

Healing Narratives After Sexual Violence in the Shadow of *Sing Beling Sing Nganten*

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Abstract

Sexual violence against women in Bali is intricately connected to gender inequality that is upheld by patriarchal cultural norms. One cultural aspect that exacerbates this issue is *sing beling sing nganten*, which legitimizes premarital sexual relationships as a sign of fertility and social acceptance, potentially heightening the risk of sexual violence and increasing psychological distress for survivors. This research seeks to investigate the psychological experiences of Balinese women post-sexual violence by analyzing their personal stories within the context of Balinese cultural values. A qualitative study utilizing a narrative ethnographic framework was conducted to explore how culture influences meaning-making, self-perception, and recovery processes among survivors. The participants included five adult unmarried Balinese women who have faced sexual violence, selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and additional interviews with community leaders and spiritual figures to capture wider cultural perspectives. The data underwent thematic analysis to reveal recurring patterns and meanings within the stories. The results uncovered four main themes: psychological trauma framed by cultural contexts, social relationships and cultural beliefs, self-acceptance processes situated in cultural structures, and the influence of spirituality and Balinese cultural norms on healing. These themes demonstrate how survivors navigate personal pain, societal expectations, and cultural traditions while rebuilding their sense of identity after experiencing sexual violence. The study concludes that Balinese cultural values can serve both as sources of psychological strain and as possible protective elements during the healing journey. These findings emphasize the necessity for culturally sensitive interventions and contribute to a richer understanding of sexual violence and recovery within the Balinese cultural setting.

Keywords: balinese cultural values; narrative ethnography; psychological experiences; sexual violence; women survivors.

1. Introduction

Violence against women continues to be a widespread and systemic issue in Indonesia, with women making up the majority of reported victims. In 2025, national statistics documented 35,131 cases of violence, of which 30,013 involved female victims (KEMENPPPA, 2026). The data show that violence against women in Bali is not just a series of isolated incidents but is deeply rooted in the structure of society. The ongoing nature of these cases calls for a thorough investigation, not only into their frequency but also into the psychological impact that survivors endure within their cultural environment (Krisiandi, 2023; Suadnyana, 2023; Winata, 2025). Although these figures likely underestimate actual prevalence due to underreporting, a common issue in gender-based violence cases (Poletini et al., 2024), the data suggests that violence against women in Bali is not just occasional, but is deeply rooted within the societal structure. This ongoing issue calls for a more thorough investigation into not only how often it occurs but also the psychological effects faced by survivors in their cultural context.

The sociocultural framework of Balinese society offers a crucial perspective for examining this phenomenon. Bali is defined by a patrilineal kinship system (*purusa*) and persistent patriarchal norms that govern gender roles, inheritance, and societal expectations (Darmayoga, 2021; Widhiyana, 2024). While Hindu philosophical teachings such as *Tat Twam Asi* and *Karmaphala* emphasize moral reciprocity, empathy, and ethical accountability (A et al., 2020; Pandeyana & Oka Dharma, 2024), cultural practice does not always align with doctrinal ideals. Gender hierarchy can endure through societal customs that place women in lower positions, especially regarding issues related to sexuality, family reputation, and reproductive obligations. For instance, the concept of "*sing beling, sing nganten*" (meaning "no pregnancy, no marriage") illustrates the societal pressures regarding fertility and a woman's eligibility for marriage (Chandra et al., 2020; Dewi et al., 2022). In this context, women's sexual experiences frequently undergo moral scrutiny, which can increase the stigma associated with incidents of sexual violence.



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A considerable amount of empirical research shows that sexual violence leads to serious psychological effects, such as anxiety, depression, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, feelings of shame and self-blame, as well as challenges in relationships (Darmayasa & Natanael, 2023; Robinson et al., 2024; Stockman et al., 2024). In the Indonesian context, however, existing studies have predominantly focused on child victims of sexual violence (Dania, 2020; Octaviani & Nurwati, 2021; Sulastri & Nurhayaty, 2021; Swandari et al., 2022; Urbayatun & Rahman, 2022) or on specific psychological variables among adolescents, such as self-confidence and social support (Hardianti & Oktariana, 2022; Viskarini & Suharsono, 2023; Yanti & Abdullah, 2021). These studies provide important insights into psychological effects, but they primarily focus on individual-level factors and quantitative results.

