vulnerable respondents throughout the study. In addition, ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), approval number NACOSTI/P/22/21654, prior to commencement of data collection.

4. Findings and Discussion

Respondents were requested to indicate various challenges that they encountered in the processes of seeking justice. The data collected were subjected to both descriptive and



thematic analysis, and the results are as follows.

Respondents were asked to express their views on the harmful impacts of contact with the criminal justice system. Among the 184 respondents, 40.8% strongly agreed and 50.1% agreed that victims suffer harm as a result of interacting with the criminal justice system, while only 5.9% disagreed and 3.2% strongly disagreed, indicating that a vast majority (90.9%) acknowledged that contact with the system can cause additional harm.

Regarding victim blaming, 37.1% strongly agreed and 56.5% agreed that criminal justice practitioners hold victims responsible for their own victimization, whereas 4.3% disagreed and 2.1% strongly disagreed, showing that 93.6% of respondents perceived that victim blaming is prevalent.

When asked about personal experiences, 82.6% of respondents reported having suffered harm in the process of seeking justice, while 17.4% did not. A smaller proportion, 32.7%, reported being blamed for precipitating their own victimization, whereas 67.3% did not experience such blame. Only 4.3% indicated that they had experienced police mistreatment when reporting their victimization, with 95.7% reporting they were treated appropriately. Finally, 26.1% of respondents reported being able to cope with the negative effects of victimization, while the majority, 73.9%, indicated they were unable to cope.

Victim blaming was another critical factor affecting victim experiences with the justice system. While 32.7% of respondents reported feeling blamed for precipitating their own victimization, the majority (67.3%) did not experience such blame.

Finally, police interactions were generally reported positively by respondents, with only 4.3% indicating mistreatment. The majority (95.7%) felt they were treated appropriately, suggesting that the police remain a critical point of access to justice, especially in rural areas sub-county, where proximity to courts is limited and travel costs are high.

4.1. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses identified four major themes related to challenges in seeking justice: secondary victimization, victim blaming, structural and procedural barriers, and emotional/psychological coping.

4.1.1. Secondary Victimization

Respondents frequently described experiencing additional harm from their interactions with the justice system. This included anxiety, depression, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness. One male victim expressed his frustration: *"I am now hopeless. My finger is not there. I have scars on my face, a reminder of the assault on me. Sometimes I just cry, for justice was not served. I needed to be heard, but nobody listened to me. I just wonder if I am a mistake"* (RES 90, 2023).

Victims also reported financial and emotional strain due to delays and repeated court attendance: *"We go to court every month and it is becoming tiresome. They keep telling us to wait. It has been two years and nothing has happened. We spend money to go to court*



4.1.2. Victim Blaming

The perception or experience of being blamed for one's victimization emerged as a critical theme in this study. Several victims reported feeling judged or held responsible for the crimes committed against them, which contributed to feelings of shame, embarrassment, and reluctance to report offenses. One victim of assault expressed her frustration: *"Sometimes I just cry, for justice was not served. I needed to be heard, but nobody listened to me. I just wonder if I am a mistake"* (RES 90, 2023). Such experiences of perceived blame undermine trust in the justice system and can deter victims from seeking further assistance. Interestingly, a key informant suggested that *"vulnerable victims, especially victims of sexual violence, are not blamed; it's either there was consent or no consent"* (RES 2, 2023), highlighting a disconnect between official perceptions and victims' lived experiences. The findings underscore the importance of addressing both formal and informal attitudes that perpetuate victim blaming to improve satisfaction and engagement with the justice process.

4.1.3. Structural and Procedural Barriers

Weak protective measures and informal justice mechanisms were significant sources of dissatisfaction. Victims recounted instances where cases mediated by local chiefs or through ADR processes collapsed due to bias or non-enforceability: *"I was attacked by my neighbour's house boy...we went to the chief who documented the case and directed us to the adjacent police station. The perpetrator did not show up, and later the chief also did not show up. My case collapsed, and I haven't gotten justice"* (RES 100, 2023).

4.1.4. Emotional and Psychological Coping

Many respondents highlighted challenges in coping with the emotional toll of victimization. Reports included persistent depression, anxiety, and in some cases, suicidal ideation: *"In the process of seeking justice, I experienced persistent illness and symptoms of depression. At one point, I had thoughts of ending my life, but my responsibility towards my children motivated me to continue and remain resilient."* (RES 70, 2023).

4.2. Discussions

The findings reveal that vulnerable victims experience multiple challenges in navigating the criminal justice system, which contribute significantly to their dissatisfaction. One of the most prominent issues is the harm caused by interactions with the system itself, often referred to as secondary victimization. Victims reported experiencing anxiety, depression, feelings of powerlessness, and frustration as they navigated legal procedures. Delays in case progression, unresponsive authorities, and financial strain from repeated court attendance and medical expenses intensified this distress. These experiences highlight how the justice process, rather than alleviating harm, can sometimes exacerbate it. These experiences are consistent with Herman (2017), who notes that legal procedures often require repeated

recounting of traumatic events, thereby reactivating trauma. Similarly, the National Institute of Justice (2019) highlights that procedural requirement can intensify emotional distress, particularly among survivors of violent crime. In addition, delays in case progression, limited responsiveness from justice actors, and financial strain associated with repeated court attendance further compound victim suffering, reinforcing Campbell and Feeney's (2017) argument that institutional encounters can have broader psychological consequences.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings challenge the assumptions of Procedural Justice Theory, which emphasizes fairness, transparency, voice, and respectful treatment as key determinants of legitimacy. The experiences reported by victims suggest that when procedures are delayed, unclear, or emotionally taxing, perceptions of fairness decline, thereby weakening trust in the justice system.

Victim blaming emerged as a critical factor affecting victims' experiences. Even when direct blame was not always reported, the perception that the system might hold victims responsible for their own victimization created a climate of fear and hesitancy. Such attitudes, whether perceived or actual, can undermine trust in justice processes, deter reporting of crimes, and reduce cooperation with authorities, ultimately impeding accountability for offenders. This aligns with broader research demonstrating that victim blaming generates shame, stigma, and feelings of invalidation among victims. This aligns with Hester et al. (2025), who argue that victim blaming shifts accountability away from offenders and undermines victim dignity. Kazmi and Rauf (2024) further explain this through the "just world" perspective, where individuals attempt to rationalize harm by attributing responsibility to victims. Feminist criminological scholarship similarly highlights how institutional and societal norms may reinforce stereotypes that influence perceptions of victims (Yosef, 2019).

While police interactions were largely viewed positively, highlighting their role as a key gateway to justice, broader systemic issues persisted. Weak protective measures left some victims exposed to threats and intimidation from offenders or their families. Informal justice mechanisms, such as local chiefs or alternative dispute resolution processes, often lacked binding authority, introduced bias, or favored more powerful community members, sometimes resulting in case collapse or inadequate redress. These challenges underline the limitations of both formal and informal justice avenues, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women and minors. This aligns with Aertsen (2017), who emphasizes that victim-centred justice requires consistency across all stages of the criminal justice process.

Emotional and psychological coping was another area of concern. Many victims struggled to manage the negative effects of victimization, with reports of ongoing depression, anxiety, and in some cases, thoughts of self-harm. This emphasizes the need for integrated psychosocial support alongside legal remedies to ensure that the pursuit of justice does not compound victims' trauma. These findings are consistent with Elliott, Thomas, and Ogloff (2014), who emphasize that victims' psychological wellbeing is closely linked to their experiences within justice systems. This underscores the importance of integrating psychosocial support services into justice processes to mitigate harm and support recovery.

The findings indicate that dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system is driven less by



individual practitioners and more by structural and procedural shortcomings, including delays, weak enforcement of protective measures, and the inadequacy of oversight in informal justice mechanisms. Addressing these systemic issues is crucial for improving the experiences of vulnerable victims, enhancing their trust in justice processes, and ensuring that the pursuit of justice does not itself become a source of harm. These findings reflect Osiro's (2022) observation that although many African states have introduced victim-centred reforms, implementation challenges continue to undermine effectiveness.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that vulnerable victims experience multiple challenges in seeking justice, which contribute significantly to their dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system. Many victims reported emotional and psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and feelings of powerlessness, as a result of delays in case progression, unresponsive authorities, and financial strain from repeated court attendance and medical expenses. These experiences reflect the phenomenon of secondary victimization, where the process of seeking justice, itself becomes a source of harm. Victim blaming emerged as a critical factor affecting victims' interactions with the justice system. Although not all respondents experienced direct blame, the perception that they might be held responsible for their own victimization created fear, hesitation, and reduced trust in legal processes. This aligns with broader research indicating that victim blaming generates shame, stigma, and feelings of invalidation, which can discourage reporting of crimes and limit cooperation with law enforcement. Police interactions were largely perceived positively, with most victims reporting fair treatment, highlighting the role of law enforcement as the first point of access to justice. However, systemic and structural shortcomings, including weak protective measures, non-binding informal justice mechanisms, and biased alternative dispute resolution processes, left some victims vulnerable to further harm. Victims who engaged with informal systems often faced delays, bias, or inadequate resolution, particularly when pitted against more powerful community members. Moreover, many victims struggled to cope with the psychological and emotional consequences of their victimization, underscoring the need for integrated psychosocial support alongside legal remedies. The study concludes that dissatisfaction among vulnerable victims is primarily driven by systemic and procedural deficiencies rather than individual practitioners, highlighting the urgent need for victim-centered approaches to justice.

5.2 Recommendations

To improve the experiences and satisfaction of vulnerable victims, it is imperative to strengthen victim protection mechanisms through rigorous enforcement of the *Victim Protection Act (2014)* and prompt implementation of protective orders to shield victims from intimidation or harassment. Legal processes should be streamlined and prioritized for vulnerable victims, with digitized records and effective case management minimizing delays, financial burdens, and emotional strain. Informal justice mechanisms, including alternative dispute resolution and community mediation, must be standardized and monitored, with



mediators trained on legal obligations, victims' rights, and impartial adjudication to prevent bias or case collapses. Addressing victim blaming through sensitization of criminal justice practitioners and community awareness campaigns is essential to foster a culture of empathy, validation, and respectful communication. Psychosocial support services, including counseling, trauma-informed care, and victim support groups, should be integrated at police stations, courts, and community centers to help victims cope with emotional and psychological effects. Finally, independent oversight and accountability mechanisms should be institutionalized to ensure transparency, reduce secondary victimization, and build trust in both formal and informal justice systems, creating a safe, responsive, and victim-centered environment.

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