There is a lack of research that explicitly combines the personal experiences of adult survivors with cultural interpretations in specific locales. Investigations that explore the cultural aspects of sexual violence in Indonesia have focused on contexts like the practice of female circumcision (Mustaqim, 2013), patriarchal norms in other provinces (Audina, 2024), or general perceptions of patriarchy and sexually violent behavior (Pangestika et al., 2022). However, there are still few empirical studies focusing on adult Balinese women that systematically explore how Balinese cultural values influence psychological interpretations following sexual violence.

This gap is important because psychological constructs like trauma, shame, and recovery can appear differently depending on cultural context (Bryant-Davis, 2019; Robinson et al., 2024). It is also practically significant, as interventions that neglect cultural belief systems risk being ineffective or even inadvertently reinforcing stigma (Bryant-Davis, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to have a culturally informed understanding of survivors' experiences to create trauma-informed services that are suitable for the specific context and socially sensitive.

This study employs a narrative ethnographic methodology to explore the psychological experiences of Balinese women following sexual violence. Conducted in Denpasar, Bali, as an urban center characterized by rapid development and sustained patrilineal customs alongside ingrained cultural expectations, the research situates survivors' narratives within the cultural frameworks of *purusa*, *sing beling*, *sing nganten*, *Tat Twam Asi*, and *Karmaphala*. It aims to elucidate how these cultural values shape processes of meaning-making, emotional responses, coping strategies, and recovery trajectories. From a theoretical perspective, the study makes a significant contribution to cross-cultural trauma research by integrating narrative inquiry with culturally specific gender norms. Practically, it provides valuable insights for the development of culturally sensitive psychological interventions and community-based support services in Bali.

2. Research Methods

This study used a qualitative research design with a narrative ethnographic approach. This method was chosen to explore the psychological experiences of Balinese women following sexual violence within their cultural and social context. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Gadjah Mada (No. 6409/UN1/PS.1/SD/PT.01.04/2025).

Participants were Balinese women who had experienced sexual violence. They had to be unmarried Balinese women aged 18 or older who had encountered verbal, physical, or non-physical sexual violence, be willing to fully participate, and be psychologically stable at the time of the study. To minimize retraumatization, the violence must have happened at least six months before data collection. Five participants took part, identified by initials (GS, VJ, LW, NP, and RH) to maintain confidentiality. Some had pre-existing rapport, which facilitated openness, while for others, rapport was built beforehand to establish trust and safety.

To deepen contextual understanding, interviews were conducted with two key informants: a Pemangku Banjar (a customary religious leader at the neighborhood level) and the Chairperson of PHDI or *Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia* in Bali (the top formal Hindu religious council in Indonesia). Their perspectives helped situate participants' stories within local religious and community frameworks.

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation from July to October 2025. Face-to-face interviews with participants took place in private, comfortable settings. It was done mainly in cafés and restaurants in Denpasar, and lasted about 53 to 100 minutes. All participants and key informants provided written informed consent before data collection. The interview guide covered participants' backgrounds, experiences of sexual violence, psychological effects, meaning-making, coping strategies, social responses, and the role of cultural values, including the discourse of *sing beling* and *sing nganten*, in their experiences. A distress

protocol was in place, allowing sessions to be paused or stopped if emotional distress occurred. Participants were also offered referrals for psychological support when needed.

Follow-up informal conversations and participant observations targeted environments where participants spent substantial time and felt at ease expressing themselves. This approach allowed the researcher to gather insights into interpersonal dynamics as well as the sociocultural factors influencing daily interactions, cultural practices, and healing processes.

Because the research was conducted in Denpasar, an urban center where modernization intersects with enduring patrilineal and patriarchal structures, broader sociocultural observations were also carried out in community religious activities, banjar gatherings, temple environments, and urban public spaces. During these observations, the researcher acted as a natural participant or visitor to reduce disruption. Field notes documented the context, interactions, nonverbal cues, and the researcher's reflections throughout. The data collected focused on gendered social interactions, public expressions of intimacy, communal practices, and culturally embedded social support related to participants' experiences and recovery. The observation settings and duration are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Field Observation Data Collection

Location	Context of Observation	Date	Duration
Residence area in North Denpasar	Observation of surrounding neighborhood environment	18 July – 18 August 2025	1 month
Pura Swagina Taman Sari, Dangin Puri Kangin Village	Observation of social interactions within traditional village community	20 July 2025	2 hours
Living World Mall, Denpasar	Observation of visitor social behavior	26 July 2025	3 hours
Jero (Residence of Pemangku Banjar), West Denpasar	Observation of social environment around religious household	27 July 2025	3 hours
Sanur Beach (Matahari Terbit, Segara Ayu, Sindhu, Mertasari)	Observation of community recreational and social activities	1 August 2025	3 hours
Icon Bali Mall, South Denpasar	Observation of visitor social behavior	2 August 2025	6 hours
Banjar Mertanadi	Observation of social interactions in traditional village setting	23 August 2025	3.5 hours

Data analysis was conducted through reflexive thematic analysis based on Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) reviewing those themes, (5) defining and naming them, and (6) producing the report. The process was inductive, letting themes arise from participants' stories rather than predefined categories, thus enabling the recognition of recurring meanings while maintaining cultural context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Sociocultural Context of Balinese Society

Interviews with cultural informants, including a *Pemangku Banjar* and the PHDI Bali Chairperson, along with field observations, reveal that Denpasar is a vibrant crossroads of urban progress and enduring patriarchal traditions. While public displays of intimacy and women's roles in education and work are becoming more accepted in city areas, gender expectations remain deeply rooted in patrilineal kinship and communal governance. Male dominance in banjar leadership and religious roles continues to influence social norms about sexuality, marriage, and female respectability.

Participants often described how reproductive expectations and sexual morality act as social control mechanisms. The talk around *sing beling*, *sing nganten* ("no pregnancy, no marriage") highlights a cultural paradox: women must demonstrate fertility during courtship, yet face stigma and purity norms if they have sexual experiences outside accepted settings. This conflicting cultural script influences how survivors understand and navigate their experiences of sexual violence.

Participant Overview

Table 2. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age	Place of Origin	Type of Sexual Violence Experienced	Key Psychological Impact
GS	25	Bangli (raised in Denpasar)	Sexual harassment by strangers and sexual violence within romantic relationships	Vaginismus, self-blame, reduced self-worth and self-confidence, social stigma

Participant	Age	Place of Origin	Type of Sexual Violence Experienced	Key Psychological Impact
JV	24	Klungkung (raised in Denpasar)	Sexual harassment during adolescence (public setting and school environment)	Fear, anger, body insecurity, tendency to self-blame, reduced confidence
LW	20	Denpasar	Repeated sexual abuse by cousins since childhood	Distrust toward men, social withdrawal, low self-confidence, history of self-harm
NP	22	Denpasar	Repeated sexual abuse by father from childhood to adolescence	Anxiety toward male figures, fear of darkness, feelings of worthlessness, trauma-related distress
RH	32	Denpasar	Sexual abuse since childhood and rape in an arranged relationship at age 18	Depression, vaginismus, trust issues, chronic psychological distress

This study involved five Balinese women aged 20–32 who had faced various types of sexual violence. Their experiences ranged from verbal harassment in public, coercive relationships, intra-familial abuse, to sexual violence associated with courtship norms. Despite differences in age, social background, and the identity of perpetrators, all participants reported enduring psychological effects. These impacts were influenced not only by the violence itself but also by cultural narratives about gender roles, womanhood, purity, fertility, and social expectations. From cross-case analysis, four major themes emerged.

Table 3. Summary of Research Themes

Theme	Description
Theme 1	Participants saw their psychological experiences as tainting their self-identity and lowering their worth as women. This understanding was rooted in deep cultural norms about female purity and gender roles in Balinese society. These interpretations influenced how they viewed their bodies, identities, and womanhood following sexual violence.
Theme 2	Participants viewed their experiences of sexual violence as proof that social and romantic relationships carry substantial risks. In a patriarchal society, women are frequently seen as responsible for upholding family morality and reputation. This understanding caused participants to see the social environment as not only a potential danger but also a place where stigma and judgment could arise.
Theme 3	Participants saw recovery as a slow process of reassembling a fractured sense of self. This journey was deeply tied to cultural principles like harmony, balance, and resilience. For them, recovery wasn't just about psychological healing but about rebuilding their identity to feel whole again within Balinese cultural norms.
Theme 4	Participants understood their experiences of sexual violence using spiritual ideas like <i>karmaphala</i> , <i>menyama braya</i> , and <i>melukat</i> rituals. These interpretations framed traumatic events as components of a larger cosmic process. This sense-making helped them manage emotional distress and discover new purpose and meaning in life following their trauma.

The results indicate that participants' psychological experiences were deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context of Balinese society. Balinese cultural values play a complex role in their post-violence experiences. Norms rooted in patriarchy, ideas about female purity, and reproductive expectations reflected in terms like *sing beling* and *sing nganten* contributed to feelings of shame, self-blame, and fear of social judgment, influencing how they understood and responded to sexual violence. Conversely, cultural and spiritual values such as *karmaphala*, *tat twam asi*, *menyama braya*, along with practices like *melukat*, offered meaning-making and emotional support that helped with coping and recovery. These findings highlight that survivors' experiences are shaped not only by personal reactions to trauma but also by larger cultural frameworks that affect both vulnerability and resilience.

Theme 1: Psychological Trauma within Cultural Context

Participants faced intense psychological distress after experiencing sexual violence. While emotional reactions differed among individuals, common feelings included fear, shame, anger, sadness, and ongoing self-blame. These responses were not only personal reactions to trauma but also influenced by wider cultural norms about femininity, morality, and purity in Balinese society.

GS, who took part in the preliminary stage of this research, appeared quite open during the interview. She spoke extensively, with a strong and emphasized voice, as if she had finally found a safe space to share her fears and emotional struggles. GS explained how feelings of fear and a sense of abnormality arose after she developed vaginismus following sexual violence. This condition caused her to question her identity as a woman, especially within cultural norms linking womanhood to sexual and reproductive roles. She reflected:

"I felt like I was not normal, like I had to be able to do it [have sexual intercourse]."
[GS-P1W1]

This experience shows how trauma can intersect with cultural norms about women's bodies and reproductive roles. For GS, her trauma's physical effects worsened her psychological distress because they clashed with her culturally defined femininity.

During the interview, NP showed more variable emotional responses while being observed by a psychologist. At times, she became tearful, especially when talking about her experience of sexual violence and her father's suicide after her case became public. For NP, her profoundest sadness was not just about the legal proceedings but also about losing a paternal figure; someone who should have offered protection and love, not violence.

Participants also frequently mentioned lowered self-confidence as a key issue. VJ, who was quieter in the interview, briefly but clearly discussed her negative body image. She linked the harassment she faced to her physical appearance and blamed her body for contributing to the violence. This view deepened her shame and further reduced her confidence.

Likewise, LW, who initially seemed upbeat during interactions, disclosed that she had self-harmed during intense emotional turmoil. She remembered:

"I used to hurt myself... at that time, I felt completely exhausted." [LW-P3W1]

Her admission was made with a tone blending regret and light humor, seemingly to ease the tension during the disclosure. Meanwhile, RH, the eldest participant, shared her past suicide attempts in a calm, reflective way, framing them as occurrences in two separate phases of her life.

Participants often described feeling "dirty," "impure," or guilty for what had happened, beyond just fear and lowered confidence.

"Sometimes I feel disgusted with myself... why couldn't I resist back then?" [VJ-P2W1]

VJ expressed regret for not resisting the perpetrator more forcefully, while NP blamed herself for her family's breakdown following her father's death. These stories highlight how victim-blaming, whether internal or societal, can intensify psychological pain. In patriarchal cultures, victims are frequently seen as morally responsible for the violence they endure, worsening emotional distress and deepening feelings of guilt and shame.

In this study, psychological trauma was understood not just as an emotional response to violence but also as a culturally rooted experience influenced by gender norms, purity expectations, and moral views on women's sexuality.

Theme 2: Social Relationships and Cultural Values

Experiencing sexual violence not only caused psychological distress but also markedly impacted participants' social interactions and relationships. Fear was commonly the first reaction, evident in increased bodily sensitivity to touch and feelings of insecurity in various settings. For some, trauma shaped their approach to romantic relationships. GS, for instance, stayed in a harmful relationship for a period, thinking that sexual engagement with her partner meant she was obliged to remain. As she shared:

"Because I had already done that with him, I thought I had to stay with him." [GS-P1W1]

She also felt confused when a later partner did not anticipate sexual intimacy. This shows how her previous experiences have altered her view of romantic relationships, linking intimacy closely with sexual expectations.

In some instances, trauma led to distrust of men. LW was skeptical about men's intentions, seeing them as mainly judging women by their looks. Consequently, she decided to avoid romantic involvement and rethought her views on marriage. She shared:

"I don't really trust men... I feel like they only see me from my body... so now I'm thinking whether I even want to get married, because the one who will get hurt is me." [LW-P3W1]

These attitudes can be seen as protective mechanisms designed to lessen vulnerability to future harm. Avoiding romantic relationships becomes a way of self-protection after experiencing past trauma.

Trauma also showed itself through alterations in daily routines and behavior. VJ opted for loose, modest clothing to prevent attracting notice, while NP found it difficult to stay in dark environments because of the circumstances surrounding the violence. In RH's situation, the trauma persisted physically, with ongoing bodily pain months after the event. These experiences illustrate

how trauma operates across multiple dimensions, affecting psychological states, bodily sensations, spatial perceptions, and social interactions.

Broader sociocultural contexts, in addition to personal experiences, influenced how participants interpreted their experiences. Denpasar, a rapidly urbanizing city, tends to have more permissive social norms, such as public displays of affection among young couples. GS observed that behaviors like hugging or holding hands are widely accepted in Denpasar but might be seen as inappropriate or be subject to gossip in more rural areas like Bangli. This divergence generates ambivalence for participants as they balance traditional cultural expectations with modern urban lifestyles. Additionally, the normalization of premarital sexual relationships within peer groups was a notable influence. In some social circles, sexual experiences became casual topics for discussion and comparison. LW mentioned that sexual encounters were sometimes talked about in a competitive or judgmental manner among peers:

"In class, when someone has slept with someone, people ask things like 'how many people?' or 'did you use protection?' And if you used protection, they say you're weak."
[LW-P3W2]

These social dynamics generate contradictory pressures. While modern norms seem to provide more sexual freedom, they can also reinforce vulnerabilities that leave women susceptible to exploitation.

Despite the changing norms, patriarchal views are still strongly rooted in Balinese society. Women are expected to marry, have children, and preferably produce a male heir. Participants mentioned the cultural story of 'sing beling sing nganten,' which is often told as jokes but subtly pressures women to get pregnant before marriage to ensure their marital status.

Participants also discussed how the discourse of 'sing beling, sing nganten' shaped their views on romantic relationships and sexuality. As GS explained:

"People often say it jokingly, but there is pressure behind it... as if if you are not pregnant, there is no guarantee that you will get married." [GS-P1W1]

LW similarly noted :

"Sometimes people say it as a joke, but over time it starts to feel like an expectation."
[LW-P3W1]

While none explicitly saw the expression as a direct cause of violence, they explained that the pressure to sustain relationships and demonstrate reproductive ability led to feelings of obligation, fear of social judgment, and challenges in negotiating intimacy following traumatic experiences.

GS's story highlights how stigma related to infertility or the lack of male children often targets women within families. Likewise, victims of sexual violence may be stigmatized as "immoral," "naughty," or "not virgins," which justifies social condemnation. As VJ explained:

"I'm afraid of my family's reaction. They're very patriarchal. I'm afraid they'll blame me, like saying 'well, it's your fault.'" [VJ-P2W1]

These accounts illustrate that trauma following sexual violence cannot be fully understood only on an individual level. It is also rooted in societal structures and cultural norms that influence how victims perceive their experiences and develop their identities within family and community settings.

Theme 3: Self-Acceptance within the Framework of Cultural Values

All five participants highlighted that self-acceptance was vital for their recovery, though it developed gradually through reflection, emotional regulation, and reinterpreting past experiences. GS initially thought vaginismus meant she was "not a normal woman." Over time, she challenged this view and rethought her experiences with more compassion :

"Now I can accept myself more and stop blaming myself all the time." [GS-P1W1]

She conveyed that she feels more empowered than ever after coming to terms with her past.

Similarly, VJ described evolving from a period of heavy self-blame to a phase of increased acceptance. As she explained:

"I realized that what happened was not my fault." [VJ-P2W1]

This change enabled her to share her experiences with trusted family members. NP also viewed her past with greater emotional calm, recognizing that her experiences are now part of her personal

life journey. Social support significantly helped her acceptance process. VJ noted that reassurance from her romantic partner helped her see that the violence she faced was beyond her control and didn't lessen her worth of love. RH highlighted how connecting with others who faced similar struggles offered validation and a sense of solidarity. She reflected that her personal suffering eventually motivated her to move forward and find meaning beyond the pain:

"Through suffering and life's trials, if we keep staying in that pain, we will never become anything. We have to keep moving forward." [RH-P1W1]

For LW, her family responsibility was a key motivation for her recovery. As an only child with high family expectations, she felt the need to stay strong and keep going. Besides accepting her situation mentally, participants took part in activities that helped rebuild their sense of control and self-esteem. GS found healing by selling items at local markets, which gave her not just income but also a boost in confidence regarding her capacity to contribute significantly to her life:

"When I open a stand and it's busy and I make money there, I really appreciate myself... my healing is when I'm doing a business." [GS-P1W1]

NP preferred recreational activities like hiking, running, or watching comedy films as straightforward yet effective ways to maintain emotional stability. LW actively participated in campus groups and sexual violence prevention efforts, turning her traumatic experiences into motivation to support others. Observations showed that many of these recovery activities took place in familiar daily spaces such as homes, workplaces, beaches, and social areas. NP often visited Sanur Beach to watch sunsets, describing it as calming and restorative. These practices align with the Hindu philosophical principle of Tri Hita Karana, especially the idea of palemahan, which highlights harmony between humans and nature.

RH demonstrated compassion by caring for animals near her home. This behavior aligns with the cultural value of menyama braya, highlighting interconnectedness and empathy for all living beings. These experiences show that recovery is not just an internal psychological process but is also reflected in everyday actions, relationships, and culturally rooted values.

Theme 4: Spirituality and Balinese Cultural Values

The participants' stories clearly showed a shift from self-acceptance to spirituality. Spiritual beliefs and practices significantly influenced how they made sense of their traumatic experiences and reconstructed life meaning. The idea of Karmaphala, representing the law of cause and effect in Hindu philosophy, was prominent in the narratives of GS, LW, and RH. This viewpoint led them to see suffering not just as personal misfortune but as part of a larger cosmic order grounded in moral balance. For GS, understanding her experiences through karma helped her accept the past while holding onto hope for future justice. RH also described witnessing harm done to her eventually result in negative consequences for the perpetrators, reinforcing her belief that moral balance will ultimately be restored.

LW expressed a comparable perspective :

"God will never sleep. God will know what is right and what is wrong. If not now, maybe in the future. So I leave it to God to respond." [LW-P3W1]

These interpretations helped participants view their suffering as part of a larger existential perspective, fostering acceptance without dismissing their pain. Besides karmic beliefs, they highlighted positive cultural values as sources of resilience. GS shared how her mother taught her to find positive meaning amid challenges. RH saw her hardships as a process of being "forged" by life, aimed at making her stronger and enabling her to support others.

The cultural principle of menyama braya also played a key role in guiding participants' recovery. LW focused her efforts on supporting relatives facing financial or personal struggles, while RH engaged in ngayah (voluntary community service), meditation, yoga, and healing activities. RH, for instance, shared how assisting others provided a fulfilling way to turn her suffering into a sense of purpose.

"At least we should still be useful for others. When we start helping people, we begin to see our own potential." [RH-P1W1]

LW expressed a similar perspective:

"Even if we cannot do much, if there are relatives who are in a worse situation, at least we should help a little." [LW-P3W1]

Daily spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, melukat purification rituals, and meprascista ceremonies served as important coping strategies. Melukat was seen as a way to cleanse emotional and spiritual burdens. GS shared that she performed melukat when she felt overwhelmed by negative thoughts, saying:

“When my thoughts become overwhelming, I usually perform melukat. It makes me feel calmer.” [GS-P1W1]

LW, born into a family of temple priests (mangku), was raised with deep-rooted traditions of ritual involvement and community service. NP highlighted the importance of meprascista, a purification ritual meant to re-establish spiritual harmony after situations deemed spiritually “unclean” or leteh. As NP described:

“In Bali they call it leteh, like being spiritually dirty. After the incident we held a meprascista ceremony to cleanse it.” [NP-P4W1]

These practices show that spirituality functioned as both a way to understand trauma and a route to recovery and reintegration. By drawing on cultural and religious values, participants reinterpreted their suffering as an integral part of a meaningful life journey, fostering opportunities for growth, resilience, and renewed purpose.

3.2. Discussion

This study shows that the psychological effects of sexual violence on Balinese women are inseparable from the sociocultural context they are part of. Consistent with prior research documenting trauma, depression, anxiety, and identity disturbance following sexual violence (Chynoweth et al., 2020; Yosep et al., 2024), participants in this study reported experiencing multidimensional psychological distress. Nonetheless, these findings go beyond previous research by demonstrating how trauma is amplified through culturally specific ideas of gender, fertility, and moral responsibility in Balinese society. This view is consistent with indigenous psychology, which stresses that psychological experiences should be understood within the cultural contexts where people live, rather than depending only on universal or Western psychological theories (Setiono, 2002).

In the patrilineal purusa system, women’s identities are strongly associated with reproductive duties and marriage roles (Sutariani, 2023). The case of GS, who questioned her identity as a woman following vaginismus, exemplifies how bodily trauma becomes intertwined with cultural expectations concerning sexual function and the continuity of lineage. This observation indicates that trauma is not solely experienced as an individual psychological response but also as a disruption of culturally mandated womanhood. The embodiment of distress, manifested through somatic symptoms, fear responses, and relational avoidance, aligns with existing literature on the physiological dimensions of trauma. However, in this context, it is additionally influenced by reproductive norms and moral evaluations.

The findings also reinforce scholarship demonstrating that patriarchal norms contribute to self-blame and silence among survivors (Mappe & Jusnawati, 2022). Participants described internalizing guilt and responsibility, particularly in cases involving romantic relationships. The normalization of emotional control within courtship dynamics echoes previous findings on unhealthy dating relationships among Balinese youth (Divariani & Wideasavitri, 2025), where emotional manipulation becomes internalized as relational obligation. The discourse surrounding sing beling, sing nganten further demonstrates how women’s bodies are governed by reproductive logic, creating a paradoxical situation: while sexual intimacy might be subtly accepted in urban areas, women are still morally blamed when harm happens. This conflicting expectation increases psychological pressure on women and perpetuates victim-blaming attitudes.

The study emphasizes that modernization and ongoing patriarchal governance coexist in Denpasar. Although urban areas are more open to dating and women participating in public life, traditional kinship and communal authority still influence norms about sexuality and respectability. This sociocultural ambivalence creates a moral double bind, forcing survivors to navigate conflicting expectations. The findings add to the conversation on how urbanization does not necessarily eradicate patriarchal systems but can lead to hybrid forms of gender regulation.

Despite these structural limitations, participants showed a variety of coping strategies that correspond to recognized trauma recovery models. This finding aligns with existing research on post-traumatic growth (Farooqui & Pushkarna, 2021; Ramadani & Rahmasari, 2023), several participants reinterpreted their experiences as opportunities for reflection, advocacy, and personal growth. Recovery encompassed emotion-focused approaches like self-acceptance and spiritual surrender, as well as problem-focused methods such as education, activism, and entrepreneurial

involvement. This combination reflects findings by Bolger (1990) and Grant & Gerrard (2020), who emphasize that coping effectiveness depends on contextual demands and available resources.

The findings indicate that recovery for participants was a gradual and dynamic process, not a straight path. Initially, they faced intense psychological distress, including fear, shame, self-blame, and relationship disruptions. Over time, recovery was supported by self-acceptance, support from important others, and engaging in meaningful daily activities. Cultural and spiritual values helped participants reinterpret their suffering, regain a sense of control, and find renewed purpose. Instead of removing suffering completely, these resources allowed them to navigate traumatic experiences and gradually find meaning in their lives. These processes align with literature that highlights meaning-making and post-traumatic growth after adversity (Bryant-Davis, 2019; Farooqui & Pushkarna, 2021).

The present study's key feature is the emphasis on culturally rooted spirituality in understanding meaning. Teachings like Karmaphala offered participants a moral structure that allowed them to reinterpret suffering without feeling personal blame. Seeing it as cosmic justice instead of personal punishment seemed to boost their sense of internal control and lessen helplessness (Pandeyana & Oka Dharma, 2024). Similarly, ritual practices such as melukat functioned as embodied acts of symbolic purification, supporting emotional regulation and social reintegration. These findings align with research in Indonesia showing that spirituality can enhance psychological resilience in victims of gender-based violence by promoting self-esteem and emotional stability (Pertiwi & Scarvanovi, 2025).

These findings also align with prior evidence that culturally grounded spiritual practices can enhance psychological well-being (Putra et al., 2019). However, this study highlights their specific role in healing from sexual violence within Balinese society. Values like *Tat Twam Asi* and *menyama braya* strengthen resilience by fostering empathy, solidarity, and a sense of community. Instead of abandoning their cultural identity, participants reinterpreted cultural teachings in ways that supported their recovery. This demonstrates that culture functions

ambivalently: it can both contribute to vulnerability and aid in healing. Therefore, culture is not just a backdrop but an active force that influences both trauma and resilience.

This study enhances cultural psychology by illustrating that post-trauma recovery is influenced by locally rooted moral and spiritual frameworks. It questions universal trauma models by emphasizing that psychological distress and growth are shaped within specific kinship ties, reproductive beliefs, and ritual practices. Practically, the results highlight the importance of culturally aware interventions that challenge patriarchal narratives and incorporate meaningful spiritual and community resources. Overall, the research shows that sexual violence against Balinese women should be understood as a culturally embedded psychological experience influenced by patriarchy, modernization, spirituality, and community values. Trauma and healing are intertwined with these social and cultural factors, underscoring the need for comprehensive approaches that address both structural and cultural aspects of recovery.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that for Balinese women, the psychological impact of sexual violence extends beyond individual trauma. It is deeply influenced by cultural frameworks that define womanhood, purity, and reproductive roles within a patrilineal (*purusa*) system. Such violence is seen not just as a personal violation but as a challenge to culturally rooted identities, where femininity is linked to marital status, fertility, and family continuity. In this context, trauma is relational and culturally shaped, not just individual. The findings highlight the complex role of culture: while patriarchal norms and discourses like *sing beling* and *sing nganten* can reinforce stigma, self-blame, and vulnerability, Balinese spiritual principles such as *Tat Twam Asi*, *Karmaphala*, communal solidarity (*menyama braya*), and rituals also offer frameworks that facilitate psychological healing and growth. By viewing trauma through a local moral and spiritual lens, this research suggests that culture serves both as a source of restriction and resilience. Consequently, understanding sexual violence in Bali demands a culturally sensitive psychological approach that recognizes how tradition influences both suffering and recovery.

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AI Declaration

AI-assisted tools were used solely to support language editing and improve clarity in the writing process. The research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and substantive content of this manuscript were conducted entirely by the authors.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Divariani, Subandi; **methodology:** Divariani, Subandi; **investigation:** Divariani; **data curation:** Divariani; **writing—original draft preparation:** Divariani; **writing—review and editing:** Divariani, Subandi; **supervision:** Subandi. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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